

Gendered Negotiations of Social Citizenship in Cameroon's Displacement Crisis

Endouh Anna Yerimah

Gender and Peace Advocacy, Building Together Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

In Cameroon's conflict-affected North-West, South-West, and Lake Chad regions, women and girls bear disproportionate burdens of displacement, yet they also engage in innovative strategies to negotiate social rights and secure livelihoods. This paper explores how displaced and marginalised women navigate exclusionary systems, asserting access to education, healthcare, and social protection while contesting social hierarchies that limit their participation. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork conducted across these three regions between 2018 and 2023, the study highlights the gendered dimensions of social citizenship, revealing how women become active agents of resilience and social cohesion. The paper introduces the concept of 'negotiated citizenship' — a set of practices through which women claim and reconstruct social membership in conditions of formal exclusion — and explicitly situates it in relation to cognate concepts including insurgent, lived, and informal citizenship. Intersectional analysis examines how widows, adolescent girls, elderly women, women associated with armed groups, and women with disabilities experience citizenship negotiations differently. The paper also engages critically with the limits and risks of informal strategies, and provides concrete institutional recommendations for policy actors operating in conflict-affected Cameroon.

Keywords: social citizenship, gender, displacement, Cameroon, Anglophone crisis, negotiated citizenship, intersectionality, resilience, informal networks, social protection

INTRODUCTION

I remember standing at a makeshift displacement camp on the outskirts of Bamenda in 2019, watching a woman I will call Miriam use her phone to relay a message about a government food distribution she had heard about from a radio broadcast. She had walked almost seven kilometres with two children on her back and one clinging to her hand. By the time she arrived, the supplies had run out. What stayed with me was not the cruelty of that particular moment but her refusal to be undone by it. She turned around, gathered four other women from the camp, and within two days had negotiated a community garden plot from a local farmer — bartering labour for land. That negotiation, informal and unrecorded, was an act of citizenship.

The Anglophone crisis in Cameroon, which erupted in 2016 from grievances over the marginalisation of English-speaking regions, has generated one of Central Africa's most severe internal displacement crises. By 2023, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimated over 700,000 internally displaced persons in the North-West and South-West regions alone (OCHA, 2023). Combined with longstanding displacement pressures in the Lake Chad basin — driven by Boko Haram insurgency, climate shocks, and cross-border conflict — the result is a population of vulnerable people whose most basic social entitlements have been severed or severely curtailed.

Within this population, women and girls are not simply passive victims. That framing, however sympathetic in intention, misrepresents the reality observed over years of fieldwork and advocacy. Women are negotiators, brokers, informal educators, healthcare-seekers, and community builders. They operate within systems that were not designed for them and that often actively exclude them, yet they find cracks, spaces, and allies. This paper documents and theorises those practices — rendering visible the gendered labour of citizenship in contexts where the state has either withdrawn or become a threat.

The central argument draws on T.H. Marshall's (1950) foundational framework of social citizenship — the idea that full membership in a political community requires not just civil and political rights, but substantive social rights including education, healthcare, and a measure of economic security. This framework is extended by integrating feminist critiques that reveal how citizenship has always been gendered (Lister, 1997; Yuval-Davis, 1997), and by grounding it in the empirical realities of displacement, where formal citizenship rights are routinely suspended or inaccessible. In such conditions, women's informal negotiations — their strategies for accessing education for their children, healthcare for their families, and some degree of economic autonomy — constitute a form of social citizenship practised from below. The paper introduces the concept of 'negotiated citizenship' to describe these practices and explicitly distinguishes it from related concepts, as elaborated in Section 2.2.

The analysis draws on qualitative fieldwork conducted between 2018 and 2023 across Bamenda, Buea, and communities along the Lake Chad shoreline. It includes in-depth interviews with 74 displaced women, focus group discussions with community groups, and ethnographic observation at displacement sites, health posts, and informal markets. The methodology is detailed fully in Section 2.3.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: GENDER, CITIZENSHIP, AND DISPLACEMENT

Foundations: Marshall, Feminist Critiques, and Displacement

The concept of social citizenship, as articulated by Marshall (1950), was grounded in post-war British welfare state thinking that assumed a relatively settled, male breadwinner household model. Feminist scholars have long critiqued this foundation. Lister (1997) argues compellingly that Marshall's model rendered women's unpaid domestic and care labour invisible, constructing citizenship as a masculine public sphere entitlement. Yuval-Davis (1997) extends this critique by showing how citizenship intersects with gender, ethnicity, and nationality in ways that create layered exclusions — a framework she describes as 'multi-layered citizenship.'

In the context of forced displacement, these exclusions become more acute. When people are uprooted from their communities, they typically lose the local networks, documentation, and physical presence that enable access to public services. For women in particular, displacement can compound pre-existing vulnerabilities: loss of land rights, exposure to gender-based violence, disrupted reproductive health services, and the intensification of care burdens (UNHCR, 2019). Yet an exclusive focus on vulnerability risks obscuring the agency that women exercise within these constraints.

Agamben's (1998) theory of the 'state of exception' offers a useful entry point: the modern state generates a space of bare life — a zone where normal legal protections are suspended — inhabited by refugees and displaced persons. Applied to the Cameroonian context, this framework helps explain how IDPs exist outside the normal reach of state provision. However, Agamben's framework leaves little room for agency, and it is here that Holston's (2008) work becomes more generative.

Conceptual Clarification: Negotiated Citizenship and Related Concepts

The scholarship on informal and non-state citizenship practices has produced several overlapping concepts that require careful differentiation. Table 1 below provides a comparative overview of four key concepts — insurgent citizenship, lived citizenship, informal citizenship, and the concept of negotiated citizenship advanced in this paper — across five analytical dimensions.

Table 1: Comparative Conceptual Framework for Citizenship Practices at the Margins

Concept	Origin/Author	Core Meaning	Key Mechanism	Limitation
Insurgent Citizenship	Holston (2008)	Citizenship claimed through urban social movements and informal city-making in Brazil	Collective mobilisation; challenge to established civic order	Tied to urban spatial politics; limited application to rural/displaced settings

Lived Citizenship	Lister (2003); Hall & Williamson (1999)	How citizenship is experienced and practiced in everyday life, beyond formal legal status	Subjective experience; cultural belonging; everyday practice	Descriptive rather than analytical; under-theorised mechanisms of change
Informal Citizenship	Isin & Wood (1999)	Claim-making outside formal state channels; practices of belonging without legal recognition	Boundary-crossing; partial inclusion; de facto rights	Risks naturalising informality as a permanent condition rather than a temporary gap
Negotiated Citizenship (this paper)	Author (2026)	Displaced women's active, relational, and strategic reconstruction of social rights through micro-political acts in formal exclusion	Iterative bargaining; informal brokerage; collective claim-making; reciprocal exchange	Does not guarantee durable rights; dependent on individual social capital and local relational structures

As Table 1 illustrates, 'negotiated citizenship' is distinguished from insurgent citizenship primarily by its locus and mechanism: where Holston's concept is rooted in collective urban social movements challenging the institutional civic order (Holston, 2008), negotiated citizenship operates at the micro-political level of individual and small-group bargaining, brokerage, and reciprocal exchange. It does not necessarily seek to transform the formal system; it works around it.

Negotiated citizenship also differs from lived citizenship (Lister, 2003; Hall & Williamson, 1999) in that it is explicitly analytical rather than descriptive. Lived citizenship documents the subjective experience of belonging; negotiated citizenship traces the relational mechanisms — the bargains, the intermediaries, the conditions of access — through which social rights are practically reconstructed. And unlike informal citizenship as theorised by Isin and Wood (1999), negotiated citizenship does not naturalise informality as a permanent structural feature; rather, it treats informal practice as a contingent response to state failure, one that carries both possibilities and risks, as explored in Section 7.

Negotiated citizenship, as used here, describes the practices through which displaced women assert, access, and reconstruct social rights in conditions of formal exclusion. It operates in informal markets, in conversations with health workers, in strategies to get children into schools without documentation, and in the collective pooling of resources to manage shared vulnerabilities. It is a set of practices, relations, and micro-political acts — not a legal status, not a formal recognition, and not a permanent alternative to the rights that states should provide.

METHODOLOGY

Fieldwork Design, Participant Selection, and Ethical Protocols

The empirical basis of this paper is qualitative fieldwork conducted in three phases between 2018 and 2023: an initial scoping phase (2018–2019) covering displacement sites in Bamenda and the surrounding North-West region; a second phase (2020–2021) extending to the South-West region (Buea, Kumba, and Lebalem Division); and a third phase (2022–2023) covering Lake Chad shoreline communities in Cameroon's Far North region, principally in the Mora and Kousseri areas.

Participants were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. The purposive element ensured representation across three analytical dimensions: geographical region (North-West, South-West, Far North), displacement status (newly displaced, protracted displacement, returned/secondary displaced), and household composition (female-headed households, households with male heads absent, multi-generational households). Snowball sampling was used to access women whose circumstances — association with armed

groups, disability, engagement in stigmatised livelihoods — made them less accessible through formal community structures.

A total of 74 in-depth interviews were conducted with individual women, complemented by 12 focus group discussions (between 6 and 10 participants each) with community groups including tontine associations, women's church groups, and informal health volunteer networks. Interviews were conducted in French, Pidgin English, Fulfulde, and Cameroonian English, with interpretation support provided by locally recruited female research assistants with demonstrated community trust. Fieldnotes from ethnographic observation at markets, health posts, community meetings, and displacement sites formed a third source of data.

Thematic coding was applied to interview and focus group transcripts using NVivo. Coding proceeded in two stages: a first cycle of descriptive coding to capture practices, strategies, and contextual factors; and a second cycle of analytical coding to identify patterns corresponding to the theoretical dimensions of negotiated citizenship (claim-making, brokerage, reciprocal exchange, collective action). Member-checking was conducted with a sub-sample of eight participants to verify the analytical interpretation of their accounts.

Regional variation was handled analytically rather than comparatively: given the different character of the Anglophone crisis and the Lake Chad crisis, the aim was not to produce comparative findings across regions but to identify patterns of negotiated citizenship that recurred across different crisis contexts, while remaining attentive to regional specificity.

Ethical considerations were particularly complex given the conflict-affected nature of all three research sites. Informed consent was obtained orally in all cases (written consent was assessed as creating documentation risk in conflict zones) and confirmed at the start and end of each interview. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point and to decline any question. Names and identifying details have been changed throughout. In the Far North, where some participants had prior association with Boko Haram or had been abducted and released, additional protocols were adopted: interviews were conducted in private, audio recording was discontinued where requested, and a trauma-informed interviewing approach was applied, with referral pathways established in advance in collaboration with a local women's NGO. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review body prior to each fieldwork phase.

The Crisis in Context: North-West, South-West, and Lake Chad

To understand the gendered dimensions of displacement in Cameroon, it is necessary to appreciate the particular character of each crisis. The Anglophone crisis in the North-West and South-West regions has a distinct political texture that shapes how displacement is experienced and how social services are disrupted. The Lake Chad basin crisis is driven by different dynamics but produces overlapping vulnerabilities.

The Anglophone Crisis

The armed conflict in Cameroon's two Anglophone regions began as a teachers' and lawyers' strike in 2016, protesting the imposition of French administrative and judicial practices in historically English-speaking regions. The government's violent response radicalised the movement and gave rise to armed separatist factions collectively known as 'Amba boys.' The subsequent counterinsurgency operations, combined with separatist violence against civilians perceived as collaborators, created a cycle of displacement that has continued with varying intensity ever since.

The social infrastructure of the North-West and South-West regions has been severely degraded. Schools have been targeted or occupied; health facilities have been ransacked or abandoned; local government structures operate in attenuated form. The crisis has also created a specific phenomenon known as 'ghost towns' — enforced commercial shutdowns called by separatist groups that prevent normal economic activity on certain days of the week. These shutdowns disproportionately affect women, who typically manage household provisioning through market trade (Ntui, 2021).

In the displacement sites visited around Bamenda, the majority of household heads were women — consistent with the gendered dynamics of conflict, in which men are either combatants, killed, or in hiding, leaving women to manage the practical dimensions of survival. Far from passive, these women were actively negotiating with local landlords, community leaders, NGO representatives, and local government officials to secure shelter, food, and access to services.

The Lake Chad Basin

The Lake Chad basin crisis is considerably older and more complex in its origins. The shrinkage of Lake Chad — which has lost roughly 90 per cent of its surface area since the 1960s, largely due to climate change and agricultural overextraction — has eroded livelihoods across Cameroon's Far North region (Magrin & Lemoalle, 2016). The rise of Boko Haram and ISWAP from the early 2010s added a layer of armed violence that made already fragile communities even more precarious.

Women in the Lake Chad basin face a specific configuration of challenges. Fishing and farming — the traditional economic bases of the region — have both been compromised: the former by the lake's recession, the latter by unpredictable rainfall and insecurity. Those displaced by Boko Haram attacks carry additional trauma and are often subject to stigmatisation in host communities — particularly those who were abducted and later released (Amnesty International, 2021). Yet even in these highly constrained conditions, women consistently find ways to reconstruct social ties and access services, as the fieldwork presented here documents.

Negotiating Education: Getting Children into School

One of the most consistent preoccupations encountered among displaced women was schooling. In every displacement site visited, women spoke about education with urgency. 'If my children stop going to school, everything is lost,' a woman called Perpetua told me in Kumba in 2021. She had fled a village in Meme Division after her house was burned and her husband detained. She was sleeping in a church with her four children, and her most pressing concern was whether the nearby school would accept them without proof of previous enrolment. The barriers to education for displaced children are well documented: lack of documentation, inability to pay fees, language barriers, and the reluctance of receiving schools to accommodate large numbers of pupils they cannot easily absorb (UNESCO, 2020). What is less documented is the labour that women perform to overcome these barriers.

A range of strategies was observed: negotiating directly with school principals, sometimes offering domestic labour or cooking in exchange for informal enrolment; mobilising networks to identify sympathetic teachers; pooling resources for shared exercise books and uniforms; and navigating NGO and church-based accelerated education programmes. These strategies represent a form of claim-making on the right to education — a right formally guaranteed under Cameroonian law but effectively inaccessible to many displaced children.

Marshall (1950) identified education as a central pillar of social citizenship. In the context of displacement, the formal mechanisms through which education is delivered have broken down. What is documented here is the informal repair work — primarily performed by women — that partially substitutes for those formal mechanisms. Kabeer (1999) has noted that women's agency in such contexts is real but constrained, operating within 'structures of constraint' that limit the range of available choices. The education strategies observed were genuinely creative and effective, but also exhausting and inequitable — the burden of securing children's rights should not fall on the individual efforts of displaced mothers.

Navigating Healthcare: Bodies, Belonging, and Informal Access

Healthcare is perhaps the domain in which the vulnerability of displaced women is most viscerally apparent — and in which their agency is most impressive. Reproductive health sits at a complex intersection of bodily rights, social stigma, and institutional access. Women who had delivered babies in displacement shelters with no skilled attendance, women who had walked hours in labour to reach facilities that turned them away, and women who had managed chronic conditions by sharing medications were all encountered in the fieldwork.

At the same time, women had built relationships with community health workers, organised informal health education sessions, and established referral networks — knowing which facility would accept patients without a residency document and which community health worker could be approached when government health post stock-outs were prolonged.

Grace, interviewed in a displacement site in Lebialem Division in 2022, had become an informal health broker for her community. She had worked as a community health volunteer before displacement and retained her knowledge and contacts. 'I know who to call. I know which hospital will take them even without papers. I know which midwife will come at night.' Her knowledge was social capital being deployed in the service of a community with no other effective access to healthcare. Scholars of global health have described similar phenomena as 'lay health workers' or 'health navigators' (Lehmann & Sanders, 2007). What distinguishes the Cameroonian context is the scale of need and the degree to which these informal roles are filling structural voids rather than supplementing functioning systems.

Mental health deserves particular attention. Formal mental health services are almost entirely absent from displacement settings in Cameroon. What was observed instead were informal spaces of collective healing — gatherings organised around prayer groups, savings associations, or cultural practices that functioned as communal coping in the sense described by Kaniasty and Norris (1993): the shared processing of traumatic experience within a social group.

Economic Strategies and Social Protection from Below

Displacement typically involves the abrupt loss of livelihood. The tontine (informal rotating savings and credit association) was the most prevalent economic institution encountered in displacement settings, serving simultaneously as a short-term credit mechanism, a social occasion sustaining community ties, and a form of mutual insurance against acute shocks.

Women also participated extensively in informal trade, maintaining market activity even during the conflict. One trader described navigating military and separatist checkpoints with pragmatic precision: 'You know their faces, you know their names, you know which day they are in a good mood.' The formal social protection architecture in Cameroon — primarily the National Social Insurance Fund (CNPS), which covers formal sector workers — excludes the vast majority of displaced women. Humanitarian cash transfers, while valuable, are time-limited and reach only a fraction of those in need (WFP, 2022). The informal protection mechanisms that women construct and maintain are not supplementary to formal provision; they are the primary social protection system for most displaced households.

Differentiated Experiences: An Intersectional Analysis

The concept of negotiated citizenship risks homogenising what is in reality a highly differentiated set of experiences. Not all displaced women negotiate from the same position or with the same resources. A systematic intersectional analysis — attending to age, widowhood, disability, and conflict-related stigma — reveals important variations that the aggregate account above tends to obscure.

Widows

Widows constitute a distinct and particularly vulnerable sub-group. Beyond the immediate loss of a partner, widowhood in the contexts studied frequently triggers a secondary dispossession: in-laws claiming rights over the deceased husband's land, property, or household resources, and contesting the widow's authority over her own children. This pattern was observed in both the Anglophone crisis regions and the Far North. Widows' capacity to negotiate access to services was often curtailed by their need first to negotiate their own standing within the household and community — a prior layer of citizenship struggle that consumed time and social capital.

At the same time, widows who had successfully consolidated their household authority sometimes emerged as among the most effective community advocates — precisely because their autonomy was not constrained by a

present male household head. Several of the most active community leaders in displacement sites visited were widows.

Adolescent Girls

Adolescent girls occupy a particularly precarious position in displacement contexts. They are simultaneously vulnerable to forced early marriage — with families under economic stress sometimes pursuing bride price as a livelihood strategy — and to sexual exploitation, both by armed actors and within displacement communities. Their access to education is more fragile than that of younger children: older girls are more likely to be withdrawn from school to perform care work or generate income, and they are less likely to be prioritised when household resources for school fees are scarce.

The negotiated citizenship strategies available to adolescent girls are narrower than those available to adult women. They typically depend on adult advocates — mothers, teachers, women's group members — to access services on their behalf. Initiatives that directly engage adolescent girls as rights-claiming agents — including girls' clubs, peer education programmes, and safe space activities — were observed to modestly expand this constrained range of options, but their reach was limited.

Elderly Women

Elderly women present a different configuration. Many have strong social capital — deep community networks, respected status, knowledge of local customs and resources — that enables effective negotiation in some domains. Older women were often central figures in tontines and communal coping networks, deploying decades of accumulated social knowledge in the service of displaced communities. However, elderly women face specific physical constraints on mobility that limit their access to services and markets, and they are less likely to have the digital literacy or phone access that increasingly mediates service information and delivery.

Women Associated with Armed Groups

Women who had been abducted by Boko Haram and subsequently released, or who were perceived to have had voluntary association with armed groups, faced acute social stigmatisation in host communities. This stigma operated as a citizenship barrier in the most direct sense: it made women reluctant to appear at public service points, attend community gatherings, or engage with authorities, for fear of denunciation or rejection. Several women in this situation described a strategy of radical concealment — constructing new social identities in displacement communities where they were not known.

The negotiated citizenship available to these women was thus conducted largely in invisibility. It depended heavily on individual brokers — trusted women who knew their circumstances and could act as intermediaries — rather than on direct self-advocacy. This represents an important limit case for the concept: where stigma is extreme, the resources required for direct negotiation may not be accessible, and the citizenship labour is displaced onto others.

Women with Disabilities

Women with physical or cognitive disabilities were consistently among the least visible and least served in displacement settings. Standard service delivery models — requiring travel to fixed-site facilities, oral communication with service providers, or physical mobility to access markets and community events — were often inaccessible to women with disabilities. Informal protection mechanisms, while sometimes inclusive, also sometimes reproduced exclusion: tontines, for example, require regular financial contributions that women with disabilities generating no income cannot sustain.

The negotiated citizenship practices of women with disabilities were thus heavily mediated by carers and family members, and dependent on the quality of those relationships. Where carers were supportive, disabled women could access services and networks through proxy advocacy. Where carers were absent, overwhelmed, or themselves displaced, disabled women faced compounding isolation.

Contesting Social Hierarchies and the Risks of Informal Systems

Gender, Authority, and Voice

The resilience and agency of displaced women should not be romanticised. Women's strategies are exercised within social structures that consistently subordinate them to male authority, and that often intensify that subordination in conditions of crisis. Displacement does not dissolve gender hierarchy; it typically relocates and reshapes it.

Decisions about household resources, movement, and livelihood were formally made by male household heads in many of the communities observed. Women whose husbands were absent had greater practical autonomy, but this autonomy was often fragile and contested. Women who spoke out in community meetings faced ridicule, social pressure, or accusations of violating cultural norms. The cumulative effect of sustained advocacy was gradually shifting what was considered acceptable, but the process was slow, uneven, and reversible.

Female community leadership in displacement sites — sometimes elected, sometimes informally recognised — created new platforms for women to make demands on service providers. This is consistent with Phillips' (1995) 'politics of presence': substantive representation requires not just formal inclusion but actual presence, numbers, and voice. The structural conditions of crisis sometimes paradoxically created space for women's presence in roles that peacetime norms would have denied them.

The Risks of Relying on Informal Systems

A critical examination of informal citizenship practices must engage honestly with the risks they entail. This paper has documented informal systems as adaptive and sometimes effective. But informal systems can also reproduce exclusion, dependency, and unequal gatekeeping, and the scholarly honesty of the analysis requires that these risks be named.

First, informal access is inherently unequal. Who you know, where you live, and how well you navigate social hierarchies determine whether informal brokerage works for you or against you. Women with strong social capital — existing networks, education, language competence — negotiate more effectively than those without. The most marginalised women, including those with stigmatised identities (Section 7.4) or disabilities (Section 7.5), are often least able to access informal pathways, meaning that informality may replicate the exclusions of formal systems rather than remedying them.

Second, dependency is a real risk in informal systems. Where access to healthcare depends on a personal relationship with a health worker, the loss or departure of that individual ends the access. Where school enrolment depends on the goodwill of a particular principal, a change of principal ends the arrangement. The contingency of informal access is not a minor operational inconvenience; it is a structural vulnerability that formal rights are specifically designed to overcome.

Third, informal gatekeeping can reproduce patriarchal and communal power structures. Community leaders who mediate access to services may extract compliance with gender norms as the price of that access. Tontines may exclude the poorest women or enforce social conformity as a condition of membership. The informal sphere is not a zone of horizontal solidarity; it is traversed by the same power relations that structure the formal sphere, sometimes in less regulated form.

This does not mean that informal practices should be dismissed or undermined by policy actors. It means that the romanticisation of informal resilience is analytically and ethically unjustifiable. Engaging with informal systems means engaging with their politics, not just their functionality. Policy actors who wish to support informal mechanisms must also be willing to interrogate who controls them and who they exclude.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS: CONCRETE INSTITUTIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis presented in this paper has concrete implications for humanitarian and development policy actors operating in conflict-affected Cameroon. The recommendations below are addressed specifically to distinct institutional actors, reflecting the multi-level nature of the challenge.

For Local Councils and Decentralised Authorities

- Develop and implement clear, written protocols for the enrolment of displaced children in schools without standard documentation, specifying alternative forms of identity verification and training school principals in their application. These protocols should be developed in consultation with women's groups and community leaders from displacement sites.
- Establish permanent liaison mechanisms between local councils and women-led community structures in displacement sites, creating a formal channel through which informal community leaders can raise service access issues with public authorities.
- Review and, where possible, suspend documentation requirements for access to local health services that have the effect of excluding displaced persons. A temporary residence declaration — which can be self-attested — should be accepted in lieu of a national identity card for the purposes of healthcare access.

For Cameroon's Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family (MINPROFF)

- Commission a national mapping of women-led community structures in displacement settings, including tontines, women's health groups, and informal education networks, to generate an evidence base for targeted support and partnership.
- Develop a dedicated sub-programme within the national gender action plan addressing the specific citizenship barriers facing widows, adolescent girls at risk of early marriage, and women with disabilities in displacement contexts.
- Establish a legal aid and awareness programme specifically targeting widows facing customary dispossession of land and household resources — a gap that statutory law addresses in principle but that community-level enforcement mechanisms cannot currently fill.

For Humanitarian Agencies (UNHCR, OCHA, UN Women, WFP)

- Systematically map informal protection mechanisms — including tontines, community health networks, and women's savings groups — before designing cash transfer or social protection programmes, and design programmes to complement rather than disrupt these existing structures.
- Mainstream trauma-informed approaches across all field programming in North-West, South-West, and Far North regions, recognising the cumulative mental health burden carried by displaced women. This includes investing in support for the community-based healing practices that women already organise, rather than replacing them with externally designed clinical models.
- Address the specific needs of women stigmatised through conflict association — including Boko Haram survivors and women from communities perceived to have sympathised with separatist actors — by developing safe, confidential service delivery pathways that do not require women to publicly disclose their histories.
- Extend the coverage and duration of cash transfer programmes to better match the protracted (rather than acute) nature of displacement in Cameroon. Current programme cycles are too short to enable the economic stabilisation that supports effective citizenship negotiation.

For Education Authorities (MINEDUB, MINESEC) and Education Partners

- Scale up the provision of accelerated learning programmes for children who have missed multiple school years due to displacement, and prioritise adolescent girls in their targeting, given the disproportionate risk of school dropout they face.
- Provide school directors and teachers in displacement-receiving areas with specific training on the rights of displaced children, the practical barriers they face, and the flexible administrative practices (simplified enrolment, fee waivers, catch-up support) that can address them.
- Establish safe learning environments that address the specific security risks facing adolescent girls — including gender-based violence within and around school settings — as a precondition for sustained enrolment.

For Research and Advocacy Actors

- Invest in longitudinal research that tracks the outcomes of women who have engaged in negotiated citizenship strategies over time, to assess whether informal access translates into durable social membership or remains permanently contingent.
- Develop advocacy that links the documentation of women's informal citizenship labour to demands for structural reform: the argument is not that women's resilience is impressive, but that it should be unnecessary at the scale at which it currently operates.

CONCLUSION

This paper began with Miriam's negotiation of a garden plot from a local farmer — a small, unrecorded act that was also an assertion of the right to survive with dignity. That act, repeated in countless variations across displacement sites in Cameroon's North-West, South-West, and Lake Chad regions, is what the concept of negotiated citizenship attempts to theorise and document.

The concept is distinguished from related frameworks — insurgent citizenship, lived citizenship, and informal citizenship — by its focus on the micro-political mechanisms of relational bargaining and reciprocal exchange through which displaced women reconstruct access to social rights in conditions of formal exclusion. It is not a celebration of informality; it is an analytical tool for making the citizenship labour of the marginalised legible, and for identifying what that labour reveals about the failure of formal systems.

The intersectional analysis presented in Section 7 demonstrates that negotiated citizenship is not a uniform experience. Widows, adolescent girls, elderly women, women associated with armed groups, and women with disabilities negotiate from different positions, with different resources, and toward different possible outcomes. An analysis that flattens these differences misrepresents the reality and forecloses the policy insights that differentiation reveals.

The critical engagement in Section 8 with the risks of informal systems — exclusion, dependency, patriarchal gatekeeping — is equally important. Negotiated citizenship is real and consequential, but it is also exhausting and inequitable. It should not be the primary social support system for hundreds of thousands of people. Documenting it with analytical rigour is not an argument for accepting it as a permanent substitute for formal rights; on the contrary, it is an argument for making the failure of formal systems more legible, and for holding states and international actors accountable for addressing it.

Cameroon's displacement crisis is not over. The political conditions that produced it remain unresolved. But within that crisis, women are not waiting for it to end. They are building, negotiating, caring, and claiming. It is past time that policy, research, and advocacy caught up with what they are already doing.

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