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Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women
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Submission on the Rights of Women in the Republic of Cameroon
Prepared by
The Advocates for Human Rights
a non-governmental organization in special consultative status
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I. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. **The Advocates for Human Rights.** The Advocates is a non-governmental organization established in 1983 that seeks to implement international human rights standards to promote civil society and reinforce the rule of law. The Advocates conducts a range of programs to promote human rights in the United States and around the world, including monitoring and fact finding, direct legal representation, education and training, and publications. The Advocates is committed to ensuring human rights protection for women around the world.
2. Voting rights and participation of women in the political process are areas of significant concern in Cameroon. Women represent 51% of the population of Cameroon, but the percentage of women in government as a whole is much lower.¹ Cameroon reported that the percentage of women members in government stands at 13.5%.² This is far below equal representation or the 30 percent quota suggested by the Committee.³ Significant underrepresentation of women persists in positions of local representation, diplomacy, administration, and magistracy.⁴
3. The substantial lack of representation by women in the public life of a country is a form of discrimination against women. *De facto* equality between men and women means equality in all spheres of life, including the political sphere.
4. This submission addresses Cameroon's compliance with its obligations in the context of women's voting and political rights. The government of Cameroon has made progress toward increasing the number of women who participate in decision-making roles within the government. However, additional efforts are required by the Convention. This submission sets forth the challenges that remain and provides recommendations for reforms to be considered.

¹ See LUKMEF-Cameroon, Women 2013 Project Home Page, *available at* <http://www.lukmefcameroon.org/2013.html> (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

² See Cameroon State party report (Combined fourth and fifth periodic report) at ¶ 95, *available at* http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/TreatyBodyExternal/Countries.aspx?CountryCode=CMR&Lang=EN (last visited 12 Nov. 2013).

³ General Recommendation No. 23 (16th session, 1997) at ¶ 16, *available at* <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/recommendations/recomm.htm#recom23> (last visited 12 Nov. 2013).

⁴ See generally Report of the Joint Mission of the Mechanisms of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa (September 2012) at ¶ 217, *available at* http://www.achpr.org/files/sessions/53rd/mission-reports/cameroon-promo-2012/misrep_promo_cameroon_2012_eng.pdf (last visited 12 Nov. 2013).

II. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

A. Scope of International Obligations

5. Cameroon ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women on August 23, 1994.⁵ In particular, obligations relating to the right to vote and political rights are found in Articles 7 and 8.⁶ Cameroon also acceded to the Optional Protocol on January 7, 2005, which allows individuals and groups to report to the Committee violations of Convention rights by Cameroon.⁷

6. Under Article 7, Cameroon has agreed to take all appropriate measures to eliminate, in Cameroon's political and public life, discrimination against women. Particularly, Cameroon agreed to work toward equal voting rights in all elections by formulating and implementing applicable government policies, to assist in increasing the number of women holding public office and performing public functions at all levels of government, and to participate in non-governmental organizations and associations (NGOs).

7. Under Article 8, Cameroon has agreed to take all appropriate measures for ensuring women equal terms as men without any discrimination, in opportunities to represent the Cameroonian government in an international capacity and to participate in work for international organizations.

10. Article 4 further obligates Cameroon to adopt temporary special measures to accelerate *de facto* equality between men and women. In General Recommendation No. 25, State Parties were instructed to take temporary special measures to ensure full compliance with the provisions of Articles 7 and 8.⁸

B. Domestic Legislative Framework

8. The Constitution of Cameroon declares in Article 2(2) that the authority of the State derives power from the people through election by direct or indirect universal suffrage.⁹ Article 2(3) entitles every citizen, aged 20 and older, to an equal and secret vote.

⁵ Signatories to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, *available at* http://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-8&chapter=4&lang=en (last visited 10 Nov. 2013).

⁶ The Convention of Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, Articles 7 and 8 (entered into force 1981), *available at* <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm> (last visited 14 Nov. 2013).

⁷ Ratifications, Accessions, and Successions to the Optional Protocol, *available at* http://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-8&chapter=4&lang=en (last visited 11 Nov. 2013).

⁸ General Recommendation No. 25 (30th session, 2004) *available at* [http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/recommendations/General%20recommendation%2025%20\(English\).pdf](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/recommendations/General%20recommendation%2025%20(English).pdf) (last visited 12 Nov. 2013).

⁹ A French language version of the 1996 Amended Constitution is available at http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text.jsp?file_id=191418 (last visited 10 Nov. 2013). An English version is available at <http://confinder.richmond.edu/admin/docs/Cameroon.pdf> (last visited 10 Nov. 2013).

9. The Electoral Code of Cameroon of April 2012 was amended in December 2012¹⁰ and made gender a legal consideration in creating all candidate lists for parliament, municipal council, Senate, and regional council elections.¹¹ For parliament and municipal councils, votes are cast for lists of candidates, which are submitted by political parties, for the seats available in a constituency.¹² Seats are filled in order of appearance on the list, particularly in the case that seats are filled from multiple lists when one list does not gain a majority of the votes.¹³ For the senate, seats are filled in part by indirect universal suffrage on a regional basis and in part by appointment of the President.¹⁴

III. COMPLIANCE WITH INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS OBLIGATIONS

10. *Traditional barriers continue to impair women's ability to participate in politics.* Barriers are manifested in several ways, including economic, cultural, educational, and political.¹⁵

11. In general, many women remain financially dependent on men in Cameroon.¹⁶ A recent report highlighted the Mbororo community where women are prevented from making decisions inside their own families because of their economic dependence and exclusion from community decision-making, even on issues that affect women.¹⁷ Without the economic resources to pursue a political career, many women are prevented from independently pursuing one. Furthermore, discriminatory laws reinforce this barrier. Article 223 of the Civil Code and Article 74 of Ordinance 81/02 of 29 June 1981 permit a husband to object to his wife's pursuit of a separate trade or profession. Article 7 of the Commercial Code authorizes a husband to put an end to his wife's economic activity simply by notifying the Registrar of the Commercial Court of his objection.

12. The current state of politics in Cameroon also presents a barrier. The underrepresentation of women and low enrollment of women in political parties can undermine confidence in women by politicians and weaken solidarity among women.¹⁸ Only a few high offices are held by women in

¹⁰ Cameroon Elections Catapult Women, More Than Doubling Their Representation In The National Assembly (25 Oct. 2013), available at <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2013/10/cameroon-elections-catapult-women> (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

¹¹ See Law No. 2012/001 of 19 April relating to the Electoral Code, §§ 151(3), 164(4)(f), 171(3), 181(2)(f), 218(3), and 246(1), available at http://www.elecam.cm/uploads/media/Electoral_Code_Fnl_.pdf (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

¹² See Election of Members of Parliament, available at <http://www.elecam.cm/en/civic-education/election-of-members-of-parliament.html> (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ The First-Ever Election Of Senators In Cameroon Took Place On 14 April, 2013, available at <http://www.elecam.cm/en/news/news/article/senatoriales-2013.html> (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

¹⁵ CAMEROON: Senatorial Elections 2013 (13 April 2013), http://makeeverywomancount.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5486:cameroon-senatorial-elections-2013&catid=85:2013-elections-monitoring-&Itemid=210#_edn16 (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

¹⁶ See Looking to Cameroon's Women Senators (Jun. 2013), available at <http://www.ipsnews.net/2013/06/looking-to-camerouns-women-senators/> (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

¹⁷ Report of the Joint Mission of the Mechanisms of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa (September 2012) at ¶¶ 124, 134, available at http://www.achpr.org/files/sessions/53rd/mission-reports/cameroon-promo-2012/misrep_promo_cameroon_2012_eng.pdf (last visited 10 Nov. 2013).

¹⁸ See Looking to Cameroon's Women Senators (Jun. 2013), available at <http://www.ipsnews.net/2013/06/looking-to-camerouns-women-senators/> (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

major political parties, including the majority party CPDM.¹⁹ Even when political parties advocate gender equality, disregard for the principle continues to prevail.²⁰ For example, the leader of a major party noted that, although a target quota for women within the party was implemented for years, it was challenging to reach that target, saying, “[M]en are reluctant to give to women. Some of the women are shy.”²¹ Men’s expectations reinforce barriers to quotas, and a senior female politician reported that “men will expect your seat if [they] arrive late (to political meetings).”²² Reported challenges to increased participation also include: “bullying and intimidation by the media, reported to cultivate negative and sexist attitudes; fear of social stigma and sexual harassment; and resistance by male family members.”²³

13. Discrimination against women in the right to education presents another barrier. Boys are given priority for schooling, and girls often cease education at the primary school level because of marriage or agriculture work.²⁴ A 2012 study published by the Cameroon government found that for every 100 boys enrolled in school, only 85 girls attend.²⁵ This gender disparity becomes evidence in the adult literacy rate, which was estimated at 64.8% for women and 78.3% for men in 2010.²⁶ A low female literacy rate in turn can hinder women from accessing information about electoral procedures to run for office or about candidates to make an informed voting decision.²⁷ Once elected, women also face the challenge of having the technical capacity to take on responsibilities, which can be limited due to lack of opportunity to develop the necessary skills.²⁸

14. Cultural barriers, such as local or religious customs, present perhaps the greatest challenges. The traditional political structure is patriarchal, having a chief and a council, who are generally all male, acting as legislative and judicial bodies.²⁹ Many men still believe that a woman’s place

¹⁹ United States Department of State, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, “Cameroon 2012 Human Rights Report”, available at <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/204309.pdf> (last visited [date]).

²⁰ See Looking to Cameroon’s Women Senators (Jun. 2013), available at <http://www.ipsnews.net/2013/06/looking-to-camerouns-women-senators/> (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

²¹ Women in African Politics: A Vote Of Confidence (9 Sep. 2013), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/09/women-african-politics-vote-cameroon> (last visited 12 Dec 2013).

²² Nath, Women in Power: Beyond Access to Influence in a Post-2015 World, p. 4 (2013), available at http://www.vso.org.uk/sites/vso_uk/files/documents/Policy/Gender%20equality/vso_women_in_power_report_final_10september2013.pdf (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²⁴ Report of the Joint Mission of the Mechanisms of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa (September 2012) at ¶¶ 124, 134 (discussing the Mbororo community).

²⁵ Cameroon’s Girls Face Educational Challenges (7 Nov. 2013), available at <http://www.openequalfree.org/girl-power/camerouns-girls-face-educational-challenges> (last visited 10 Dec. 2013).

²⁶ Central Intelligence Agency. (2009) The World Factbook. Retrieved March 22, 2009, available at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cm.html> (last visited 9 Dec. 2013); Cameroon: Women Literacy in Focus (25 Sep. 2012), available at <http://allafrica.com/stories/201209270999.html> (last visited 12 Dec. 2013) (stating 60% of women are literate).

²⁷ See New Manual Encourages Women to Enter Politics (13 Nov. 2013), <http://www.globalpressjournal.com/africa/cameroon/new-manual-encourages-women-enter-politics/page/0/1> (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

²⁸ See Looking to Cameroon’s Women Senators (Jun. 2013), available at <http://www.ipsnews.net/2013/06/looking-to-camerouns-women-senators/> (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

²⁹ Montemarano, Gender Equality in Cameroon: Political Participation and Leadership, p. 6 (Dec. 2011), <http://gci-cameroon.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Gender-Equality-in-Cameroon-2011.pdf> (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

is in the home, not pursuing a political career.³⁰ This has been described as an “overwhelming prejudice” in one report.³¹ One journalist cited a belief among some men that “when you empower a woman, you are empowering her to hurt them.”³² A Cameroonian NGO reported that the persistence of patriarchal social structures also perpetuates violence against women.³³

15. The traditional role of women in Cameroon, including domestic duties and farm work, also reinforces barriers for women in politics.³⁴ For example, in rural areas, Cameroon claims that women participate in the decision-making process as members of management structures, yet those positions are concentrated in food security programs, which are seen as acceptable traditional roles.³⁵

16. A recent story highlights disenfranchisement of women voters due to the new biometric voter registration system. Prior to the biometric system, an unregistered voter could be presented by two witnesses.³⁶ But under the new biometric system (implemented to reduce voter fraud), voters are required to have their photographs taken for their national identity cards in order to vote.³⁷ This disenfranchises some women where cultural or religious traditions impede their ability to obtain a national identify card. For example, in the Far North region, which is largely Muslim, women are not permitted to have their photographs taken.³⁸ Even if women overcome these hurdles, control or intimidation by their husbands can still restrict their rights to vote. In one woman’s case, her husband and his friend instructed her to vote for a particular party.³⁹

17. Women’s freedom of movement may be restricted by their husbands,⁴⁰ thus further impeding their ability to participate in political processes. The national identity card required to vote also allows someone to travel, and the same husband who told his wife who to vote for feared it would be “difficult to control” his wife if she could leave home.⁴¹

18. *Recent elections for the senate mark positive progress toward equality for women in decision-making positions.* On April 14, 2013, Cameroon held its first senatorial elections.⁴² Of

³⁰ See Looking to Cameroon’s Women Senators (Jun. 2013), available at <http://www.ipsnews.net/2013/06/looking-to-camerouns-women-senators/> (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

³¹ Montemarano, Gender Equality in Cameroon: Political Participation and Leadership, p. 5 (Dec. 2011), <http://gci-cameroon.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Gender-Equality-in-Cameroon-2011.pdf> (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

³² Women in African Politics: A Vote of Confidence (9 Sep. 2013), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/09/women-african-politics-vote-cameroon> (last visited 12 Dec 2013).

³³ Interview with Cameroonian non-governmental organization via electronic questionnaire, January 2014, on file with The Advocates.

³⁴ CAMEROON: Senatorial Elections 2013 (13 April 2013), http://makeeverywomancount.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5486:cameroon-senatorial-elections-2013&catid=85:2013-elections-monitoring-&Itemid=210#_edn16 (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

³⁵ See Cameroon State party report (Combined fourth and fifth periodic report) at ¶ 181.

³⁶ Cameroon: Keeping the Veil On Women’s Electoral Participation (7 Nov. 2012), available at <http://allafrica.com/stories/201211080409.html?viewall=1> (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² The First-Ever Election Of Senators In Cameroon Took Place On 14 April, 2013, available at <http://www.elec.cm/en/news/news/article/senatoriales-2013.html> (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

the 70 seats that were elected, women were elected to 17 seats, and the President appointed 3 additional female senators out of 30 appointments.⁴³ Although the elections and appointments bring the representation of women to 20% in the senate, it is still “inadequate” according to the More Women in Politics Network.⁴⁴

19. Recent elections for the parliament mark positive progress toward equality for women in decision-making positions. The 2012 election law appears to have made an impact during the electoral process. The law sought to require that each candidate list have at least one female candidate.⁴⁵ Prior to the 2013 parliamentary elections, the percentage of women in the National Assembly was below 15%, and women represented only 23 of 180 seats in the National Assembly.⁴⁶ In the politically active North West region, 5% of parliamentarians were women.⁴⁷ Results of the September 2013 election, however, showed an increase in female representation in parliament. Women were elected to 56 seats of the National Assembly’s 180 total, representing 31.1% of all seats.⁴⁸ With the support of a UN Women Gender and Elections expert, the electoral board ELECAM rejected 48 of 250 candidate lists from 38 political parties—20 of those 48 rejected candidate lists were denied for failing to meet the gender requirement.⁴⁹ In addition, at least two of the major political parties of Cameroon introduced roughly 30% quotas for women candidates, directly impacting the candidate lists for election.⁵⁰

20. Presidential appointments of women continue to be disproportionately low. Although election results have shown great improvement, Presidential appointments have not made comparable advances in reaching equality for women. Most recently, only 10% of President Paul Biya’s appointments to the Senate were women.⁵¹ In 2012, only 9 of 66 cabinet posts appointed

⁴³ Looking to Cameroon’s Women Senators (Jun. 2013), available at <http://www.ipsnews.net/2013/06/looking-to-camerouns-women-senators/> (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

⁴⁴ Cameroon Elections Catapult Women, More Than Doubling Their Representation In The National Assembly (25 Oct. 2013), available at <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2013/10/cameroon-elections-catapult-women> (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

⁴⁵ CAMEROON: Senatorial Elections 2013 (13 April 2013), http://makeeverywomancount.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5486:cameroon-senatorial-elections-2013&catid=85:2013-elections-monitoring-&Itemid=210#_edn16 (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

⁴⁶ United States Department of State, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, “Cameroon 2012 Human Rights Report”, available at <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/204309.pdf> (last visited 10 Nov. 2013).

⁴⁷ Nath, Women in Power: Beyond Access to Influence in a Post-2015 World, p. 11 (2013), available at http://www.vso.org.uk/sites/vso_uk/files/documents/Policy/Gender%20equality/vso_women_in_power_report_final_10september2013.pdf (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

⁴⁸ Cameroon Elections Catapult Women, More Than Doubling Their Representation In The National Assembly (25 Oct. 2013), available at <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2013/10/cameroon-elections-catapult-women> (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Municipal/Legislative Elections: Civil Society Presses For Women Representation (10 Jul. 2013), available at http://www.cameroon-info.net/stories/0,48756,@_municipal-legislative-elections-civil-society-presses-for-women-representation.html (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

⁵¹ Cameroon Elections Catapult Women, More Than Doubling Their Representation In The National Assembly (25 Oct. 2013), available at <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2013/10/cameroon-elections-catapult-women> (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

were women, or less than 15% of all cabinet posts.⁵² As of July 2010, only 242 out of 994 judges in the Ministry of Justice, also Presidential appointees, were women.⁵³

21. **Local representation by women remains low.** Between 2007 and 2012, only 24 of 360 mayors were women.⁵⁴ Prior to the September election in 2013, only 16% of municipal councilors were women in the politically active North West region.⁵⁵

22. **Representation at the international level by women remains low.** In the Concluding Observations in early 2009, the Committee expressed concern over a lack of women's representation at the international level due to the country's stated unavailability of women to serve in these positions.⁵⁶ Cameroon reported only that one woman from Cameroon was a member of an international body in July 2009.⁵⁷

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

23. The Advocates makes the following questions and poses the following recommendations:

A. Questions:

- Describe efforts to promote more women to international delegations and other high-level positions.
- Describe efforts increase female representation in domestic decision-making positions.
- Describe measures to ensure that public organizations, such as public boards, local councils, political parties, trade unions, professional and industry associations, women's organizations, and community-based organizations do not discriminate against women and respect the principles contained in Articles 7 and 8.
- Describe the factors which hinder women from exercising their right to vote and any measures, if any, the government has undertaken to overcome these obstacles.
- Describe efforts to inform and educate women on electoral and voting procedures, especially women who are illiterate.

⁵² United States Department of State, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, Cameroon 2012 Human Rights Report, available at <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/204309.pdf>.

⁵³ Report of the Joint Mission of the Mechanisms of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa (September 2012) at ¶ 97, available at http://www.achpr.org/files/sessions/53rd/mission-reports/cameroon-promo-2012/misrep_promo_cameroon_2012_eng.pdf (last visited 10 Nov. 2013).

⁵⁴ Looking to Cameroon's Women Senators (Jun. 2013), available at <http://www.ipsnews.net/2013/06/looking-to-camerouns-women-senators/> (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

⁵⁵ Nath, Women in Power: Beyond Access to Influence in a Post-2015 World, p. 11 (2013), available at http://www.vso.org.uk/sites/vso_uk/files/documents/Policy/Gender%20equality/vso_women_in_power_report_final_10september2013.pdf (last visited 12 Dec. 2013).

⁵⁶ Concluding Observations from 43rd session at ¶ 34.

⁵⁷ Cameroon State party report (Combined fourth and fifth periodic report) at ¶ 103.

B. Recommendations

- Undertake measures to overcome barriers, such as illiteracy or impediments to freedom of movement, that prevent women from exercising their political rights effectively.
- Adopt measures to facilitate women's right to vote, including public outreach to both men and women, transportation to polling centers, and ensuring that voting registration requirements are reasonable and do not have a discriminatory impact on women.
- Identify and eliminate obstacles to voting for women, including photograph and national identity card requirements and restrictions on freedom of movement. Ensure that interference with a person's right to vote is prohibited by law and such laws are enforced.
- Adopt special measures, such as photographs, symbols, and fingerprint voting, to facilitate voting by illiterate voters and provide them with adequate information.
- Provide support, training and advice to elected female representatives on issues, such as: navigating the institution to which they are elected; their core responsibilities; relationships with constituents; their duties and responsibilities; budgeting; and executive oversight; and procedural matters and operations.
- Develop and carry out institutional reforms to ensure the culture and working environment of political institutions is sensitive to the needs of female representatives, for example, the availability and proximity of female restrooms, provision of on-site or nearby childcare services, eradication of evening sessions that may interfere with familial duties, as well as other structural reforms such as proportionate gender representation on committees.
- Provide adequate funding to organizations and programs that support and promote women's political participation.
- Undertake public awareness campaigns to educate and promote women's political participation as voters, candidates, and appointees.