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**CAMEROON**

Submission by:

ADF International  
Chemin du Petit-Saconnex 28  
1209 Geneva, Switzerland

Web: [www.adfinternational.org](http://www.adfinternational.org)  
Email: [gmazzoli@adfinternational.org](mailto:gmazzoli@adfinternational.org)

## Introduction

1. ADF International is a global alliance-building legal organization that advocates for religious freedom, life, and marriage and family before national and international institutions. As well as having ECOSOC consultative status with the United Nations (registered name “Alliance Defending Freedom”), ADF International has accreditation with the European Commission and Parliament, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the Organization of American States, and is a participant in the FRA Fundamental Rights Platform.
2. This report explains why Cameroon should continue to affirm the sanctity of life on the part of all human beings, including the unborn, and why it should resist calls to liberalize access to abortion due to the fact that there is no international human right to abortion. It also deals with the issue of high levels of maternal mortality and morbidity in Cameroon.

### (a) Abortion

3. The Cameroonian law on abortion differs slightly depending on whether one makes use of the French or the English version of the Penal Code. Sections 337 to 339 of the Code provide that abortion is illegal except if it is proven to be necessary to preserve a pregnant woman from grave danger to her health or if the pregnancy resulted from rape.<sup>1</sup>
4. The French version states that in both cases, the procedure must be performed by a “qualified person,” whereas the English version draws a distinction between a “qualified person” performing an abortion in the case of threat to health and a “qualified medical practitioner” performing it in the case of rape. Regarding rape, the French version requires the public prosecutor’s office to “certify the materiality of the facts,” whereas the English version provides that the prosecution “must certify a good case.”<sup>2</sup>
5. Groups promoting more liberalized access to abortion throughout Africa, however, would like to see such access be made available on demand, and claim that it is not just a matter of improving maternal health and reducing maternal mortality and morbidity, but rather is an issue of fundamental human rights, of which abortion is supposedly one.

#### *The right to life in international law*

6. A so-called international “right to abortion” is incompatible with various provisions of international human rights treaties, in particular provisions on the right to life.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Cameroon Abortion Policy,” last accessed 5<sup>th</sup> October 2017, available at: <http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/abortion/doc/camero1.doc>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

7. Article 6(1) of the ICCPR states, “Every human being has the inherent right to life.” The ICCPR’s prohibition of the death penalty for pregnant women implicitly recognizes the right to life of the unborn.
8. Although the ICCPR allows for the death penalty to be imposed on both adult men and women, it explicitly prohibits applying the death penalty to pregnant women. Article 6(5) states that the “sentence of death shall not be imposed for crimes committed by persons below eighteen years of age and shall not be carried out on pregnant women.” This clause must be understood as recognizing the unborn child’s distinct identity from the mother and protecting the unborn child’s right to life.
9. The *travaux préparatoires* of the ICCPR explicitly state that “the principal reason for providing in paragraph 4 [now Article 6(5)] of the original text that the death sentence should not be carried out on pregnant women was to *save the life of an innocent unborn child*.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, other early UN texts note that the intention of the paragraph “was inspired by humanitarian considerations and by *consideration for the interests of the unborn child*.”<sup>4</sup>
10. The protection of unborn life is also found through an ordinary reading of the language in the preamble of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The preamble states that “the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, *before as well as after birth*.”
11. Article 1 of the CRC defines a child as “every human being below the age of eighteen years.” This provides an upper limit as to who is a child, but does not provide a lower limit on when the status of “child” attaches. Moreover, Article 6 of the CRC holds that “States Parties recognize that every child has the inherent right to life. States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child.” Viewed in the context of the preamble, both Articles 1 and 6 of the CRC indicate recognition and protection of unborn life.

*Legalizing abortion does not make it safe*

12. The medical infrastructure in Cameroon, like much of sub-Saharan Africa, is poor, with an inadequate number of trained health professionals and unsanitary, poorly-equipped health facilities. Women who receive abortions will still face the same poor conditions faced by women who give birth and deal with similar complications, such as bleeding and infection. Providing more access to abortion will mean more women will suffer from abortion complications.
13. High rates of maternal mortality have less to do with the legality of abortion per se than with an inability to access obstetric care, lack of information, and lack of health workers, especially in the case of women living in poverty and in rural areas.

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<sup>3</sup> A/C.3/SR.819, para. 17 & para. 33; In accordance with the Article 32 of the Vienna Convention, the *travaux préparatoires* are considered to be a “supplementary means of interpretation.”

<sup>4</sup> Commission on Human Rights, 5<sup>th</sup> Session (1949), 6<sup>th</sup> Session (1950), 8<sup>th</sup> Session (1952), A/2929, Chapter VI, Article 10.

14. Further, abortion can never be safe because it takes the life of the unborn child, and harms the mother through the loss of her child.

#### *Reducing recourse to abortion*

15. Cameroon must focus on introducing measures to reduce recourse to abortion, instead of focusing on legalizing it, in line with paragraph 8.25 of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development. Measures to reduce abortion include improving access to education, which empowers women and leads to social and economic development, as well as facilitating healthy decision-making.
16. Cameroon must also focus on helping women get through pregnancy and childbirth safely, rather than helping women end their pregnancies. Given the maternal health crisis in Cameroon, resources must focus on improving conditions for pregnant women, women undergoing childbirth, and postpartum women.

#### **(b) Maternal Health**

17. Cameroon's maternal mortality ratio (MMR) in 2015 was 596 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births, down from 728 per 100,000 in 1990.<sup>5</sup> Every maternal death is a tragedy. It devastates the woman's family, in particular the woman's children, and affects the entire community socially and economically. The high number of maternal deaths in Cameroon is a pressing and urgent human rights concern.

#### *Necessary maternal health interventions*

18. Almost all maternal deaths are preventable, particularly when skilled birth attendants are present to manage complications and the necessary drugs are available, such as oxytocin (to prevent haemorrhage) and magnesium sulphate (to treat pre-eclampsia). Problems often include a lack of drugs and poor infrastructure, such as no electricity or running water and inaccessibility of hospitals due to weather conditions.
19. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends a minimum of four prenatal visits with trained health workers, in order to prevent, detect, and treat any health problems. Although it has been estimated that in 2014 around 83% of pregnant women in Cameroon received some level of prenatal care during their pregnancies (though this still leaves close to a fifth of all Cameroonian women without any care at all), it was estimated by UNICEF that only 59% received the minimum of four visits recommended by the WHO.<sup>6</sup>
20. UNFPA also documented that with regard to availability of midwives, nurses, clinical officers and medical assistants, physicians, and OB/GYNs, only 11% of the estimated need was met in 2012. Beyond this, 76% of reportedly essential

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<sup>5</sup> World Bank, "Maternal mortality ratio (modeled estimate, per 100,000 live births)," 2015, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.STA.MMRT>.

<sup>6</sup> UNICEF, "Maternal Health, Antenatal Care, Current Status + Progress," last accessed 5<sup>th</sup> October 2017, available at: <https://data.unicef.org/topic/maternal-health/antenatal-care>.

interventions were not covered by the minimum health benefits package, and over half of more than 500,000 rural births (which significantly outnumbered urban births) occurred without a skilled birth attendant being present.<sup>7</sup>

21. These issues must be remedied, but frequent calls to increase legal abortion access as a necessary precondition to solving them are misguided. Legalizing abortion also does not guarantee that pregnancy and childbirth will become safer when the real problems with Cameroon's health-care system do not involve lack of access to abortion. Providing more access to abortion will mean more women will suffer from abortion complications.
22. In line with paragraph 8.25 of the ICPD, Cameroon must focus on introducing measures to avoid recourse to abortion by way of investing in social and economic development and by providing women with support throughout and after pregnancy.

### **(c) Recommendations**

23. In light of the aforementioned, ADF International suggests the following recommendations be made to Cameroon:
  - a. Affirm that there is no international human right to abortion and that the right to life applies from conception until natural death, and as such that the unborn child has the right to protection of his or her life at all points;
  - b. Resist calls to further liberalize abortion, and instead implement laws aimed at protecting the right to life of the unborn;
  - c. Recognize that the legalization of abortion, in a country with high levels of maternal mortality and morbidity and with severe problems with access to proper health-care, will not make pregnancy and childbirth any safer;
  - d. Improve health care infrastructure, access to emergency obstetric care, midwife training, and resources devoted to maternal health; and
  - e. Focus on safely getting mothers and babies through pregnancy and childbirth, with special attention paid to improving health-care access for women from poor and/or rural backgrounds.

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<sup>7</sup> UNFPA, "The State of the World's Midwifery 2014," last accessed 5<sup>th</sup> October 2017, available at: [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/EN\\_SoWMy2014\\_complete.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/EN_SoWMy2014_complete.pdf), 74.



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