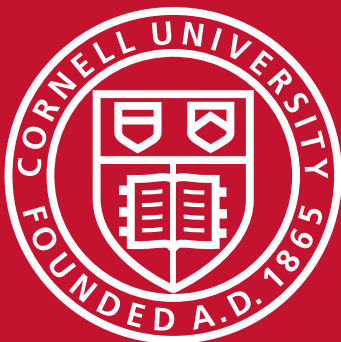


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HER
WHOLE
TRUTH

Marie
Dawandala,
Damaris
Doukouya,
and Martha
Weteya

Profiles of Women Facing
Extreme Sentences



Cornell Law School
Cornell Center on the Death Penalty Worldwide

Cameroon: Targeting Girls Fleeing Terrorist Violence

By Cornell Center on the Death Penalty Worldwide



Marie Dawandala, Damaris Doukouya, and Martha Weteya were only seventeen years old when they were arrested in October 2014 in the northernmost region of Cameroon. None of them had attended school, and they could not afford to hire a lawyer to defend them. Moreover, as speakers of the Fulbé language, they did not understand French, the language of the criminal proceedings. Without legal counsel or consistent access to interpreters, they labored to understand the charges against them. They eventually learned that they had been charged with supporting Boko Haram—the group that had terrorized them and their neighbors in Nigeria, and whose violence they fled. Damaris had just given birth and had her three-month-old infant with her, and Marie was six months pregnant. The police took the infant into custody alongside her mother.

All three girls had left their native Cameroon to seek domestic employment in Nigeria, where they lived with their husbands close to the Cameroonian border. Around this time, most people living in the border region fled en masse to escape the violence of Boko Haram. Like many others seeking refuge from the fighting, Marie, Damaris, and Martha fled back home without their identification documents.

“When I was arrested, I was not told why. I first learned at the police station in Maroua that I was thought to be part of Boko Haram. I was with my child who was breastfeeding, and I was heartbroken. I lost consciousness. When I woke up, my body no longer belonged to me. My breasts ran dry. I couldn’t understand how while everyone was fleeing Boko Haram, I was accused of belonging to this group.” – Damaris

After four months in police custody, the three women and Damaris’s daughter were moved to Maroua Central Prison. They remained there for the next thirteen months, as they were unable to afford bail. Marie gave birth to her son in prison.

One year and five months after their arrest, Marie, Damaris, and Martha were brought before a military tribunal, where they learned they were charged with immigrating illegally, espionage, conspiracy to commit insurrection, and membership in an armed gang. The authorities only partially provided them with an interpreter over the course of the proceedings. After an abbreviated trial, all three were



Marie Dawandala and her son Stéphane Dawandala, who was born in prison and is now five years old.

sentenced to death. So little did they understand their own trial that they did not realize they had received a death sentence until a prison guard explained it upon their return to prison.

“When I got back to the prison, I didn’t speak to anyone. A guard explained the decision to us. I wanted to die. I didn’t even want to walk. I looked for any means to kill myself on the spot. Unfortunately, the prison guards watched over me.” – Damaris

“Knowing the verdict, I also looked for any means to kill myself. Because I did not have any way to do it, I went five days without eating, hoping to die... a guard and another detainee came to see me and asked me not to die and told me there was hope because I could appeal.” – Martha

Unbeknownst to Marie, Damaris, and Martha, the military court had no authority to hear their case, as Cameroonian law specifies that military tribunals may only hear the cases of individuals who were over the age of 18 at the time of the alleged crime.

Now condemned to die, all three women were

returned to Maroua Central Prison. They spent their days and nights in the dilapidated, overcrowded section of the prison reserved for women. They found it hard to breathe in the overcrowded, foul-smelling cells. They had no access to sanitary napkins, nor did the prison provide medical care for pregnant or breastfeeding women. The food brought to the detainees by the prison administration was of poor nutritional quality, consisting only of maize and vegetables, and humanitarian organizations had to intervene to provide additional food. The prison administration provided very little health care.

“I don’t have anything... I don’t have a coat, underwear, a bra, sanitary napkins. What I wear comes from donations.” – Damaris

“Here, we are totally destitute...We don’t even have firewood.” – Martha

Their children grew up under these difficult conditions, sharing their mothers’ meals. They did not have access to adequate nutrition or health care, and the knowledge of their mothers’ death sentences cast a long shadow over their childhood.



Damaris Doukouya and her daughter Tchivet Kaldapa, aged 5, who grew up in prison.

For the next five years, Marie, Damaris, and Martha survived in these conditions, doing their best to care for their children. They were stigmatized by both prison guards and fellow prisoners because they were classified as terrorists. It was well-known to their family members that authorities may consider visits to a relative charged with terrorism as a form of complicity, and that attempting it could even result in criminal charges. During their five years in prison, Marie, Damaris, and Martha did not receive a single visitor.

“What is unfair is the fact that I was accused of being Boko Haram when I didn’t know anything. Wherever I am until my death, this bad word – Boko Haram –will always mark me and rings constantly in my head.” – Marie

In 2019, Cameroonian lawyer Nestor Toko, President of the Network of Cameroonian Lawyers Against the Death Penalty, traveled to Maroua and met the three women in prison. Convinced that they had been wrongly accused and concerned by their account of their arrest and trial, he agreed to represent them pro bono. He regularly drove 24 hours from the coastal city of Douala to speak with the women and assure them that he would fight for a new trial. He helped them appeal their convictions. In 2019, the Military Court of Appeals overturned the convictions and death sentences of all three women and ordered that they be re-tried before a civilian tribunal.

While awaiting their new trial, Marie, Damaris, Martha, and their children were transferred to a secondary prison in the small town of Mokolo, where detention conditions are even more desperate. Unlike Maroua, Mokolo has no NGOs to provide even modest aid to destitute prisoners. They receive nothing more than the prison’s inadequate diet and they are wearing out their donated clothing, since the prison does not provide any personal items. In response to the rapidly spreading threats posed by Covid-19 in Cameroon’s overcrowded prisons, a religious order offered to take and care for their two children, now aged five. Faced with an impossible choice, Marie and Damaris agreed

to be separated from their children with the assurance that a nun would bring the children to visit them twice a month. So far, however, they have not received any visits or news of the children who spent their entire lives incarcerated by their mothers’ side.

“The nun received permission from the authorities to take our children. I agreed to be separated from my child, but I had no choice. What could I do when I had no way to take care of him?” – Marie

“Normally two times each month, my child comes with the nun to the prison. But it’s been three months since I last saw my daughter... Separation from my daughter is not easy, but I have no choice.” – Damaris

For the first time since their conviction in 2014, Marie, Damaris, and Martha see the possibility that they could one day be released.



Lawyer Nestor Toko with Marie, Damaris, Martha, and their children, during a prison visit.

This profile was written on the basis of court records, publicly available information, and interviews with Marie, Damaris and Martha, and their lawyer. It is published with their consent.