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Center for Gender, Peace and Security

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Gender-based violence in Cameroon: an undeniable reality

In recent years, gender-based violence, particularly against women, has been on the increase in Cameroon. Gang rapes, harassment, mutilation and death at the hands of spouses have become commonplace in large urban areas. The news is regularly marked by scandals in which women are either stripped naked, beaten by their spouses, or raped individually or collectively. Cultural and religious contingencies continue to wreak havoc, such as early marriage, genital mutilation, incest and violence of all kinds. At the same time, the repressive legal framework on the issue of violence remains unchanged, making young girls and women habitual and ultimately normal victims. The highly patriarchal socio-political context keeps women in positions of weakness that do not encourage them to fight for their "acquired" rights, or even for their emancipation. The aim of this Insight Note is to analyze the socio-cultural determinants that generate violence against women, while recalling the normative framework for the protection of women's rights that exists in Cameroon, and the recommendations for improving women's rights.

In many societies around the world, respect for women's rights has not always been a priority issue. Women are relegated to the background and considered naturally inferior to men. Within society, women are sometimes subjected to a wide range of forms of violence. This is the case in Africa, where violence against women is increasingly considered a commonplace phenomenon. In 2021, a study by the World Health Organization found that 65% of women in Central Africa and 40% in West Africa had suffered violence. In Cameroon in particular, the figures released by various associations and institutions since the beginning of 2023 are overwhelming. There has been a steady rise in the number of feminicides, widely reported on social networks thanks to the "DÉNONCE TON HOMME VIOLENT" movement. This movement emerged in November 2023, following the death of YANGWO Diane, a young teacher beaten to death by her husband, on November 15, 2023, in the city

of Douala. This feminicide proved to be one too many, if the wave of indignation it aroused on the web is anything to go by.

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The Ministry for the Promotion of Women and the Family (MINPROFF) indicates that between February and May 2023, more than twenty women were killed either by their husbands, partners or ex-partners, or by brigands or strangers in the Centre region. In the Littoral region, between January and November 2023, almost fifteen women died as a result of physical and sexual violence committed by their spouse or unknown assailants. “Violence occurs when a human being is harmed, beyond his or her physical, moral or even psychological integrity". Violations of women's rights persist, and this makes it difficult for women to assert themselves, and to achieve a high level of management favorable to their economic and social development. So what are the socio-cultural determinants of violence against women in Cameroon? Is the normative framework for the protection of women's rights effective? Using a socio-anthropological approach, it is important to focus on the socio-cultural causes of such violence, followed by an analysis of the typology of violence and the normative system for protecting women's rights, and then recommendations for improving women's rights.

Socio-cultural determinants of gender-based violence

According to the National institute of Statistics (INS), women make up almost 51% of this population[1]. If we go by this percentage, it would be obvious that Cameroon's development would depend in part on the role played by this not inconsiderable part of the population. But there are real obstacles preventing them from fully participating in society. In this study, we refer mainly to P. BOURDIEU's *La Domination Masculine*[2]. In that book, he analyzes gender relations, looking for the permanent causes of men's domination over women. In all human societies, this domination is explained by a habitus that gives women a predetermined role; in particular, the hegemony of men over women and the weight of customary and religious practices that lead to the inferiorization of women.

The social hegemony of men over women

Society recognizes a certain predominance of men over women. The violence suffered by women stems essentially from the inferior status accorded to women in society and within the family. Simone de BEAUVOIR truly opened up the debate on inequality between men and women. Her famous phrase “One is not born a woman, one becomes one” sums up her analysis of this sexual segregation[3]. She explains it as a social construct, an ancient heritage transmitted through education and culture. In professional terms, Cameroon has seen a persistent marginalization of women in the country's decision-making spheres. No woman has ever held the position of Prime Minister, President of the National Assembly or Senate. The posts of Governor and Mayor are held exclusively by men.

Male power is still the rule of society. Male domination thus represents the quintessential form of symbolic violence;[4] male superiority is imposed as a natural order, and women as dominated.

[1] Institut national de la statistique, note de politique sur les violences basées sur le genre au Cameroun : ampleurs et défis, 2020, p.9.
[2] Pierre BOURDIEU, *La domination masculine*, dans *Actes de recherche en Sciences sociales*, Vol 84, Septembre 1990.
[3] Simone de BEAUVOIR, *Le deuxième sexe*, Paris, Gallimard, Folio, 1974, p.32.
[4] Pierre BOURDIEU, op.cit.

The influence of customary practices

In Africa in general, and Cameroon in particular, the socio-cultural context, characterized mainly by tradition, has confined women to the background. The habits and customs of Cameroon corroborate these thoughts, when we observe that patriarchal attitudes, stereotypes taught to children, and discriminatory traditions in society contribute to maintaining women's submission to marital authority and encourage violence against them.

African culture in general, and Cameroon in particular, has made men visibly superior to women. However, the State has not remained inactive in the face of all these acts of violence against women.

Typologies of gender-based violence and the normative framework for the protection of women's rights

Types of violence against women

Violence against women can take many forms. Physical violence takes the form of intentional blows and wounds, punches to the face, kicks to sensitive parts of the body (stomach, chest, kidneys). The blows often result in broken bones, abortions, lifelong mutilation or the loss of an eye.

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There is also verbal violence in the form of insults, name-calling, shouting, outbursts, dishonourable language and even denigration. From their forties onwards, women testify that they are subjected to verbal violence by their husbands, who no longer find them attractive. For example, one victim said: "I'm a young woman living in the Mokolo district of Yaoundé; my husband regularly insults me in front of my children. When I complain to my parents, they tell me to put up with it, because my children's success is at stake."[5] . The Institut National de la Statistique highlights the extent of violence against women throughout Cameroon. The results of the study reveal that at least 13% of women have been victims of physical violence at some point in their lives, 39% have been subjected to physical violence since the age of 15, 7% of pregnant women are victims of physical violence, 12% are married at an early age and 22% endure emotional and psychological violence.[6] A look at the situation in 2023 shows that these figures have skyrocketed.

There is also sexual violence. This refers to the use of force, coercion or intimidation to have sex or to participate in sexual practices. In Cameroon, the number of women who have suffered sexual abuse in the home rose from 13% to 15% between 2004 and 2011.[7] Some women also experience economic violence.

What's more, women continue to be victims of human rights violations, simply because they are female; hence the preponderance of the dismal phenomenon of feminicide. As a result, on December 13, 2024, there were 69 feminicides in Cameroon. In 2023, there were 237 cases of violence against women, an increase of 22% on 2022.[8] These are alarming statistics in a patriarchal society where women's rights associations denounce the absence of specific legislation to

[5] A victim's comments during the denunciation phase to the association fighting violence against women, December 15, 2024.
[6] Institut national de la statistique, note de politique sur les violences basées sur le genre au Cameroun : ampleurs et défis, 2020, p.20.
[7] Rapport national sur l'état de la population du bureau central des recensements et des études de la population, Cameroun, édition 2013, p.15.
[8] www.journalducameroun.com, consulted on December 24, 2024.

punish the perpetrators of violence against women.[9]

The normative framework for the protection of women's rights

Women's rights are enshrined in legal instruments at international level, through the action of various organizations such as the UN. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (known as "CEDAW"), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979, recommends for the first time that States Parties implement affirmative action measures in favor of women to promote equality in all areas, including in places of political power. Resolution 34/180 of December 18, 1979, states that "Violence against women constitutes a violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and prevents women from enjoying such rights and freedoms in whole or in part".

At regional level, we can cite the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women, which devotes a section to violence against women. Adopted on July 11, 2003 in Maputo, it urges African governments to combat all forms of discrimination and violence against women in Africa. It also urges them to include in their national constitutions and other legislative texts, the principles of equality between men and women and the notion of gender-based discrimination.

To enrich the system of repression against each category of violence, Law no. 2016/007 of July 12, 2016 on the new penal code, criminalizes violent acts exercised against women.

Recommendations for an effective guarantee of women's rights

These recommendations are listed under various headings. First and foremost, the State and its institutions need to set up specialized brigades to combat domestic violence, but with safeguards in place to prevent any excesses that would only lead to conflict between men and women, who are destined to live in perfect harmony and complement each other; Enable associations working to combat gender-based violence to act as civil parties in court cases, and facilitate women's access to justice; Educate people to change the negative socio-cultural behaviors of both sexes. Such education would necessarily involve increasing the school enrolment rate for children in general, and girls in particular.

For women's associations and organizations, we need to maximize awareness-raising campaigns focusing on positive masculinity; create income-generating activities for women to avoid their complete dependence. To help women achieve greater fulfillment, we also need to build their capacities (functional literacy, continuing education, etc.).

For couples, we need to establish open communication within the couple. This is a priority for any couple who wants to get through life's difficulties without damage; feel solidarity with all women victims of domestic violence and agree to testify when necessary; refuse forced marriages for our daughters and, by extension, avoid early marriages; engage in self-criticism to become aware of one's status as a victim.

Overall, gender-based violence, particularly against women, remains a reality in the lives of Cameroonian women. Concerns about this social phenomenon have prompted a number of international and national initiatives. So, to reduce or eradicate this phenomenon, we believe that we need to step up the fight, by informing women more about their rights, letting them know that they are not alone, and that they can count on women's associations. Put pressure on state authorities, and especially the judicial system, to take the necessary measures to prevent such violence. Violence calls for a collective response!

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[9] "If the government succeeded in passing such a law, with its exemplary penalties for perpetrators of domestic violence, we would have very few women in our towns dying in the name of love and the home," says Nadine BAANA, President of *Initiative Femme*, a former victim of domestic violence.

The Center for Gender, Peace and Security (CGEPS) is an independent research centre whose main mission is to contribute, through research, study, analysis, documentation and information, to improve the mainstreaming of gender and the contribution of women in global peace and security initiatives in Africa and around the world. It is made up of a team of researchers and experts with diverse and varied skills in the field of peace and security.

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