

Interventions of Muslim Students' Association Bamenda towards Emancipation and Empowerment of Widows in the Ndop Plain, 2010-2020

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Abstract: *The Muslim Students' Association Bamenda, MUSAB-Cameroon as an Islamic Faith-Based Organisation (IFBO) has garnered increasing attention in different spheres of interventions, one of which is the emancipation of widows through the fight against widowhood rites in visible imposing patriarchal societies. This article examines the extent to which MUSAB-Cameroon influenced widows' social, economic and political statuses in the Ndop Plain, stretching from 2010 to 2020. By examining historical developments and contemporary practices, the study provides insights into the interplay between faith, culture and gender empowerment. It profiles the initiatives implemented by the organisation, the challenges faced and the broader implications for gender equality in the area of study. Following a critical historical approach based on content analysis informed by primary and secondary sources, the study revealed that MUSAB-Cameroon through its sensitisation and empowerment approach, significantly, contributed to allaying widows' second-fidel plights while identifying their potentials and possibilities to serve as veritable community development actors. These changes, important as they were, met with persistent barriers that hindered sustainable progress, but the resilience of the organisation resulted in significant positive changes in the area under study.*

Keywords: *MUSAB-Cameroon, Widow Empowerment, Ndop Plain, Islamic Faith-Based Organisations.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Ndop Plain also known as Ngoketunjia Division, located in the Northwest Region of Cameroon, exhibits a rich cultural tapestry and diverse demographic landscape. The population is predominantly rural, relying on agriculture as the primary source of livelihood. The socio-political landscape is characterised by traditional patriarchal norms. The interplay of cultural, religious and socio-economic factors shaped the area during this period as women faced multifaceted challenges rooted in patriarchal structures that dictated their roles in society. These challenges were exacerbated for widows, who experienced heightened vulnerability due to cultural norms surrounding widowhood rites. Such practices stripped widows of their rights, subjecting them to social, economic and emotional hardships, (Mbanga, 2010, 24). The creation and extension of MUSAB-Cameroon in the area influenced attitudes towards widows' emancipation and empowerment, leading to gradual shifts in societal norms and increasing opportunities for widows in education, health and economic activities. This paper argues that the presence and actions of MUSAB-Cameroon in the Ndop Plain aimed among other intentions to challenge the existing gender standards and promote widows' participation in various facets of community life. The objective of this study is to analyse the actions taken by MUSAB to emancipate and empower widows and challenge widowhood rites in the Ndop Plain. The central argument asserts that MUSAB has played a vital role in emancipating and empowering widows from patriarchal control, thereby fostering social change and improving their status in the community. The literature on gender emancipation and empowerment highlights the significance of addressing patriarchal norms to achieve equality (Kabeer, 2001). The capability approach (Sen, 1999) emphasises the need for individuals to have the freedom to pursue their own goals. Additionally, feminist theories provide a framework for understanding how social structures perpetuate gender inequalities. Limited research has focused on grassroots organisations like MUSAB-Cameroon and their impact on widows' rights and empowerment. This study which is structured into four main sections aims to fill that gap by examining MUSAB's contributions in assisting people in need. The first part will vividly depict the plight of women and widows in various societal domains before the influence of MUSAB, second part to detail the various actions initiated by MUSAB to empower women and combat widowhood rites. The third

part will discuss the challenges faced by MUSAB and their strategies for overcoming these difficulties and the fourth part will illustrate the changes brought about by MUSAB's initiatives in the Ndop locality. To understand the transformative actions of MUSAB-Cameroon, it is necessary to examine the historical context of women's plight and the oppressive widowhood rites that have shaped their experiences in the Ndop Plain.

2. THE PLIGHTS OF WOMEN BEFORE THE INFLUENCE OF MUSAB-CAMEROON

Before the advent of MUSAB-Cameroon and its influence in the area, women played auxiliary roles in the decision-making of the society. The traditional council that deliberated on traditional issues did not have any woman as a member of its body. Yet, those who suffered the most of violence and discrimination either directly or indirectly were the women and in most cases the widows and their children. As of 2016, the Ndop Plain totalled above 8000 widows spread amongst the thirteen fondoms. Between 1990 and 2020, the number of widows was at a steady increase.¹ The young widows were obliged by the custom and tradition of their localities to contract another marriage with relatives of their late husband. The result was that they later found themselves becoming double widows thereby complicating the situation, (Bim Adewunmi). The stigma women and widows went through was discriminatory as it was clearly stated that widowers (men) were not subjected to some traditions and rituals like "widower hood rites", rather the widows (women), (M, Owen, unpublished manuscript, 6, 8).

The women in Ndop Plain in the Precolonial and somehow in the colonial times were subjected to social isolation and stigmatisation and had no significant place in the society. They were never equal to their men folk. Their places were in the kitchen and on the farm. Widows in the area went through various types of ordeals in their communities. The death of a husband meant stigma, destitution and abuse for many of the world's poorest widows, (Likiatu Pongwo, 2025, interview). In the Babessi fondom, one of the villages in Ndop, widows were subjected to certain rites like shaving of heads, sleeping on the floor, rubbing of camp wood and parading the market almost half naked while wailing and being removed from their land after the death of their husbands, (Mathias Dinga Bunchu, 2024, interview). In the fondoms of Baba I, widows went through a thirty-day mourning period, in Bamali one year, and in Bambalang for five months. After this, they still could not have full control of their late husband's assets, (Edith Mungwa, 2025, interview). In 2008, Bim Adewunmi,² a voluntary service overseer working with MUSAB-Cameroon visited a pioneering project in Cameroon trying to turn around 500-year-old traditions on widowhood rites. During her visit to the Baba I Community, she was concerned about the poor treatment of two widows Hajaratou Chanteh and Fatimatou Ndashi. Coincidentally, the two ladies had just lost their respective husbands and were undergoing some of those obnoxious rites which widows went through. Upon return to the head office in Yaounde, she painted a vivid picture of the Cameroonian widow thus:

I saw Hajaratou Chanteh's eyes were wet and her voice was trembling as she talked about her battle with the family of her late husband. Following his death 16 years ago, they took all his possessions and denied her access to the house they had shared with their children. Since then, she has been trying to claim her rightful inheritance, while shouldering the burden of raising their children with the meagre income she earned tilling other people's land. 'They told me to hand over the little money I earned or borrowed – money I should have used to look after my children and myself. They said it was "family property". My father was frail by then. I had no helper.' (MUSAB-Cameroon Archives, 13)

Widows fought against abuse and maltreatment with almost no help from anyone as most of them slept on the floor, refused visitors and denied the chance to leave the house, even when their livelihoods depended on it. The greatest problem women faced especially widows after property seizure was a poor quality of life, misery, suffering, desolation and loss of hope. According to Alima, a widow, the widow's poverty was very bad. The Canadian diplomat noted that, for widowed women in Cameroon's North West Region, losing one's husband often also meant losing proper rights, the home and sometimes even the children. Although protected by Cameroon's inheritance laws, widows and their children often found themselves at the mercy of their communities and were treated without regard for their basic human

¹The continues increase came as a result of HIV/AIDS pandemic, the operation ghost towns of the early 1990s and the Anglophone crisis which started in 2016.

²She was one of the voluntary service overseers from Canada who worked with MUSAB Cameroon to minimise some widowhood rites and enhance the rights of widows in the North West Region of Cameroon.

rights. Such discrimination resulted in extreme poverty, marginalisation and exposure to violence which pushed MUSAB-Cameroon in collaboration with the local governing authorities and the government of Cameroon to take the initiative to address such plights, (Sundze, 2022, 66).

Support for education constituted an important pillar of intervention initiated by MUSAB-Cameroon toward the emancipation of widows and their empowerment. Widows after the loss of their husbands were left with the challenge of single-handedly sponsoring their children in school. This task was more difficult in that children of widows were identified as vulnerable. In the Ndop Plain, women and widows particularly faced educational barriers as traditional beliefs prioritised male education, resulting in lower literacy rates for females. Widows, in particular, encountered further obstacles; their status limited their access to educational opportunities, reinforcing cycles of poverty and dependence. The female gender was also prone to economic vulnerability in that women, especially widows were largely confined to informal economic activities, with limited access to resources and credit. Following the death of a husband, widows lost their property rights and faced economic exploitation, leaving them at the mercy of patriarchal norms that dictated their financial dependence. Health issues also disproportionately affected women and widows, particularly in accessing reproductive health services. Cultural taboos surrounding women's health prevented them from seeking necessary medical care, often resulting in poor health outcomes and increased mortality rates (Bim Adewunmi, 2022). Having established the challenges faced by women and widows, we can now explore the specific initiatives undertaken to emancipate and empower these individuals and combat the detrimental widowhood practices. The foregoing plights for widows in the Ndop Plain suggest a need for awareness intervention which got attention from different stakeholders, one of which was MUSAB-Cameroon.

3. ACTIONS INITIATED BY MUSAB-CAMEROON

Actions taken by MUSAB-Cameroon were in the empowerment and well-being of the communities. The actions began with the political emancipation of women. The guiding document of MUSAB-Cameroon upon formation was the Islamic principle of justice and members put in every effort to implement social justice in the society by fighting to emancipate women and widows and grant them access to equality in decisions that had effects on them and the society. MUSAB-Cameroon through Widows for Peace and Justice (WPD) worked in collaboration with the authorities of the region to ensure that widows also enjoyed the right to work, the right to property and to freely choose a spouse and contract another marriage only with their free and full consent. Every possible effort was put in place to impede those widows' coping strategies that led them and their families towards legality, expectation, marginalisation and extreme poverty, (Sundze, 67). The next measure was for MUSAB-Cameroon through the government to put an end to discriminatory widowhood rites, increase widows' knowledge of their rights and to empower and support women and widows who decided to pick up legal fights for their rights. Since the extreme restriction on widows' mobility and lifestyle was a breach of all articles of Conventions, both National and International on human rights and dignity, such malpractices were to be stopped at the local level, (Ambe, 2008). Thus, the association worked in synergy with traditional rulers of the region to implement and work for the success of the above measures.

As a move geared towards the enhancement of widows' rights, the Canadian High Commissioner to Cameroon - René Cremonese and the Governor's representative of the North West Region were invited to a meeting organised by MUSAB-Cameroon at the regional office of the association in Bamenda. This meeting had as its principal objective to establish judicial mechanisms to assist widows trapped in widowhood rites. The High Commissioner, through the Canadian Fund for Local Initiatives, supported local human rights groups in their efforts to end the plight of widows, and early marriages, especially amongst some Muslim settlements and child trafficking that occurred as a result of some traditional customs. Cognisance of these concerns, coupled with the relentless fight put up by MUSAB-Cameroon, René Cremonese decided to use the top-down approach in enhancing widowhood rights. This was done by joining human rights groups in the municipality of Bamenda, that projected human rights before extending to the local levels, (Sundze, 70). As a follow-up to the meeting with the Canadian High Commissioner, traditional rulers in the Ndop Plain were contacted by the leaders of MUSAB-Cameroon to ratify agreements aimed at minimising some widowhood rites in their respective kingdoms. This decision was followed by a conference organised on widowhood rites at Mawa Hotel in 2014, during which rulers in attendance unanimously agreed that some widowhood practices were bad and had to be

minimised, (Sundze, 58). Christine Bosse, one of the volunteers from Ottawa-Canada organised a two-day seminar in Babessi Fondom. She was accompanied by Patu Bako, MUSAB-Cameroon's Secretary General. During the gathering, she expressed the need for certain rites to be eradicated. Bosse noted that "one thing we are doing is, encouraging the writing of Wills, and legal marriages backed by certificates". Those documents could help enhance the rights of any woman who could find herself in the state of widowhood. After the meeting, the regent of Babessi Fondom encouraged people to legalise their marriages as it was the most assuring way for a brighter future for either of the couples in the case of the demise of any of them (Bim Adewunmi).

MUSAB-Cameroon also put in efforts for the inclusion of women into local traditional councils of the various fondoms of the Ndop Plain. Since traditional rulers had great commands over their people and had ratified agreements with the efforts of MUSAB-Cameroon to minimise widowhood rites in the various fondoms, so women were included in the decision-making body of the various traditional councils. Fon Kemshi II of Baba I was among the first traditional rulers in the North West to lead the struggle in the fight for widows' rights. He decided to involve women in the traditional council where decisions affecting the village were taken, (Fon Kemshi II, 2023 interview). Fourteen women were selected in Baba I to integrate the weekly traditional council meeting. They were Memunatu Moh Tarnteh, Samahwuh Mohntanghanghare, Sahbihtu Mohtem, Ashetu Ndzembanteh, Muentoh Lima, Mariatu Chayi, Amshetu Forbeh, Sadatu TitaDamu, Marti Chayi, Samahwu Nah, Ladifatu Giembeh, Abiba Tahmue, Aminatu Wakili and Sanatu Chayi-the chairlady, (Nawa Tita, 2025, interview). The Fon of Babessi in collaboration with the Village Traditional Council passed an order which forbade widows from being subjected to certain rites like shaving of heads, sleeping on the floor and being removed from their land after the death of their husbands, (Mathias D. Bunchu, 2024, interview). After working to include women in leadership positions, the focus was on the enhancement of widows' rights.

The eradication of some widowhood rites constituted another premise of intervention by MUSAB Cameroon in the Ndop Plain. As indicated earlier, widows fought against abuse and maltreatment with almost no help from anyone. The widowhood project was borne of an HIV/AIDS anti-stigma and discrimination in the mid-to late-1990s. The president of MUSAB-Cameroon asserted that it became clear there was a knock-on effect when husbands and fathers succumbed to the disease, leaving widows and children behind, (Mama Sundze, 2024, interview). The project which worked in three phases and involved a huge amount of consultation with villagers, before binding agreements that recognised the rights of widows were drawn up between advocates and the Fons. The project started in the Baba I Fondom and extended to Babessi, Bamali and Bafanji Fondoms reaching approximately 8,000 widows. The executive president of MUSAB-Cameroon noted that, some of the younger Fons had been to the university – so they decided to target them. They had to see what the association presented as a project to minimise certain aspects of widowhood rites and understood why we were coming in. Some of these traditions had lasted more than 500 years. This project was very sensitive (MUSAB-Cameroon Archives, 13). On a day-to-day level, the fights were done by community advocates-women and men who had received training funded by VSO to support widows. In Baba I, advocate Chayi Sanatu who also doubled as the spoke's lady for the women in the traditional council saw the project as a chance for re-education. According to her, it was unfair to the widow and her children, who must be provided for, to undergo the poor treatment meted out to her. "We made the husband's family understand that the widows have rights. If they refused to understand, we sent them to the palace." (Asanatu Chayi, 2025, interview). Another widow Lydia Swiri Ndikum, one of the village's twenty-six advocates also recounted the poor treatment widows underwent. After her husband died, her head was shaved – by a near-blind old woman, who inflicted wounds with the razor—and she slept on the floor for three months. She testifies that:

When my husband died the only people who came closer to me were those who came to mourn with me [other widows undergoing the same treatment]. I could not go out, I could not attend church, it was like you were not your own person, I don't want any other woman to be treated that way. I want this eradicated. Widows should be free to live their lives, (Lydia Ndikum, 2025, interview).

All of the advocates were passionate about their work and while most of them were women, a few were men, all committed to the course of assisting to uphold the dignity of widows in the society. Every member of the society was involved in the struggle to minimise obnoxious widowhood rites. With the advent of MUSAB-Cameroon and the ultimate aim to assist orphans, widows and people living with

HIV/AIDS, they quickly understood that women could be used as caregivers to achieve their goal. Most of those women experienced unfair treatment in the context of widowhood rites. Faced with this challenge, MUSAB-Cameroon in line with its mission to assist the needy initiated projects geared at alleviating the plights of women faced with widowhood rites. Fons in places like Baba I, Bamali and the regent of Babessi were convinced to sign an agreement to improve the plight of widows in their respective kingdoms. The foregoing agreements were followed by the organisation of the Kings' Conference on widowhood rites, orphans and vulnerable children at the Mawa Hotel in 2014. In attendance were Fon Kemshi II of Baba I, one of the first traditional rulers in the North West Region to occupy the driver's seat in the fight for widows' rights, (Sundze, 43). In the Babessi Fandom, the regent called for a meeting at the council hall during which the necessity to scrap off some of those notorious widowhood rites such as rubbing of camp wood and parading the market almost half naked while wailing was explained to the people (Adama Nchonte, 2025, interview).

As one of the strategies to emancipate widows in the Ndop Plain, MUSAB-Cameroon introduced a project of legal assistance to the vulnerable. This began with the sensitisation for the procurement of legal documents that could permit widows to initiate legal procedures for their emancipation and wellbeing. This was followed by assisting women to acquire marriage certificates as legal protection for their marriages. In that light, mass marriages were organised in 2013 that saw twenty-five couples benefiting in Babessi and in 2015, twenty-three couples also benefited in Bafanji and Ndop Central. Grace Maboh, one of the beneficiaries used the marriage certificate acquired with the efforts of MUSAB-Cameroon to initiate legal procedures to claim ownership of her late husband's assets which started yielding positive results as of 2020. By 2020, she was living comfortably in her home with her five children, (Grace Maboh, 2025, interview). The MUSAB-Cameroon mass marriage campaign permitted a total of eighty-four couples in the Ndop Plain to acquire marriage certificates.

This move of nuptial security was complemented by actions undertaken to enliven the educational plights of vulnerable young widows, female OVC, youths living with HIV/AIDS as well as orphans who were unable to take care of their schooling. The association to assist these persons, entered into a partnership agreement with the Ministry of Social Affairs through the Regional Delegation to help vulnerable children benefit from education like their privileged peers. MUSAB-Cameroon's partners in education UNICEF were to take care of their school needs like books, pens and uniforms while their fees were taken care of by the Ministry of Social Affairs through special funds for vulnerable children. Through the Bi-multilateral OVC project, twenty-seven pupils most of whom were females benefited during the 2012/2013 school year in St John Catholic Primary School, the Presbyterian Primary School and the Islamic Primary School in Ndop town, (Balah Tankoh, 2024, interview). Through MUSAB-Cameroon, the female children were also given opportunities and encouraged to attend higher levels in education just like their male counterparts. Having secured the socio-political emancipation of women in the society, MUSAB's next action was for economic empowerment.

Actions taken towards economic empowerment mostly centered on efforts to enhance the wellbeing of widows and their dependents in the Ndop Plain. MUSAB-Cameroon implemented programs focusing on economic empowerment through vocational trainings that significantly increased women's skills and confidence. In order to financially empower caregivers of orphans and vulnerable children (OVC), MUSAB-Cameroon in partnership with other associations established and managed income generating activities. In December 2010, a workshop on HIV Exchange was organised. During the workshop, the value of collaborative exchange amongst grassroots development associations was discussed. Another issue discussed was the necessity to include representatives of Voluntary Service Overseers who were concerned with HIV/AIDS programs in the region. It was realised during the 2010 meeting that the aim of MUSAB-Cameroon of assisting the needy in the society was difficult to attain due to lack of finances to run projects. Another problem discussed was the late arrival of funds from donors as well as insufficient resources to carry out projects earmarked to have positive effects on the lives of OVC and widows (Balah Tankoh, interview).

Considering the limitation to procure funds from donor agencies to implement their actions, and alert of the challenges to maximize their emancipation and empowerment projects, MUSAB-Cameroon initiated the creation and management of local income generating activities. Based on the experience with business planning and marketing and considering the fact that MUSAB-Cameroon was running a successful motor-taxi business, Heather Stuttard, a voluntary service overseer (VSO) from Canada

requested funding from her home government. The fund was intended to carry out a collaborative workshop for interested organisations willing to operate some economic activities aimed at financing projects to positively impact the lives of OVC through women initiatives. The fund required to run the workshop was 825,000 Francs CFA. (MUSAB-Cameroon Archive,17). Most of those who attended the workshop wrote out business plans to be submitted for small grants application for IGA funding. The projects were sent through MUSAB-Cameroon to the VSOs who then lobbied for funding from their home government. Through the knowledge gathered at the workshop, attendants who were mostly caregivers in collaboration with the office of MUSAB-Cameroon drew up other business plans to carry out further training in other places (MUSAB-Cameroon Archive). It is in this connection that Christine Bossé³ was encouraged by the progress of small business projects already established in the fondoms of Mbatu, Nkar, Nsongwa, Chomba to extend the corn mill business to Nchukubuu, Mboghobam, Quefendiang and Meya quarters in Baba I with the profits going towards supporting widows in the community, (Balah Tankoh, 2024, interview). According to Bossé, the best way to assist OVC and widows especially was to help the latter to be financially independent. She remarked that "if for example, a widow had a problem and needed to go to the palace, she could not go empty-handed", she needed to go with money. It should be recalled that the greatest problem widows faced after property seizure was poor quality life, misery, sufferings, desolation and loss of hopes. According to Alima, a widow who managed one of the corn mills grinding businesses, the widow's poverty was very bad. She remarked that, "when we had those grinding machines, we had to do better. Indeed, our lives became greatly improved upon", (Alima Yinweh, 2024, interview). The corn grinding mill business was managed by Sanatu Chayi in Mboghobam, Aminatu Wakili in Nchukubu and in Quefendiang, it was run by Jamilatu Bih.

Complementing the corn mill initiative, in the income generating program was an initiative to transform cassava into garri. Cassava and its associated products, garri constitute a major source of income to almost every household in Baba I and in most of the Ndop Plain. With this established order, MUSAB-Cameroon decided to further expand this principal source of income to entrench the economic empowerment of women and widows (Emmerencia Ndayuh, 2024, interview). Under the auspices of CARE Cameroon which also worked in partnership with MUSAB-Cameroon, provided a cassava grinding mill to assist in garri processing. On the 2nd of September 2016, the Quefendiang mill business was established with Jamilatu Bih as its pioneer manager, (Jamilatu Bih, 2024, interview). These interventions of MUSAB-Cameroon align with the theories of Sen and Kabeer as demonstrated below.

The ideas of Sen on women's empowerment resonate with this discourse. Amartya Sen's capability approach emphasises the importance of expanding individuals' freedoms and opportunities to achieve their potential. According to Sen, genuine empowerment involves more than just economic resources; it requires the ability to make choices and exercise agency in various aspects of life. For women, this means having access to education, healthcare and social resources that enable them to participate fully in society (Sen, 38). In the context of this study, MUSAB's initiatives align with Sen's framework by promoting educational opportunities and health awareness for widows in the Ndop Plain. By providing scholarships and health education, MUSAB enhances widows' capabilities and empowers them to make informed choices and assert their rights (Sundze, 94). Kabeer's Perspective on women's empowerment equally connects with this study. Naila Kabeer further develops the discourse on women's empowerment by emphasising the interplay between resources, agency and achievements. Kabeer asserts that empowerment occurs when women gain access to resources (economic, social and political), develop the agency to utilise these resources, and achieve positive outcomes in their lives. This tripartite framework highlights the necessity of structural changes in society to foster women's empowerment (Kabeer, 46). MUSAB's actions, such as microfinance programs and advocacy against widowhood rites, reflect Kabeer's ideas by providing women with economic resources encouraging their active participation in community discussions and decision-making processes (Sundze, 108). Connecting Sen and Kabeer's ideas with the paper, the study of MUSAB's efforts in the Ndop Plain illustrates the practical application of both theories on women empowerment. By addressing educational barriers, economic vulnerabilities and social stigmas, MUSAB embodies the principles of the capability approach while also facilitating women's agency. The association's focus on education and advocacy

³Christine Bossé was another VSO with MUSAB-Cameroon. She specialised in assisting caregivers in the establishment of income generating activity.

against oppressive widowhood rites demonstrates how empowering women leads to broader social change. This alignment with theoretical frameworks reinforces the argument that effective empowerment strategies must address both individual capabilities and systemic barriers. Despite the various activities undertaken by MUSAB-Cameroon towards widows' emancipation and empowerment in the Ndop Plain, there were some challenges encountered in due process as discussed in the next section of this paper. While MUSAB-Cameroon has made significant strides in promoting widows' empowerment and challenging widowhood rites, it has also encountered various obstacles along the way that necessitate a closer examination and the strategies employed to overcome them.

4. CHALLENGES FACED BY MUSAB AND THEIR RESPONSES

The difficulties encountered involved cultural and patriarchal norms, impact of conflict and insecurity, limited access to education, economic disparities and resource limitations, weak legal and policy frameworks, insufficient support systems and networks and health as well as reproductive rights challenges. In the area, cultural norms historically upheld patriarchal values that impeded widows' emancipation and empowerment. Traditional beliefs positioned men as the primary decision-makers within households and communities, relegating women to subordinate roles. These societal expectations discouraged women's participation in public life, including politics and community leadership. As a result, women faced barriers to education and professional development, with many accepting their limited roles as a norm, (Batliwala, 2001,16). This internalisation of cultural beliefs perpetuated a cycle of disempowerment, where women viewed their contributions as secondary to those of men. MUSAB encountered significant cultural resistance in its efforts to promote women's empowerment and combat widowhood rites as community members adhered to traditional beliefs, viewing changes as a threat to cultural identity. To counter this, MUSAB engaged influential male leaders and community stakeholders in discussions, fostering understanding and support for women's rights in the Ndop Plain (Aliyu Tita,

The prolonged conflict in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon affected the thirteen fondoms, exacerbating existing gender inequalities. Political instability in the Ndop Plain occasionally disrupted MUSAB's activities. The violence and instability created an environment of fear, where widows became particularly vulnerable to various forms of violence, including sexual assault, exploitation and the trauma of constant kidnappings of their male children for ransoms by separatist leaders. Many women were displaced from their homes, losing their physical shelter and their access to social networks and economic opportunities, (Frida Njoya, 2025, interview). The trauma associated with conflict further diminished widows' self-esteem and confidence, making it difficult for them to advocate for their rights or engage in emancipation and empowerment initiatives. This context of insecurity significantly undermined any progress toward gender equality, widows' emancipation and empowerment. The organisation adapted by being flexible in program scheduling and focusing on building community resilience, emphasising the importance of solidarity among women (MUSAB Archives).

Access to quality education for girls in the Ndop Plain remained a significant challenge. High rates of illiteracy among widows stemmed from cultural biases that prioritised boys' education over girls'. Families often viewed investing in daughters' education as less valuable, leading to high dropout rates due to early marriage, teenage pregnancies, and inadequate school facilities, (Sundze,93). This lack of education restricted women's ability to acquire essential skills for decent employment, perpetuating cycles of poverty and dependency. The limited educational opportunities for widows ultimately hindered their economic independence and empowerment. To address this challenge, MUSAB engaged in community dialogues that involved influential male leaders, elders and educational stakeholders like proprietors of lay private schools and mission bodies including the Baptist and Presbyterian that operate schools in the Ndop Plain. By fostering discussions around the benefits of widows' emancipation and empowerment, MUSAB aimed to create a more supportive environment for their initiatives and shift perceptions about gender roles (Nahmweh, 2025, interview).

Widows in the Ndop Plain encountered substantial economic challenges due to limited access to resources and opportunities. Traditional economic structures favoured men, leaving widows with fewer opportunities to own land, secure loans, or start businesses.⁴ This economic disparity was compounded

⁴It was difficult for women to obtain loans from financial institutions to start up meaningful economic activities since their rights over landed properties were limited due to patriarchal norms.

by societal attitudes that devalued widows' work, particularly in agriculture and the informal sector (Batliwala, 2001 562). Limited financial resources posed a challenge to the implementation of MUSAB's programs. Consequently, widows struggled to achieve financial autonomy, which is crucial for emancipation and empowerment. Although some microfinance initiatives aimed to support widows, many failed to reach those in remote areas due to inadequate infrastructure and a lack of financial literacy. The organisation sought partnerships with NGOs and government entities to secure additional funding and resources, allowing for the expansion and sustainability of their initiatives. The absence of robust support systems and networks for widows in the Ndop Plain further complicated their empowerment. Community organisations and women's groups, although crucial for providing resources, education and advocacy, faced significant challenges, including limited funding and capacity (Kamga and Ndi, 2018, 46). Many widows were unaware of available resources due to a lack of outreach and engagement from this organisation. Societal stigma surrounding widows who sought assistance deterred them from accessing necessary support. Strengthening these networks and promoting collaboration among various stakeholders became essential for fostering empowerment and addressing systemic issues.

Despite the existence of national laws promoting gender equality, enforcement remained weak in the area under study. Widows lacked awareness of their rights and the legal mechanisms available to protect them. Customary laws frequently took precedence over formal legal protections, leading to discrimination and violence against widows. For instance, cases of domestic violence often went unreported due to stigma or fear of retaliation (Kamga and Ndi, 39). The slow judicial processes and insufficient support services for victims hindered widows' ability to seek justice. This gap between policy and practice perpetuated a culture of impunity and undermined widows' rights. There was need to work in close collaboration with both the local and administrative authorities through the various humanitarian actions with the efforts of MUSAB-Cameroon to propel the important place of the women and widows in Islam (Mansuruh, 2025, interview).

Widows in the Ndop Plain also faced significant health challenges that affected their emancipation and empowerment. Access to healthcare services, particularly reproductive health, remained limited due to inadequate infrastructure and cultural barriers. Many women struggled with issues such as maternal health complications, lack of family planning resources, and insufficient prenatal care (Nussbaum, 2000, 34). These health challenges jeopardised widows' wellbeing and hindered their ability to participate fully in economic and social activities. Without adequate healthcare support, widows found it challenging to pursue education and employment opportunities, further entrenching their marginalisation. Ensuring the sustainability of empowerment programs was crucial for MUSAB. The association prioritised training women to become facilitators themselves, enabling them to continue the work within their communities and ensuring that knowledge and skills were passed down (Sundze, 15). In spite of the constraints encountered, the resilience and determination of MUSAB-Cameroon led to meaningful changes in the community. The following section will highlight the tangible impact of these initiatives on the widows' lives and the broader Ndop locality.

5. CHANGES BROUGHT BY MUSAB'S INITIATIVES

The study highlights various initiatives implemented by MUSAB-Cameroon, which collectively contribute to enhancing widows' emancipation and empowerment. Educational and vocational training programs improved literacy rates and provided women with essential skills for economic participation. This aligns with feminist theory espoused by Simone Beauvoir [D1](1949), where she challenges the traditional notion of gender and advocates for women's liberation and equality in all aspects of life, emphasising the importance of education as a fundamental element of empowerment. By equipping widows with knowledge and skills, MUSAB-Cameroon fostered a sense of agency that is crucial for challenging traditional gender roles. One of the most notable findings was the shift in community perceptions regarding women's roles. The initiatives of MUSAB-Cameroon contributed to changing attitudes, with increased recognition of widows' rights and capabilities. This transformation reflected the potential for MUSAB-Cameroon as an FBO to challenge patriarchal norms, as supported by social capital theory captured by Pierre Bourdieu (1992) where he focuses on the reproduction of social class, status and power relations, involving economic, cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1992 45[D2]). By fostering networks of support among widows, MUSAB-Cameroon enabled collective action that reinforced positive changes in gender dynamics.

The Ayaba meeting also brought some relief to the plight of these widows. The culturally imposed but poor treatment experienced by widows was minimised as they gained access to their late husband's asset. This was the case of Grace Mabboh earlier mentioned, who saw her return to the late husband's home, though she had been struggling without success to recover their properties from the family members (Sundze,74). Under this aspect, MUSAB-Cameroon recorded some successes as some negative aspects which the widows suffered were minimised. The usual thirty days mourning period that the widows went through was reduced to one week in Baba I, in Bamali it was reduced from one year to one month, and in Bambalang, it was reduced to five months, and widows could have full control of their late husband's property, (Edith Mungwa, 2025, interview). Fon Kemshi II of Baba I took it as his personal issue to minimise some nefarious widowhood rites in his Fondom. Fon Njoya of Bamunka saw the practice as detrimental to the society, and remarked that "losing your husband is already painful and certain illegal practices added to it". He often referred to the widows as "his Queens" and was committed to giving them maximum protection. He remarked with happiness that the coming of MUSAB-Cameroon was some sort of reawakening as some widowhood rites were minimised and rights of the widows enhanced, (Njoya III, 2025, interview).

Another major change brought in the Ndop Plain was that the rights of widows to have full control of their late husband's properties were enacted into the law of the various fondoms and some widowhood rites were minimised. The usual forty days of lying on the floor upon the death of a husband in Baba I was reduced to seven days after which the mourning widow could sleep on a mattress for the remaining three weeks, (Adama Nchonte, 2025, interview). Again, through the continuous efforts of various initiatives and efforts in respective societies to enhance the dignity of marginalised groups, the dynamism of many women has propelled and conferred them a place in the public scene contrary to what culture and traditions inherited had reserved for them, (Fidessou, 2021,114). Most of the women who were advocates and caregivers with MUSAB-Cameroon actively participated in deliberations at the village traditional Council. Cases like domestic violence against women, poor treatment of widows were handled by those female caregivers and any decision they took without being biased were enacted and implemented by the Village Councils (Nawa Tita, 2025, interview).

Lastly, MUSAB's initiatives led to a significant increase in the number of women and widows within the locality pursuing education. The scholarship programs and mentorship opportunities resulted in higher enrollment and retention rates, contributing to a more educated female population. The microfinance programs launched by MUSAB-Cameroon through the respective income generating activities resulted in many widows gaining financial independence. By establishing small businesses such as corn and cassava grinding mills, widows reported improved economic conditions and enhanced social status within the community, (Sundze, 98). In summarising the transformative effects of MUSAB's actions, it is crucial to reflect on the broader implications of these changes for women's empowerment and the ongoing struggle against patriarchal norms in the Ndop Plain in particular and beyond in other localities.

6. CONCLUSION

The actions of the Muslim Students Association of Bamenda have had a profound impact on widows' emancipation and empowerment in the Ndop Plain between 2010 and 2020. The findings demonstrate that this organisation implemented impactful initiatives that addressed education, political and economic plights of widows, contributing significantly to their emancipation and empowerment within the community. These achievements did not go without cultural enhancement of widows' agency and social standing within the community. Despite these achievements, cultural resistance which remains a significant barrier to widows' emancipation and empowerment persisted as traditional beliefs about gender roles continued to influence community attitudes. Financial constraints further limited the sustainability and scalability of MUSAB's initiatives, underscoring the need for ongoing support and resources. Additionally, while many women became active participants in community development, their representation in leadership roles remains low, pointing to structural barriers that must be addressed. The implications of this research extend beyond the local context of Ndop Plain. Policymakers and practitioners can draw valuable lessons from the successes and challenges of MUSAB-Cameroon in promoting widows' emancipation and empowerment and the fight against widowhood rites. By fostering partnerships between MUSAB-Cameroon and governmental entities, and by implementing gender-sensitive policies, stakeholders can create an enabling environment that

supports widows' rights and participation. Thus, the study highlights the transformative potential of MUSAB-Cameroon as an IFBO in advancing widows' emancipation and empowerment. As this organisation continues to navigate the complexities of cultural, economic and social landscapes, they play a pivotal role in shaping a more equitable future for widows in the Ndop Plain and beyond.

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