

Causes, Prevention and Solutions to Domestic Violence against Women in Cameroon: A Qualitative Study of Opinions from Perpetrators and Victims

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Abstract: - Information on domestic violence against women in Cameroon comes essentially from various operations of Demographic and Health Surveys and is essentially quantitative and incomplete for the proper understanding of this social ill. Quantitative data has revealed that the frequency of this ill in Cameroon is high and even higher than many other sub-Saharan countries. In order to better grasp how the key perpetrators of domestic violence (men) and the main victims (women), perceive the causes, consequences, prevention and solutions to the problem, a focus group discussion of six women and five men was organized in each of Cameroon's ten regional capitals. The study revealed that despite divergent perceptions of gender-based domestic violence, both female and male discussants in a majority considered it bad and good for elimination. However, some men feel that it can be good if it is mild and aimed at correcting the wrongs of a woman. Some women, especially in the South, East and Centre regions of Cameroon, feel that some degree of domestic violence against them is necessary to serve as an expression of love. On a whole, both men and women participants at the focus group discussions see gender-based domestic violence as a social ill that needs religious, traditional, judiciary and administrative authorities to combat as well as individual self-control.

Key words: Gender-based domestic violence, households, perpetrators, victims, Cameroon

I. INTRODUCTION

The United Nations defines domestic violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty exercised by somebody with whom they share an intimate relationship". It is an age-old social ill that is practiced in all societies both developed and undeveloped. Victims can be of any age, race, culture, religion, education, employment or marital status. Although both men and women can be abused, most victims are women. The various forms of domestic violence carried out against women include: name-calling or put-downs, preventing partners from contacting their family or friends, withholding money, stopping a partner from getting or keeping a job, actual or threatened physical harm, sexual assault, stalking, intimidation Domestic violence can be criminal and includes physical assault (hitting, pushing, shoving, etc.), sexual abuse

(unwanted or forced sexual activity), and stalking. Although emotional, psychological and financial abuses are not criminal behaviors, they are forms of abuse and can lead to criminal violence. Domestic and other forms of violence against women are a clear violation of their rights and dignity as human beings. Domestic violence has unlimited negative consequences on the health and emotional wellbeing of female victims. These negative consequences range from minor injuries, severe harm, and psychological disturbances to death of the woman and unborn babies in the case of violence on a woman during pregnancy. It can also lead to separation or divorce with untold consequences on the children and the whole family. Despite these negative consequences, many cultural and social norms in Cameroon largely favour men and this serves as breeding grounds for domestic violence against women. The deterioration of the social and economic situation resulting to poverty, social marginalization, unemployment, impunity of perpetrators, silence as well as some harmful traditional practices have worsened and/or created conditions that are conducive for the prevalence of domestic violence against women. Statistics from various editions of the Cameroon Demographic and Health Surveys show that many forms of domestic violence against women are common in Cameroon and the frequencies are rather unacceptably high.

Theoretical Considerations

There are several theories that treat domestic violence. These theories include the idea that domestic violence is a learned behavior from childhood and that repressed batterers fall into a cycle of violence. For example, the social ecological model recognizes that contributory factors to domestic violence exist at the individual, relationship, community, and societal level. Some factors, such as substance abuse, contribute to the frequency and severity of the abuse while others, such as the systematic acceptance of violence against women, has a causal relationship to domestic violence.

Although there are no complete explanations, research indicates that domestic violence has its roots in the subordinate role women have traditionally held in private and public life in many societies. The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women describes

violence against women as "a manifestation of historically unequal power relationships between men and women." At the same time, violence is used to perpetuate and enforce women's subordinate role. In the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, the United Nations and its member countries condemn domestic violence as one of the "crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into subordinate positions compared with men."

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender-based domestic violence is a subject of concern to researchers working in many different fields. The literature on it is therefore very abundant and only a very brief summary of this rich literature is presented here. The root causes of domestic violence within various economic, social, and cultural contexts have been the subject of interest for many economists and social scientists. Research has found that lower economic resources and poor standards of life increase the incidence of domestic violence. The literature further suggests that women who have more autonomy, mobility and economic independence are relatively safer from such violence. This is also seen to be true for households with a higher level of education. Disparity between husband and wife in terms of education and wages, pointing to a superior socioeconomic status for women would, however, lead to an increase in domestic violence.

Research Questions

The analysis is based on the following research questions: Are there differences in the way men (main perpetrators of domestic violence) and woman (the key victims) view gender-based domestic violence? How can the opinions of men and women towards domestic violence be useful in the search of solutions to this worrisome social ill in Cameroon?

III. DATA AND METHODS

Method

After the realization that the situation of domestic violence against women in Cameroon require special attention, the Central Bureau for the Census and Population Studies decided in October, 2014 to carry out focus group discussions in all of Cameroon's ten regional headquarters to gather more information on this worrisome situation. In each region, six (6) women and five men were selected. The women were selected among those that have reported being victims of domestic violence and the men were those who had been reported by their spouses as perpetrators of domestic violence.

Female discussants were aged 20-55 and were either currently married or cohabiting. Their educational levels ranged from basic to higher education. Generally they worked as housewives or in the informal sector doing petty trading, farming, tailoring or hairdressing. Male discussants were aged 27 to 62 and were all married. A majority were working on their own in the informal sector with very few in the civil

service. Their educational levels ranged from none to secondary education.

The first stage of this qualitative survey was the identification of discussants. The discussants were provided by the various regional delegations for social affairs. Female discussants were all women who had been to the various delegations of social affairs to complain about instance(s) of domestic violence from their partners or persons close to them. The male discussants were partners who had exercised violence against their wives. After identifying the discussants, they were informed of the purpose of the study and of the fact that the information collected would not be disclosed to anybody as it was meant only for this study. Their identities will not be disclosed even when what they say is to be cited verbatim. This was followed by the signing of a commitment form by each discussant and the organizer of the discussions.

The discussions took place in two sessions. The first session was that of women. It lasted for approximately three hours on average. The second focus group discussions were for men and it lasted two and a half hours. During each discussion, there was one person directing the discussions and two persons who took down the causes, opinions, experiences, proposals and recommendations of the discussants. The notes taken down by different rapporteurs were later on completed with information recorded with the aid of a Dictaphone. The various sessions took place behind closed doors. At the end of each female focus group discussion, one of the discussants was allocated five minutes to recount her personal domestic violence experience while the others waited for their turn in the main hall.

The various discussions were guided by the following sub themes: definitions of domestic violence against women or the understanding of what constitutes domestic violence against women, types, perpetrators, causes, consequences, perceptions, attitudes towards perpetrators, prevention and measures for protection of victims

IV. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The first step of the focus group discussions was to seek for discussants' understandings of domestic violence against women.

Discussants' Definitions of Domestic violence

When asked what they understood by domestic violence against women, discussants, both male and female, saw it as "physical harm" caused by men or other members of the household. Some discussants, mostly women understood this form of violence to mean both physical and psychological violence. As one female discussant aged 34 in the South West Region of Cameroon put it, "It is the wickedness of men (husbands) towards their partners (wives). It is expressed through beating, sexual deprivation, insults, refusal to provide financial resources for the upkeep of the household, greed, etc."

Types of Domestic Violence Cited by Discussants

During discussions relating to types of domestic violence against women, both male and female discussants mentioned beating of wives or female partners, refusal of husbands to provide money for feeding, health care, absence of love from the husband towards the wife, quarrelling and emotional stress to women caused by males' improper behavior.

Women emphasized the practice of extra-marital sex by men, discriminatory treatment of wives in polygamous unions, husband's abandonment of the home, husband's late arrival at home after work, husband's refusal of the wife's right to work outside the household, husbands' refusal of their wives' right to visit their friends and relatives, husbands' use of insulting words on their wife and the non-consideration of the work women carry out within the household.

Perpetrators of Domestic Violence against Women

Both male and female discussants viewed husbands as the key perpetrators of domestic violence against women and many women emphasized the negative roles usually played by their mothers-in-laws as well as other members of their husbands' families especially when they live within the household. As one female discussant aged 45 in the South Region of Cameroon put it "My mother-in-law who now lives permanently with us is a real perpetrator of violence; she insults and even threatens to fight with me, she supports her son, my husband in every wrong he does against me". She added that "she is never happy when I live in peace with my husband". With tears running down her cheeks, she summed up her experience with the phrase, "My mother-in-law is a real monster-in-law"

Discussants' Opinions on the Causes of Domestic Violence against Women

Domestic violence against women is caused by many factors amongst which are socio-cultural and the individual behaviors especially that of the main perpetrator, the husband. The root causes may be found in the inferior position of women in many spheres of life-socio-cultural, political, economic and religious spheres. The causes of domestic violence against women in Cameroon cited by female and male discussants can be grouped into three categories; causes mentioned by both female and male discussants, causes advanced specifically by female discussants and those mentioned by male discussants.

Both male and female discussants share the fact that when the husband is unable to meet up with the financial demands for the upkeep of the household, he may become aggressive especially towards the wife. Sexual unfaithfulness and unilateral sexual abstinence especially from the wife can provoke violence against her. One discussant, a man of 56 in the North Region postulated that a unilateral decision by the woman not have sex with her husband can cause the husband to be violent against her. To buttress the point, he even added "my wife often decides with no justification not to have sex

with me and each time this happens, my interpretation of the decision is, she does it with other men and this leaves me with no option than to force her to give me or apply force to take what is rightfully mine".

Male discussants cited the extravagant lifestyles of some women, bad company and the unilateral decision of the wife to adopt a method of contraception without the husband's consent, negative comparisons, and women's indiscriminate copying of western ways of life shown on televisions are some of the causes of domestic violence against women. Concerning the negative influences of televisions on women, a male discussant aged 58 in the Far North Region of Cameroon said "Now our days, the television promotes lifestyles that are not adapted to our cultural values and our women and children copy them blindly. This should not be tolerated by any reasonable man. This together with extravagance and the refusal to bear forth many children when she is still young, cause me to insult and even beat her".

While some women admit that they are sometimes responsible for some of the violent acts directed against them by their partners. Some women declared that one of the reasons why men exercise violence against their wives is because they suffer from inferiority complex. Talking on inferiority complex, one female discussant aged 37, holder of Bachelor of Arts (B.A) degree and a civil servant said, "because my husband holds a secondary education certificate, he feels inferior because I hold a certificate higher than his. He attributes anything I do or say to the fact that I am more educated and wants to usurp his position of head of the family. 'These thoughts often leave me frustrated and make me regret why I got into this marriage'. A good number of female discussants lay the blame at the threshold of in-laws specifically the mother-in-law who some wives now prefer to call them "monster-in-laws", as the origin of the majority of the domestic violence their husbands exercise on them.

Childlessness is one of the causes of domestic violence in Cameroon. One female discussant described the troubles she faces in relation to childlessness in the following words, "I got married to my husband four years ago, at the beginning living with him was a 'dream come true'. After four years of marriage and not being able to conceive, he and his family apportion the blame on me. My husband does not know that infertility is an issue for the man as it is for the woman. He refuses to go for any medical consultations and I have to go alone. I do not think I will continue to live with him because age is fast wearing me down and I will be forced to leave at some point in time".

The desire for some men to control almost every aspect of the wives' lives was also mentioned as one of the sources of domestic violence against women. As one female discussant, a woman in her late thirties who works in Garoua the North Regional capital put it, "My husband controls all aspects of my life. At the end of every month, I go to the bank with my husband to sign my salary and hand it over to him. He gives

me what he likes and he has never rendered an account of how he uses my salary” in her words “my husband is too possessive and doesn’t allow me to make friends or join associations”. She concluded by saying, “I am my husband’s private prisoner”.

One class of female discussant feels that violence is hereditary in some families. During the discussion, one lady said her husband is just as violent as the brothers and their mother. In the North West Region, two discussants, all doing petty trading aged 40 and 42 whose husbands come from the same family said “our husbands are both aggressive and irresponsible. They are supported in their evil acts by their mother who herself is very aggressive. We are certain that they inherited all these from their mother”

Another cause of domestic violence that was mentioned by some women is the cost of bride price. Some women especially in the Northern part of Cameroon mentioned that because of the low bride price men pay for their wives, they have little consideration for them and can send one woman away and bring in another at will. In the Adamawa region, a discussant, a housewife aged 28 said “my husband often tells me that he can send me out of “his house” (our house) and bring in another wife after all it did not cost him much to bring me in. He often says there is no legal document that obliges him to keep me as his wife. Your stay with me depends on your complete submission and ability to do what pleases me”.

Other causes of domestic violence cited by some female discussants include the practice of homosexuality by some of their partners, male sexual weakness, and addiction to alcohol, smoking, drug abuse and involvement in games of chance (stakes) that deprive men of money meant for the upkeep of their families. One female discussant aged 34, narrated her experiences on the causes of domestic violence against her in the following words “My husband who is 50 drinks alcohol excessively and smokes as well, I suspect that he is a homosexual. With all these, he has become unable to perform his duties as husband and instead of trying to change, he has instead chosen to become aggressive towards me”.

Some discussants mentioned inter-ethnic or inter-tribal marriages which are often disliked by the families of the husbands as a cause of violence. One discussant, a woman aged 26 in the West Region said, “My husband loves me but his family has been mounting pressure on him to marry another woman from their village or send me away because I come from another tribe and after having resisted for some time, he is beginning to give in to the demands of his family”

The differential treatment of wives in polygamous marriages was mentioned as one of the key causes of violence against women. A Muslim woman aged 33 living a polygamous union in the North West Region described her situation in the following words, “My husband has four wives, he pays his attention and devotes all his time on the last wife while the rest of us are deprived of his love and financial support”.

Opinions on the Consequences of Domestic Violence against Women

Generally, both men and women view domestic violence as a social ill that must be eliminated. The negative physical and psychological consequences of this ill narrated by both female and male discussants can be grouped into 3 categories.

The first category of consequences is in the domain of health. The health implications of domestic violence include traumas, stress, mental disorder, injuries, disability, death, etc. The health consequences can easily be captured through this narration by one female panelist, a woman aged about 47 in the West Region” Today, I am suffering from high blood pressure which culminated into partial stroke and I am unable to walk properly. These are not unconnected with the many years of physical and psychological torture that my husband has subjected me to”.

The second group of consequences women mentioned in their numbers from the focus group discussants is economic. These include the high cost of treating physical and psychological complications resulting from domestic violence, time wasted for multiple visits to social welfare services, courts, etc. “As one female discussant aged 44, living in a consensual union in the South Region puts it, “Last year my partner got me well beaten and I sustained grave injuries. I could not walk for six days and we collectively spent more than 30000 francs to treat the injuries”

The third category of consequences is social. Among the many social consequences mentioned is the weakening of the family nucleus (marriage) leading to separation or divorce. Many discussants narrated that separation or divorce leads children out of the home thereby pushing them into deviant acts such as living in the streets, stealing, prostitution, drug abuse, school drop-out etc. One female discussant, a teacher aged 30 in the North West Region opines that, “Domestic violence against women destroys the love that exists in a home, transforms the home into a battle field causing fear and loss of self-esteem among the children and the mother thus pushing the victim (the wife) into doing silly things such as cheating on the husband”

Justifications for Domestic Violence against Women

From the focus group discussions, three conclusions can be drawn concerning the justification of domestic violence against women.

The first conclusion is expressed by a majority of discussants dominated by women who feel that gender-based domestic violence is unnecessary. In this connection, one female panelist said, “Domestic violence against women, the weaker sex, cannot be justified on moral, religious or legal grounds. Its negative consequences are glaring and everything humanly possible should be done to eliminate this act that dehumanizes of human dignity”

The second revelation is that held by some women who feel that some degree of violence against them from their partners is necessary as an expression of love. In this connection, a discussant in the South Region said, "My husband sometimes beats me to show that he loves me and that he is angry when I do not behave properly. After beating me, the love between us intensifies and solidifies". It should be added here that, in this region beating a woman is sometimes seen as the husband's expression of love for her. However, this beating should not be too harmful that is, if only there exist a form of "gentle beating".

A third revelation is that held by men who judge domestic violence against women as a corrective measure. According to them, a woman can be insulted or even beaten if she burns the food, if she is extravagant, if returns home late, if she insults or threatens to fight with her husband, if she does not take adequate care of children.

Measures to Prevent Gender-based Domestic Violence

Some preventive measures against gender-based domestic violence that female discussants emphasized on include: the careful choice of husbands, the avoidance of early marriages, patience and submission to partners, sensitization on the elimination of the harmful notion against inter-ethnic, inter-tribal or inter-religious marriages, etc. Many women also advocated the avoidance of gossips, negative out-of-household influences, peer pressure, avoiding the introduction of children born out of wedlock into the home, the promotion of dialogue among couples, understanding and tolerance of the husband as well as the prevention of marrying men with an inferior educational level. One female discussant, a teacher aged 34 in the Centre Region, proposed that, "Girls should be allowed to go to school and to properly choose their husbands once they are ripe for marriage. They should avoid marrying men with inferior educational levels or financial situations"

Another preventive measure held predominantly by female discussants is the introduction into the school curriculum of a course on gender based domestic violence for the education of young men and women in schools on the ills of gender-based domestic violence. As one female discussant, 32 in North West Region put it, "When young men are educated at tender ages on the ills of maltreating women, they grow up to be civilized and less violent partners. Most men who practice domestic violence against women today, were not properly educated at young ages on this social vice"

Male discussants particularly emphasized on proper behavior and submission on the part of the woman, mutual respect and dialogue. In this connection, a male farmer aged 34 in the South West Region said, "If women are submissive to their husband as the bible demands and do the right things, there will be no violence against them". Another male discussant in the same region said, "Some degree of beating on the woman is necessary in order to maintain discipline in homes"

The two groups of participants agreed on the fact that both men and women need to be educated through seminars on the negative effects of violence in general and domestic violence against women in particular.

Behavior towards Perpetrators of Gender-based Violence

Both male and female discussants feel that perpetrators of gender-based domestic violence need counseling especially Christian counseling to stop them from the evil act. Some discussants, mostly women asked for severe legal punishment against perpetrators while others feel that they should be avoided through separation or divorce. "I cannot stay and die from continuous beatings from my increasingly brutal husband. I am actually thinking of leaving him and never to get married again", said a discussant aged 38 and victim of frequent violent acts from the husband in the West Region

Protection of Victims of Domestic Violence against Women

Female discussants generally feel that victims of gender-based violence can be protected through economic empowerment, counseling of perpetrators as well as frequent monitoring of victims and perpetrators by law enforcement officers and social workers. However, some discussants feel that with the general laxity of law enforcement and social welfare officers in Cameroon in protecting victims, victims can only be protected by God. In this line, one female discussant, aged 39 in the East Region said this, "The law or the social welfare systems in Cameroon have failed to protect us (victims). We can only seek protection from God while remaining submissive and seeking dialogue"

IV. CONCLUSION

The emotional expression with which victims (women sometimes weeping) discuss issues of domestic violence indicates that they were physically and psychologically deeply injured by this ill. These focus group discussions revealed that gender based domestic violence is deeply-rooted in the Cameroonian society and the legal as well as the social welfare systems have not done enough to reduce its prevalence as well as protect its vulnerable victims. In fact, the legal and social welfare systems will not be able to significantly reduce domestic violence against women if they do not work with local and international Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs, religious organizations, community organizations) with whom they need to work in harmony in the fight against this age-old social ill. As emphasized by discussants, educating boys starting from very young ages can greatly shape their behaviors and prepare them to become non-violent towards women when they grow up. Many female discussants feel that if they are empowered economically and through education, they can become better treated by their partners. This means that greater efforts need to be made towards the education and empowerment of the girl child if gender based violence has to be curbed. Future actions in the fight against gender-based violence need to focus on the divergent views concerning gender-based violence expressed

by victims (women) and perpetrators (man). Aspects such as early marriages and polygamy which are very likely to expose women to gender based violence especially in the Northern parts of Cameroon need to be tackled by both the legal and social welfare services. Educating men especially on the consequences of alcohol and drug abuse as revealed by this study can equally contribute to reducing the frequency of gender-based violence.

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