

**A Qualitative Study of Men's and Women's Opinions on Authors, Causes, Consequences, Justification, Prevention and Solutions to Domestic Violence against Women in Cameroon**

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Abstract

Information on domestic violence against women in Cameroon comes essentially from various operations of the Demographic and Health Surveys and only quantitative and incomplete for the proper understanding of this social ill. This quantitative data has revealed that the frequency of domestic violence against women in Cameroon is high and even higher than for many other sub-Saharan countries. This quantitative information an underestimation and does not tell the whole story about the worrisome situation. 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 female and male discussants, most of them considered domestic violence against women as 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 woman. Some women, especially in the South and Centre regions of Cameroon, feel that some degree of domestic violence against them is necessary to serve as an expression of love. Some men found some degree of it to be good for corrective purposes The main purpose of this qualitative study is to provide clarifications for the purpose of better understanding domestic violence against women in order to formulate efficient strategies to combat it.

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

**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 some 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. **Different forms of domestic violence carried out against women include:**

- name-calling or put-downs
- their partners preventing them 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 behaviours, 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 a human being. This violence has unlimited negative consequences on the health and emotional wellbeing of female victims. These negative consequences range from simple injuries, severe harm, and psychological disturbances to death of the women and unborn babies in the case of violence on women during pregnancy. It can also lead to separation or divorce with untold consequences on the children and the whole family. Despite these many negative consequences, many cultural and social norms in Cameroon which largely favor men still provide breeding grounds for domestic violence against women. The deterioration of the social and economic situation resulting to poverty , social marginalization, unemployment, impunity, silence ,etc., as well as some harmful traditional practices have worsened and / or created conditions that are conducive to 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 unacceptably high.

### **Situation of Domestic Violence against Women in Cameroon**

Statistics from the DHS show that the frequency of gender-based domestic violence in Cameroon is pre-occupying. From 2004-2011, domestic violence against women witnessed a rise despite the implementation of many combat measures.

**Table 1: Evolution of Domestic Violence Exercised by Partners against Women in Union, Separated or Divorced in Cameroon, 2004-2011**

Year	% of women who had undergone any form	% Evolution 2004-2015
2004	65.5	
2011	70.0	+4.5

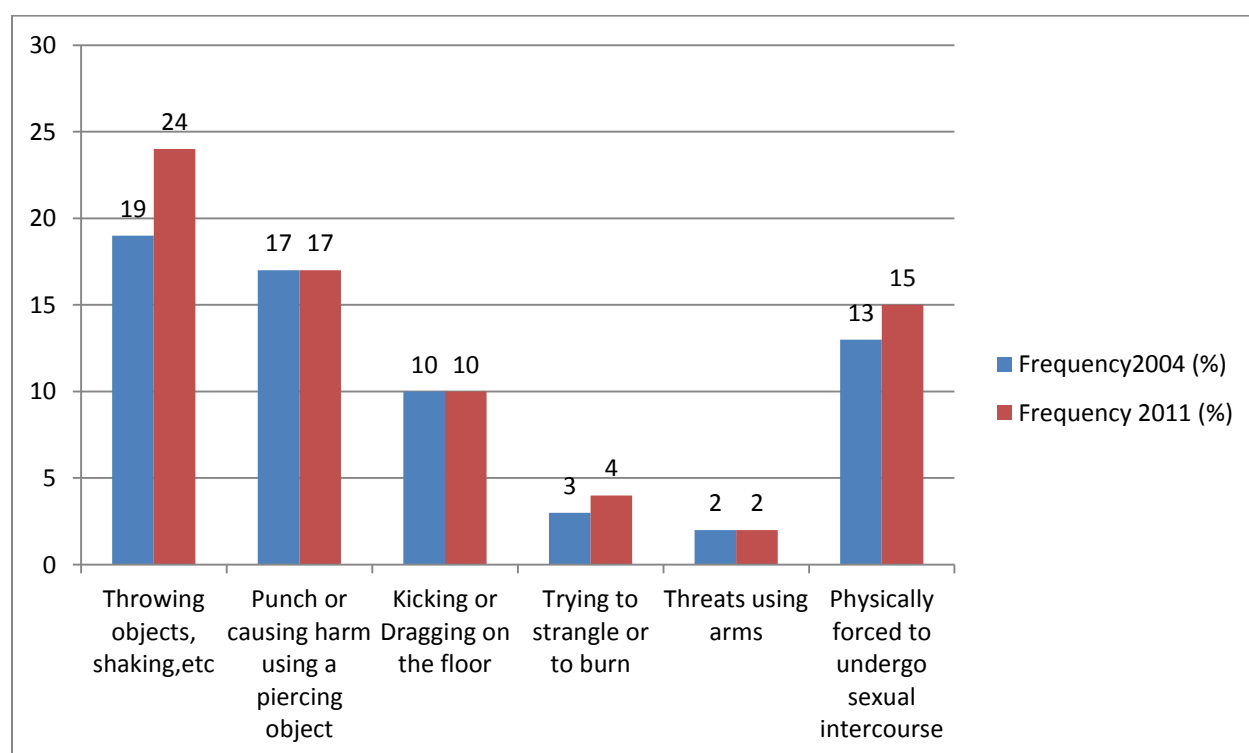
Source: DHS, 2004 and DHS-MICS, 2011

During the period, 2004-2011, the proportion of women who were victims of domestic violence since the age of 15 increased by 4.5. In fact, this proportion was instead supposed to drop considering the many attempts made by the Government of Cameroon and NGOs to reduce or eliminate violence against women in all its forms. This means that these combat measures have not been very efficient or that the situation would have been worse without them due to a worsening social situation characterized by increasing drug abuse and alcoholism, poverty, etc.

### Frequency of Various Forms of Domestic Violent Acts against Women

Gender-based domestic violence can be physical, psychological, verbal or sexual. It can also be financial deprivation, deprivation of liberty by the partner or someone within the household. This violence can be very severe resulting in serious injuries or death and it can also be mild. All these forms of violence are present in Cameroon.

Figure1: Proportion (%) of Women who have been Victims of Various Forms of Physical Violence from their Partners

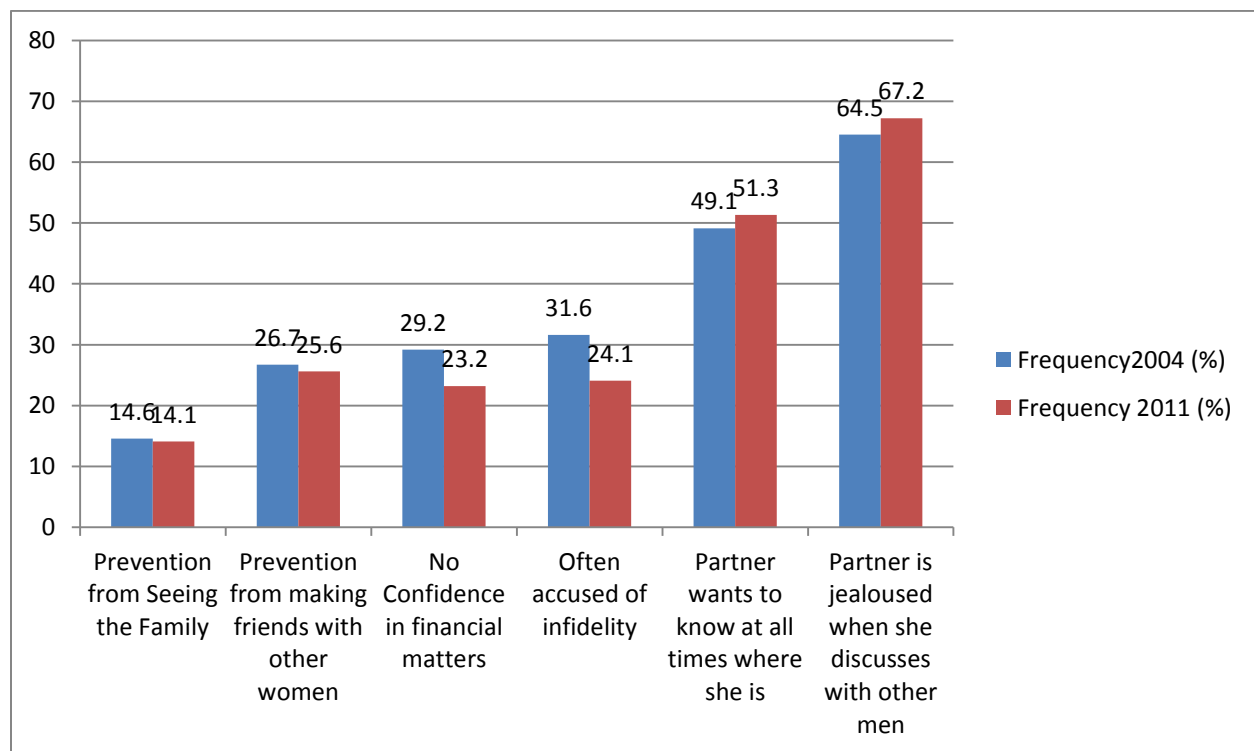


Source: CDHS 2004 and CDHS-MICS 2011

During the period 2004-2011, the frequency of various forms of physical violence exercised by a partner either increased or remain constant. Notably, the proportion of women who were forced to undergo sex by their partners, usually the husband increased as well that of women who were violated by throwing objects at them (figure1).

Apart from undergoing physical violence from their partners, many women were also victims of psychological violence as illustrated by figure 2.

Figure: Frequencies (%) of Various Forms of Psychological Violence Exercised Against Women by their Partners



Within the period 2004-2011, the proportion of women whose partners felt jealous when they discuss with other men and that of women whose partners control their movements increased slightly. For other forms of psychological violence, there was only a slight decline (figure2). However, the fact that psychological violence affects more than 50% of women attests to its very high prevalence in Cameroon. When one considers the general hesitance of victims of domestic violence to report its occurrences, these statistics may be taken as an underestimation.

When statistics on domestic violence against women in Cameroon are compared with those from some other sub Saharan African countries such as Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Uganda, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi and Tanzania, one comes to the realization that its frequency in

Cameroon is significantly higher. This leads us to ask the following questions: - Why is domestic violence against women in Cameroon so high? What do victims and perpetrators of this form of violence think of its causes, prevention, consequences and solutions, etc.? This work which is based on a qualitative approach seeks to provide clarifications on the situation of domestic violence against women in Cameroon with the purpose of better understanding it and defining efficient strategies to combat the ill.

## Data and Methods

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 it. In each region, six (6) women and five men were used. Women for the discussion 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 of undergoing violence from their partners. 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 and for no other purpose. Their identities was not also to be disclosed even when what they are 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 FGD was that of women. It lasted five hours approximately five hours. The second that lasted slightly less than four hours was that of men. During each discussion, there was one person directed the discussions and two persons who took down what the discussants narrated. The notes taken down by different rapporteurs were later completed with information recorded by a Dictaphone. The various sessions took place behind closed doors. At the end of the female focus group discussion session, one of the discussants was allowed to recount her domestic violence experience in the absence of others.

The various discussions were guided by the flowing themes:

- definition of domestic violence against women or understanding of what constitutes domestic violence against women, types, perpetrators, causes, consequences ,perceptions, attitudes towards perpetrators, prevention and measures for protection of victims

## **Discussion of Findings**

The first step of the FGDs is definition of 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 put it, "It is the wickedness of men 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 husband's refusal to provide money for feeding, health care, absence of love from the husband towards the wife (ves), quarrelling and emotion stress to women caused by males' improper behaviour

Women emphasized the practice of extra-marital sex by men, discriminatory treatment of wives 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 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 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 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 in every wrong he does against me". She added that "she is never happy when I live in peace with my husband". She concluded while crying by saying, "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 which are socio-cultural and the individual behaviours 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 sphere. 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 husband, usually the household head is unable to meet the financial demands for the upkeep of the household, he may become aggressive especially towards the wife. They also agreed that sexual unfaithfulness and unilateral sexual abstinence especially from the wife can provoke violence against her.

Male discussants cited the extravagant lifestyles of some women, bad company; the unilateral decision of the wife to adopt a method of contraception, negative comparisons, and women's indiscriminate copying of western ways of life shown on televisions as some of the causes of violence against women. Concerning the negative influences of televisions on women, a male discussant in Maroua in the Far North Region of Cameroon said "Today, 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 right-thinking persons; all should be done to suppress these strange values".

While some women admit that they are sometimes responsible for some of the violent acts directed against them by their partners, most of them acknowledged the fact that men are often the cause. Some women declared that one of the reasons why men exercise violence against their women is they sometimes have an inferiority complex. Related to this, one female discussant said, "Because my husband has only secondary education, he feels inferior because of the educational level that I have that is higher than his. He attributes anything I do or say to the fact that I have a first degree which he hasn't. This often frustrates me and makes me regret why I got into this marriage". A good number of female discussants pointed a finger to the in-laws specifically to the mother or "monster-in-laws", as the origin of some of the violence that their husbands exercise against 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, and living with him was very pleasing. After four years of marriage without being able to bear a child for him, he and his family blame me for it. My husband feels that men do not have problems putting their wives in a family way. He refuses to go for any medical consultation and I have to go alone. I do not think I can live this experience all my life. I will be forced to leave at some time".

The desire of 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 in Garoua narrated, "My husband controls all aspects of my life. At the end of every month, I go to the bank with my husband and sign a cheque for him to collect my salary. He gives me what he likes and he has never rendered an account of how he uses my salary" and she continued by saying "My husband is too possessive and jealous as he doesn't allow me to make friends or join associations. She concluded by saying, "I am my husband's private prisoner".

Some women feel that violence is hereditary in some families. During the discussion, one mentioned her husband is violent just like the brothers and their mother. Another cause of domestic violence that was mentioned but by few 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 other women at will.

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 that deprive men of money meant for the upkeep of their families. Some of them mentioned inter-ethnic marriages which are often disliked by the families of the husbands and the differential treatment of wives in polygamous marriages other causes of domestic violence against women.

### **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 (in tears) by one female panelist, "Today, I am suffering from high blood pressure 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 groups of consequences women mentioned by the panelists are economic. These include the high cost of treating physical and psychological complications resulting it, time wasted for multiple visits to social welfare services, courts, etc.

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 streets, stealing, prostitution, drug abuse, drop-out from school, etc. As one female discussant put it, "domestic violence against women destroys the love that exists in a home, transforms the home into a battle field causing fear and loose of self-esteem among the children and the mother and pushing the victim (the wife) into silly things such as cheating on the husband"

### **Justifications for Domestic Violence against Women**

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

The first conclusion is that 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 cannot be justified on moral, religious or legal grounds. Its negative consequences on the women and the family show that everything should be done to eliminate this devaluation of human dignity"

The second conclusion 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 woman in the South region



of Cameroon said, "My husband sometimes beats me to show that he loves me and is angry when I do not behave properly. After beating me, the love between us grows". It should be added that in this region beating a woman is sometimes seen as husband's expression of love for her. However, this beating should not be too harmful.

A third conclusion is that of 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 she returns home late, if she insults or threatens to fight with her husband, if she does not take adequate care of children, if she burns the food...

### **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, prevention of inter-ethnic or inter-religious marriages, etc. Many women also advocated the avoidance of gossips, negative out-of-household influences, 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.

Another preventive measure mentioned by is the education of young men in schools on the evils of gender-based domestic violence. As one female discussant in Bamenda, North West Region of Cameroon, put it, "When young men are educated at tender ages on the evils of maltreating women, they grow up to be civilized and less violent partners. Most of the men who practice domestic violence against women today, were not properly educated at young ages of evil effects"

Male discussants particularly emphasized on proper behavior and submission on the part of the woman, mutual respect and dialogue. 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.

### **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 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”

## **Conclusion**

The emotional (sometimes weeping) nature in which women victims discussed issues of domestic violence indicates that they were deeply physically and psychologically 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. In fact, the legal and social welfare systems will not be able to significantly reduced domestic violence against women and other organizations ( NGOs, religious organizations, community organizations...) need to work in harmony in the fight against this age-old social ill.

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