



RESISTING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN CAMEROON

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INTRODUCTION:

Violence against women in Cameroon remains a pervasive and deeply ingrained issue, despite ongoing efforts by the government and grassroots organizations. According to the 2018 Cameroon Demographic and Health Survey (UN Women, 2021), an alarming 64% of women have experienced some form of violence. Yet, the true extent of this crisis is likely underestimated, as many cases go unreported due to cultural stigmas, lack of awareness, and systemic shortcomings. Healthcare providers often lack the training to recognize and document these incidents, while limited resources and poor clinical practices further obstruct justice (Nguefack-Tsague et al., 2024).

The most common and known forms of violence against women in Cameroon, includes physical, emotional, sexual, and economic abuse. **Physical violence** involves actions that cause bodily harm or pain, such as slapping, throwing objects that could cause injury, pushing, shoving, hitting with a fist or another object, kicking, dragging, beating, choking, burning, or threatening with weapons like guns or knives (García-Moreno et al, 2005). **Emotional violence** includes behaviors that damage a woman's self-esteem and emotional well-being, such as insults, humiliation, belittling (especially in front of others), intimidation through yelling or breaking objects, and threats—either direct or indirect—to harm her or someone she cares about (García-Moreno et al, 2005). **Sexual violence** refers to any non-consensual sexual activity, including being physically forced into intercourse, engaging in sex out of fear of potential harm, or being coerced into degrading or humiliating sexual acts. **Economic violence** occurs when a partner deliberately restricts a woman's access to financial resources as a means of control, such as withholding money, preventing her from working, or limiting her financial independence to isolate or manipulate her ((García-Moreno et al, 2005). In addition to the above-mentioned forms, violence against women in Cameroon is manifested in a wild variety of ways and contexts including digital violence, climate violence, violence in war zones, violence caused by lack of basic needs such as education, healthcare, accommodation, etc.

In this article we will discuss the state of violence against women in Cameroon and focus on three presently common forms of violence which are digital violence, intimate partner violence and violence caused by the anglophone crisis. These three forms of violence were chosen to be explored after a webinar held on December 10th 2024 by four grassroots Cameroonian organizations under the theme "Creating Safe spaces, shattering myths and Combating Gender-Based Violence in Cameroon". This webinar aimed to raise awareness on the prevalence of violence against women, provide a safe space for survivors to share their stories and experiences, discuss the impacts of violence against women in our communities and prevention strategies we could explore. The four organizations that planned this webinar include GreatRift Foundation and My African Womanhood based in the Centre Region, HealthiFirst based in the North West Region and She Is Strength organization based in the South West Region. The collaboration of these entities resulted in other activities such as workshops, campaigns, and match pass to make known the situation of

women in different regions of Cameroon especially those in the conflict zones and the capital city, Yaoundé.

Furthermore, this article has the following objectives:

1. To analyse and discuss the current state of violence against girls and women in Cameroon.
2. To explore the different forms of violence against women in various regions of Cameroon including violence against women in war zones, intimate partner violence and digital violence.
3. To spotlight the work of grassroots NGOs to network and create safe spaces for survivors of violence against women while advocating for the implementation of women inclusive public policies.

COMMON FORMS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN CAMEROON

1. Violence of Women in War zone (Anglophone crisis)

The Anglophone crisis in Cameroon is rooted in historical and cultural differences between the Anglophone (English-speaking) and Francophone (French-speaking) regions. The crisis can be traced back to the colonial era when Cameroon was divided between British and French administrations. The British Southern Cameroons and French Cameroon had different systems of administration, with the British implementing indirect rule and the French practicing assimilation. One of the key events contributing to the crisis included in the 2016 protests by Anglophone lawyers and teachers against the perceived marginalization and attempts to assimilate the English legal and educational systems into the French systems. The crisis escalated due to the government's failure to address these grievances promptly, leading to widespread protests, strikes, and eventually armed conflict. Hence, the Anglophone population feels marginalized and underrepresented in the political and economic spheres, leading to calls for federalism or secession.

The Anglophone crisis in Cameroon has had severe effects on women and girls. Women have been subjected to sexual violence, including rape, by both armed groups and security forces (Ngoh, 2018). This has led to physical and psychological trauma (Menyoli, 2021). Many women and girls have been forced to flee their homes due to the violence, leading to a significant number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees. Displacement often results in loss of livelihoods, increased vulnerability, and poor living conditions (Menyoli, 2021). Furthermore, access to healthcare for women has been compromised due to the destruction of health facilities and the displacement of healthcare workers (Ngoh, 2018). Thus, women and girls face difficulties in accessing maternal and reproductive health services, leading to increased maternal and infant

mortality (Menyoli, 2021). Additionally, the ongoing violence, displacement, and loss of loved ones have caused significant physical and psychological distress among women and girls. Many suffer from anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Finally, displaced women and girls who relocated in other regions are at higher risk of exploitation, including human trafficking and forced labor. This clearly shows how the challenges of women in conflict zone are more severe and intense than those of men.

2. Intimate partner violence:

A cross-sectional study conducted in Yaoundé, Cameroon, from August to October 2022, examined the prevalence and impact of intimate partner violence (IPV) among 404 women aged 17 to 67 years. The findings revealed that emotional violence was the most commonly reported form of abuse, followed by economic violence, physical violence, and sexual violence, which affected 33.7% of respondents. Women who experienced IPV reported various adverse health consequences, including physical trauma, mental disorders such as anxiety and depression, gynecological trauma, and behavioral disorders. The study underscored the severe impact of IPV on women's physical and psychological well-being, highlighting the urgent need for intervention and support services to protect victims and prevent further harm.

The research identified several factors that contribute to intimate partner violence in Cameroon. Among the key triggers were jealousy, perceived insolence, refusal of sexual advances, sexual dissatisfaction, rejection of certain sexual practices, and conflicts over financial or property rights. Other reasons included a woman's refusal to stop working, disputes over child custody, and accusations of disrespect toward a male partner. These factors reflect deeply entrenched gender norms and power imbalances that often place women in a subordinate position in relationships. The most commonly cited reason for violence was jealousy, demonstrating how possessiveness and control play a significant role in abusive relationships. This finding suggests that IPV is not only a result of economic and social struggles but also a manifestation of deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes.

The prevalence of intimate partner violence in Cameroon highlights the urgent need for increased awareness, legal protection, and community support for survivors. Many women do not report their experiences due to fear of stigma, retaliation, or lack of confidence in the justice system. Strengthening legal frameworks, improving law enforcement responses, and promoting gender-sensitive policies are essential to addressing this crisis. Additionally, education and advocacy efforts must focus on changing societal perceptions of gender roles and fostering healthy, respectful relationships. Community-based initiatives, including counseling services, economic empowerment programs, and safe shelters, are crucial in helping survivors regain their independence and rebuild their lives. Without concerted efforts from the government, civil society, and community leaders, intimate partner violence will continue to threaten the well-being and rights of women across Cameroon.

3. Digital Violence Against Women

Access to the internet is rapidly increasing in Cameroon, with 72 % of households owning at least one smart phone (Awondo, 2018). This growth has brought benefits such as improved quality of life, efficiency and productivity (ECSD, 2020). Additional access to the internet has increased the flow and exchange of personal data between individuals, associations and companies (Boraine, 2019). Conversely, access to the internet has exposed users to risks like scams, identity theft and digital violence against women. The government has responded with cyber legislation and initiatives to raise awareness and enhance cybersecurity. This response includes Enacted Cybersecurity and Cybercrime Law in 2010, and Law includes criminal offenses and penalties for cybercrimes.

A significant 77% of women in Cameroon have experienced online harassment, including stalking, sexual harassment (such as unwelcome sexual advances), and deliberate humiliation, such as revenge porn—where explicit content is shared without consent. Additionally, studies indicate that women make up the majority of cyber blackmail victims in the country (Bonny, 2020). In response to such online violence, 85% of women block their perpetrators, 55% choose to ignore them, and 35% take action by reporting incidents or adjusting their privacy settings. Despite these challenges, awareness of digital protection laws remains low, with 81% of women unaware of existing legal protections against online violence. Furthermore, 40% rate their digital security knowledge as poor or below average, and there is limited awareness and usage of essential digital security tools like VPNs and two-factor authentication. Given the high prevalence of online violence against women and growing concerns about digital safety, there is a pressing need for training programs to enhance digital security awareness and equip women with the skills to protect themselves online.

GRASSROOT ORGANIZATION AND THEIR PROJECTS TACKLING VIOLENCE AGAIN WOMEN

➤ GREAT RIFT FOUNDATION (Yaoundé, Centre)

GreatRift Foundation, a non-profit organization founded by Ehabe Victor, Maague Chelsea, and Takuh Vanessa in March 2023, is actively involved in addressing this pressing concern. The foundation's mission is to empower marginalized communities, bridge societal divides, and foster hope through sustainable interventions. By advocating for justice, equality, and inclusive development, GreatRift Foundation envisions a world where every individual, regardless of background, can thrive and contribute to a more equitable society. GreatRift Foundation has been

implementing various social and economic projects aimed at combating violence against women and promoting gender equality and human rights. Through advocacy campaigns, workshops, webinars, school visits, and community outreach programs in towns like Yaoundé and Bamenda, the organization strives to raise awareness, promote gender equality, and uphold human rights.

To address the issue of violence against women, GreatRift Foundation implements a range of solutions to support victims of gender-based violence. The organization advocates for policy changes to protect victims and hold perpetrators accountable. Educational programs and awareness campaigns are conducted to challenge societal norms and raise awareness about gender-based violence. Providing safe spaces and shelters ensures that women have a confidential and secure environment to seek refuge and support. By offering counseling, legal aid, and empowerment programs, GreatRift Foundation aims to empower women, break the cycle of abuse, and promote gender equality and human rights in Cameroon. In conclusion, the GreatRift Foundation is dedicated to combating gender-based violence, advocating for gender equality, and creating a society where women can thrive without fear of violence. Through its impactful initiatives and commitment to social change, the foundation is making significant strides towards a more just and equitable Cameroon.



Figure 1: Workshop on Violence against women organized by GreaftRift Foundation at Oxford School in November 2024

➤ **HEALTHIFIRST (Bamenda, North West Region)**

Healthifirst is a grassroots organization committed to helping the community live healthier lives especially the less privileged through community-based awareness campaigns and interventions that involve, free consultations, free screening, free medications and subsidized Ultrasound exams and minor surgeries. Furthermore, this organization is committed to promoting mental health by

creating awareness against factors affecting mental health like violence against women, drugs use and abuse. HealthiFirst's vision is to create communities that priorities preventive medicine and health access equity as the core to attaining universal health coverage not just in physical but mental health.

The most generic form of violence against women observes by this organization in the North West is intimate partner violence and rape.

“The first one I will mention is rape, my stay here has been marked by a couple of rape cases often teenagers.... Some time ago, it has not been up till five months. There were two of them. One was 14 and the other was 16. They had been raped by someone who had a gun....There was nothing no one could do about it because number one, no one could really identify who the gunman and number two there is no way to follow up things like that in a lawless community like the one I live in ... Another rape case was by a neighbor and at the end of the day the challenge in addressing that is the challenge of insecurity” (Dr. Platine Nyuyki from HealthiFirst).

This shows how familiar people take advantage to rape those they know being aware that the ongoing crisis will make it difficult for victims to seek help for authorities like the police. Reporting to the police might be interpreted as acknowledging that the rapist is a separatist since raping women is a very common act of separatist, says Dr. Platine. Thus, the parents of the victim will prefer to keep quiet for their security. This shows how women's life and health are taken advantage of in the context of war and conflict.

As an organization transforming lives in very fragile communities rife with high levels of insecurities with heightened degrees of violence against women particularly intimate partner violence and sexual assault of female minors, HealthiFirst has been engaged in creating awareness on mitigating gender based violence and empowering over 300 young girls and women with strategic steps to safe reporting and social justice in the Jakiri Sub Division, Northwest Region Cameroon. Aside awareness, we provide free consultation services to empower survivors, help them in getting justice and facilitating their social reinsertion.

➤ **MY AFRICAN WOMANHOOD (Yaoundé, Centre Region)**

My African Womanhood is an organization that was founded 5 years ago with a mission to empower and contribute to the formation and rise of African women and girls to potential leaders. In achieving its goals, the organization has 5 main working areas which include: Education for ALL, IDP Girls Leadership Program, Combating Violence against women, Menstruation is Power and Promoting Sustainable Agriculture. Two of these projects are directly linked to Eradicating violence against women which are IDP Girls Leadership Program and Combating Violence against women.

The IDP Girls Leadership Program was established by MAW to support internally displaced women and girls in Yaoundé, recognizing their heightened vulnerability to human trafficking, precarious jobs, and limited access to basic needs during conflict. This initiative equips participants with skills in leadership, IT, entrepreneurship, and community engagement, enabling them to secure better jobs, start or improve businesses, and actively contribute to their communities. Through digital literacy, they access online opportunities, and leadership training enhances their daily interactions. The program has led to remarkable successes, including participants launching businesses, securing higher-paying jobs, and one individual traveling for an exchange program with mentorship support. By fostering financial independence and professional growth, this initiative has transformed the lives of over 500 young girls and women, empowering them to rebuild their futures despite the challenges of displacement.

For the past two years My African Womanhood has been actively involved in the fight against violence, through workshops, social media advocacy, webinar and sensitization campaigns. In 2023, MAW organized a workshop on violence against women and girls' leadership center. The aim of this workshop was to enlighten the people on violence, dispel gender-norms and provide a safe space for survivors to share their experiences. The workshop brought together some members of the community, who were schooled on the course and enlightened on the role everyone can play to combat the phenomenon. Last year 2024, MAW decided to intensify her combat against violence against women through social media advocacy, a workshop and a webinar. Through her media pages, she went on to educate her community on the various types of violence against women, their effects, how they can be combated and a few resources to reach out to in case of any of the forms of violence against women. The post contained images indicating stop signs and spoke about different forms of violence against women such as Human trafficking, Domestic Violence, Sexual violence, Femicide etc.



Figure 2: Workshop on GBV organized by My African Womanhood at its Women and Girls Leadership Centre in November 2024

➤ **SHE IS STRENGTH ORGANIZATION (Buea, South West Region):**

She Is strength (SIS) mission is to empower young girls and women to excel as leaders in the society. This organization empowers them through education, entrepreneurial skills and leadership skills. It envisions a world where all girls are equipped with the necessary skills to excel as leaders. The target audience of this organization are young girls in vulnerable conditions such as the internally displaced, disabled, and girls from underserved communities. Working in the South West which is an area highly affected by the anglophone crisis, SIS have seen firsthand how violence against women has affected caused rape, school dropouts and physical abuse (Maeva, Founder of SIS).

The She Is Strength organization stated that they have taken several measures to combat violence against women by advocating in local communities, which had helped raise significant awareness. These measures include workshops where young women could openly discuss the challenges they faced, and SIS has also promoted girls' education by providing scholarships to those who have been forced to drop out of school due to the crisis. The organization emphasized that education is the first step in the fight against violence against women. Additionally, SIS promotes financial independence as a means to combat violence against women, by organizing vocational training programs to equip young girls and women with entrepreneurial skills. For Maeva and her team, the fight to end violence against women and girls cannot be achieved alone, which is why they have been collaborating with other organizations to strengthen their efforts.



Figure 3: SIS organization promoting women's health in areas affected by the Anglophone crisis in May 2024

THE FUNDAMENTAL ROLE OF WOMEN IN FIGHTING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Women in Cameroon have been the main drivers in the fight against violence, challenging patriarchal structures and leading community initiatives to protect their fellow women. They have found ways to resist and organize, creating support networks and safe spaces. Women-led organizations such as My African Womanhood, She Is Strength, and GreatRift Foundation have taken on the task of raising awareness in society, providing assistance to survivors, and demanding justice.

Amid the Anglophone crisis, women have contributed to the fight for their rights through peaceful means. They have organized intercommunal dialogues between village leaders in conflict zones, provided shelter to victims of the crisis, created safe spaces for survivors of sexual violence, and organized entrepreneurship workshops. Initiatives such as the Internally Displaced Girls' Leadership Program, designed by three women from the Northwest region (one of the conflict areas) and driven by My African Womanhood, have enabled young women affected by the conflict to acquire leadership, technology, and entrepreneurship skills, giving them autonomy and new opportunities. These women have transformed pain into strength, demonstrating that access to education and economic independence are essential tools for breaking the cycle of violence. On other occasions, female activists have met with the government and separatist groups to raise awareness about how the crisis has affected women and to call for reduced violence in these two regions of the country.

When faced with intimate partner violence, many women have defied fear and stigma by speaking out against their abusers. The high participation in workshops on combating violence against

women shows that more women are willing to raise their voices and do what is necessary to access resources that can help them build a better life. Likewise, in the digital sphere, women have taken the initiative to protect themselves and educate others about the dangers of online harassment. Women-led campaigns have shared strategies for identifying and reporting digital violence, strengthening many users' ability to defend themselves. The creation of virtual support communities has allowed women affected by online violence to feel less isolated and to find support from others who have gone through similar experiences.

Beyond denouncing violence, Cameroonian women are designing sustainable solutions to eradicate it. They have demanded changes in public policies, promoted education from a gender perspective, and created support networks that transcend generations. Their leadership has been key in highlighting gender-based violence not as an individual problem but as a structural issue that requires the mobilization of the entire society.

CREATING SAFE SPACES

Regardless of the wonderful job of all four organizations, there is still a lot of work to be done in order to create a Cameroon free from violence against women. At the end of the webinar all four organizations agree on the following strategies to combat this health and societal issue while creating safe spaces for survivors.

Communities can play a crucial role in the fight against violence against women by collaborating with local authorities to organize awareness campaigns. Local governments should establish administrative positions for experts in violence against women to better support survivors. Additionally, communities can host workshops for both adults and children, starting from the age of 13, to educate them on the dangers of violence against women and ways to prevent it. Strengthening and enforcing laws against perpetrators is also essential. Some suggest that sensitization should begin early, with courses on the subject integrated into school curriculums. Others advocate for the creation of peer-support networks where survivors can share experiences and help others escape abusive situations. Moreover, enhancing community safety through measures such as streetlights and neighborhood watch programs, as well as implementing policies that specifically protect women and girls, can contribute significantly to reducing violence against women.

Misconceptions about gender roles contribute to the persistence of violence against women in Cameroonian society. Many men believe that women are inherently weaker and should be submissive, which leads some to feel entitled to control or mistreat them. To challenge these harmful beliefs, it is crucial to educate men and boys on the importance of consent, respect, and healthy relationships. This requires tackling misconceptions at their roots by promoting gender

equality from an early age. Boys should be taught that men and women are equals, and comprehensive sexuality education should be incorporated into school subjects like civics to provide a clear understanding of sex, gender, and respectful relationships.

CONCLUSION

Violence against women in Cameroon remains a pressing human rights and public health issue, exacerbated by factors such as conflict, cultural norms, and the increasing digital space. The Anglophone crisis has heightened the vulnerability of women and girls, exposing them to sexual violence, displacement, and economic hardship. Intimate partner violence remains widespread, often fueled by societal expectations and gender inequalities, while digital violence is on the rise due to expanding internet access and the lack of legal awareness.

Despite these challenges, grassroots organizations across Cameroon are actively working to combat violence against women through education, advocacy, and support programs. Their efforts—ranging from workshops and vocational training to legal assistance and community awareness campaigns—are crucial in creating safe spaces for survivors and preventing further violence. However, more must be done. Strengthening laws, improving law enforcement responses, and integrating gender equality education from an early age are essential steps in dismantling the cultural and structural barriers that allow violence to persist. By fostering collaboration between communities, authorities, and civil society, Cameroon can move towards a future where women and girls can live free from violence, fear, and discrimination.

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