DECLARATION OF THE CENTRAL AFRICAN COALITION FOR THE ELIMINATION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS (CAC-EVEFF)

"WOMEN RISE, CENTRAL AFRICA"

On Cameroon's Abstention During the Vote on United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/C.3/81/L.16/Rev.1 on the Prevention and Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women and Girls

Legislative Sovereigntism: An Unnecessary Precaution to Conceal the Persistence of Conservatism and the Deprioritisation of Equality Issues, Which Fuels Violence Against Women and Girls

We, the collective of 44 civil society organizations representing nearly 3,000 members across the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) sub-region, brought together under the CAC-EVEFF Coalition and working towards the promotion and protection of human rights, gender equality, and the elimination of gender-based violence (GBV) and violence against women and girls (VAWG):

Recalling the fundamental commitment of ECCAS Member States to human dignity, equality between women and men, and the protection of vulnerable persons, as enshrined in the Preamble to the Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon;

Reaffirming the binding nature of the international and regional commitments freely undertaken by the State of Cameroon, particularly the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and its Optional Protocol, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, as well as the Maputo Protocol, ratified by Cameroon in 2012;

Concerned by the persistence and severity of GBV and VAWG, including femicides and domestic violence, affecting women and girls across the ECCAS sub-region and in Cameroon;

Hereby adopt this declaration.

RECOGNITION OF THE EFFORTS UNDERTAKEN BY THE STATE OF CAMEROON AND ITS HEAD OF STATE TOWARDS THE ELIMINATION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

The Central African Coalition of Civil Society Organisations Against GBV/VAWG commends and acknowledges the proactive policy pursued by the Cameroonian authorities on GBV/VAWG and the protection of women's rights. This policy is reflected in initiatives, institutional frameworks and policy orientations implemented by the Government of the Republic under the leadership of the Head of State, President of the Republic, His Excellency Paul Biya:

The establishment of a normative and punitive framework: The Coalition notes the adoption and implementation of provisions of the Penal Code, particularly Law No. 2016/007 of 12 July 2016, which criminalizes violations of physical integrity, sexual assault, rape, sexual harassment and female genital mutilation (Article 277-1), with aggravating circumstances where the offence is committed within a couple or against a minor.

Institutional and strategic leadership: The Coalition appreciates the action undertaken by the Government, under the leadership of the Head of State and through the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family (MINPROFF), as demonstrated by the National Strategy for Combating Gender-Based Violence (2022–2026), the establishment of support platforms, listening centers and community awareness-raising mechanisms.

Recognition of the seriousness of the phenomenon: The Coalition takes note with interest of the official recognition by public authorities of statistics and alerts relating to GBV and femicides, as well as the consultative process initiated around a preliminary draft of a specific law against violence against women and girls.

These achievements demonstrate political and institutional commitment that must be consolidated, strengthened and fully translated into concrete action.

LEGAL AND POLITICAL CRITICS OF CAMEROON'S SOVEREIGNIST ABSTENTION

With gravity and clear-sightedness, the Coalition deplores and criticizes Cameroon's abstention during the vote on the United Nations General Assembly draft resolution dedicated to the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls on 17 November 2026. Its position is based on the following considerations:

The reality of the continued erosion of social values and the alarming normalization of violence as a means of resolving disputes between men and women: The Coalition notes with concern that Cameroon has been experiencing political and security instability for more than a decade, contributing to the entrenchment of a culture of violence within society. This culture, in turn, affects gender relations by placing them within dynamics of conflict and opposition, particularly by accelerating the erosion of social values and increasing the vulnerability of traditionally fragile social groups. All these factors contribute to a growing trend in violence against women and girls, an increasing restriction of their rights and freedoms, and a consequent erosion of the vision of gender equality.

This phenomenon can be observed not only through hate speech in traditional media and on social media platforms, and the resurgence of violence against children (abductions, unlawful confinement, rape, trafficking, exploitation and the killing of children), but above all through the increase in femicides. Indeed, more than 230 cases of femicide have been documented over a recent three-year period, with a consistently upward trend (56 cases in 2023, 69 cases in 2024, 60 cases in 2025, and 50 cases of femicide and 1,599 cases of GBV between January and April 2026 alone – Source: MINPROFF, May 2026). The Cameroon Demographic and Health Survey (5th edition, 2018) indicates that nearly 45% of women in unions have experienced physical or sexual violence perpetrated by their partners, highlighting a continuous of violence that ultimately leads to homicide.

The legally unfounded and socially unnecessary nature of invoking legislative sovereigntism in relation to issues of gender, sexual and reproductive health, and safe abortion: Arguments based on the defense of legislative sovereignty and normative reservations cannot justify abstention from a United Nations General Assembly resolution. First, a General Assembly resolution is a non-binding instrument that neither modifies nor replaces the domestic law of a sovereign State. Second, in accordance with international treaty law – particularly Article 27 of the 1969 Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties and the principle of pacta sunt servanda – a State party to binding conventions such as CEDAW and the Maputo Protocol cannot invoke its domestic law to evade its international obligations, nor justify a political withdrawal from the protection against gender-based violence. The Vienna Convention provides for an exception under Article 46, but upon examination of its cumulative conditions, this exception is entirely inapplicable to Cameroon regarding the two aforementioned conventions.

Finally, United Nations practice provides States with specific mechanisms for explaining their votes or dissociating themselves from some paragraphs, thereby allowing them to support the central objective of eliminating violence without abstaining from the entire text. This is the approach adopted by some of the African countries that voted in favor of the resolution (approximately fifty): expressing official reservations or dissociating themselves from certain paragraphs considered sensitive rather than abstaining. Cameroon could have followed this middle-ground approach.

Similarly, by linking its abstention to the wording surrounding the concept of "gender", the State of Cameroon deliberately perpetuates confusion between gender, which, according to the standard United Nations definition, constitutes a structural analysis of power relations and inequalities between men and women (which underpin violence against women and girls), and gender as perceived in Cameroon, namely, an ideology relating to sexual orientation or sexual identities. By abstaining, Cameroon strips the concept of "gender" of its structural dimension, reducing it to the protection of women and children, and risks depriving public policies and the law currently being developed of the appropriate tools needed to address the root causes of violence.

Along the same lines, Cameroon links its abstention to formulations considered non-consensual regarding certain reproductive rights concepts, such as the notion of "safe abortion". Yet the Maputo Protocol (ratified by Cameroon) explicitly provides for reproductive rights under Article 14, including medical abortion in several circumstances, some of which were incorporated into the Penal Code of 12 July 2016 under Article 339. Cameroon could have officially dissociated itself from certain interpretations of reproductive rights without abstaining.

A clear contradiction with national discourse and public policies: This abstention directly contradicts the official rhetoric on the protection of women and families, the National Strategy for Combating GBV (2022–2026), and the commitments made by Cameroon before regional and international bodies. It creates a major discrepancy between the image of a State that claims to combat violence against women within its borders and that of a State which abstains at the United Nations in the face of an almost unanimous international consensus (175 votes in favour against 6 abstentions, while the overwhelming majority of African States voted in favor of the resolution).

Harmful effects on survivors and the fight against impunity: On the ground, this position sends a signal of normative and political weakening at a time when GBV survivors and the families of femicide victims need enhanced protection, unambiguous legal clarity and unwavering institutional commitment. It weakens the advocacy efforts of grassroots actors, contributes to the normalisation of domestic and sexual violence, and undermines Cameroon's international credibility ahead of its periodic review before the CEDAW Committee in 2027.

REMINDER OF THE ADDED VALUE OF THIS RESOLUTION IN THE FIGHT AGAINST VIOLENCE

A United Nations General Assembly resolution (such as Resolution A/C.3/81/L.16/Rev.1 of November 2026) does not have direct legally binding force: it does not create any new legal obligation in the strict sense of a treaty. However, from a normative, political and operational perspective, its adoption and a favorable vote by Cameroon would have provided several major opportunities to address existing gaps in Cameroon's current framework.

On the normative level: Moving beyond the traditional criminal law approach to address the systemic dimension

Cameroon's legal framework is based essentially on the 2016 Penal Code, which criminalizes individual acts (assault and battery, murder, rape) without addressing gender-based violence as a system of inequalities. The resolution would have provided an updated conceptual framework capable of addressing these shortcomings:

The classification and prevention of femicides. Cameroonian criminal law does not recognize "femicide" (the killing of a woman because of her sex or gender) as an autonomous criminal offence. The resolution emphasizes the specific identification of gender-related killings, the analysis of risk factors at an early stage, and the State's obligation of due diligence to prevent repeat offences following an initial complaint.

Addressing digital and technology-facilitated violence. Cyber-harassment, the non-consensual dissemination of intimate images and online blackmail targeting women and girls are increasing significantly in Cameroon, while the existing punitive framework (the 2010 Law on Cybersecurity and Cybercrime) remains poorly adapted to the specific nature of GBV. The resolution explicitly incorporates these new forms of violence.

Coercive control and economic violence. Beyond visible physical violence, the United Nations text emphasizes insidious forms of control (deprivation of resources, prohibition from working, social isolation), which are essential to understanding and breaking the cycle of control in domestic violence.

On the legislative level: A catalyst for the GBV framework law and the reform of family law

While Cameroon has been working for several years on a preliminary draft of a specific law against GBV and on the reform of the Code on Persons and the Family, the adoption of the resolution would have created a favorable environment for:

Accelerating the adoption of the specific law. A favorable vote at the United Nations would have provided advocacy actors with a direct instrument for engaging Parliament and the Government to align domestic law with the most recent international standards, particularly with regard to emergency protection orders (the immediate removal of an abusive partner even before criminal proceedings).

Strict regulation of amicable and customary settlements. The resolution reaffirms the principle that traditional or family mediation mechanisms must never replace public legal action or compromise victims' safety in cases of serious violence.

On the operational level: Moving from declarations of intent to accountability

The resolution contains specific recommendations that directly address the obstacles observed on the ground in Cameroon:

Gender-responsive budgeting (GRB). The resolution calls on States to allocate dedicated, sustainable and traceable budget lines to essential services (emergency shelters, toll-free helplines and legal aid funds), whereas support services in Cameroon still depend largely on funding from international donors and NGOs.

Centralization and interoperability of data. The resolution encourages the establishment of unified and disaggregated national data collection systems (police, justice, health and social affairs) in order to move beyond fragmented estimates and measure the proportion of complaints that never result in a court judgment.

Continuity of protection in humanitarian and security contexts. This recommendation of the resolution is particularly relevant to Cameroonian regions affected by crises (Far North, North-West, South-West and East).

The text recalls the need to integrate GBV prevention and response from the humanitarian emergency phase, including for internally displaced and refugee women.

On the diplomatic and financial level: Maintaining credibility with partners

Preparation for the periodic review (CEDAW 2027). Voting in favor of the resolution would have enabled Cameroon to appear before the CEDAW Committee as a proactive State, acting in continuity with its international commitments, rather than having to justify a position perceived as defensive.

Mobilization of international funding. Technical and financial partners (United Nations agencies, the European Union and bilateral cooperation partners) rely on States' normative alignment with General Assembly resolutions to guide their financial and technical support to national programs (such as the forthcoming post-2026 strategy). This abstention therefore constitutes, in itself, a loss of opportunities for stakeholders involved in the fight against GBV/VAWG in Cameroon.

THE COALITION'S SPECIFIC AND JUSTIFIED EXPECTATIONS OF THE STATE OF CAMEROON

In order to dispel any misunderstanding, reaffirm the primacy of victims' protection and align Cameroon's diplomacy with its constitutional and international commitments, the ECCAS sub-regional Coalition of Civil Society Organisations for the Elimination of Violence Against Women and Girls (CAC-EVEFF) expects the following concrete actions from the State of Cameroon:

Expectation 1: Publicly clarify the implications of the abstention and reaffirm full commitment to combating GBV and femicides.
Justification: Remove the ambiguity created among citizens, victims and international partners by clarifying that the abstention in no way calls into question the State's obligation to prevent, prosecute and punish all forms of violence against women and girls, including femicides.

Expectation 2: Adopt, as soon as possible, a comprehensive and autonomous framework law against GBV and VAWG.
Justification: Address the shortcomings of existing criminal law provisions by providing the country with a comprehensive legal instrument that explicitly establishes prevention, immediate protection for survivors (protection orders and emergency accommodation), the prosecution of domestic violence and femicides, as well as the prohibition of resorting to customary or family settlements where these compromise the safety and rights of victims.

Expectation 3: Ensure effective prosecutions, access to justice, and free or affordable medical evidence.
Justification: End impunity and the practical obstacles that discourage victims from filing complaints by ensuring dignified and specialized reception at police stations and gendarmerie brigades, reducing the costs associated with medical certificates, and providing legal and psychosocial support to survivors.

Expectation 4: Harmonize domestic law and family law with CEDAW and the Maputo Protocol, and prepare for the 2027 CEDAW review in collaboration with civil society.
Justification: Eliminate discriminatory provisions or those that create inequalities in legal status and property rights, and establish a transparent and inclusive consultation framework between public administrations and civil society organizations for monitoring public policies and international commitments.

Expectation 5: Strengthen the reliable, disaggregated and public collection of data on GBV and femicides, as well as ensure sustainable funding for support services.
Justification: Ensure that public policies and budget allocations are based on reliable and up-to-date data, and guarantee sustainable resources for listening centers, shelters, and medical and psychosocial support services throughout the national territory.

Done within the ECCAS region, on 25 November 2026.

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