

## **Violence against the Women and the Girl Children in Cameroon**

**Poster** presented at the International Conference on Population organised by the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population by Teke Johnson Takwa [tekejt2002@justice.com](mailto:tekejt2002@justice.com)

Central Bureau for the Census and Population Studies,  
P.O.Box 12932 Yaoundé-Cameroon  
PhD IFORD –Yaoundé-Cameroon

Violence against the woman and the girl children here refers to physical or psychological abuse of the dignity of the woman or the girl child. This physical and psychological harm done on the woman and the girl remains widespread in Cameroon and the Central African Region as a whole despite enormous efforts at the national and international levels to eliminate them. In fact, violence against the woman is more widespread in the Central African Region in which Cameroon is found than in other major areas of sub-Saharan Africa.

### **Efforts to Eliminate Violence against the Woman and the Girl Child in Cameroon**

Knowing the negative consequences of violent acts against the women and the girl children, the government of Cameroon has joined international efforts to end them and has also taken measures to adapt international recommendations on eliminating various forms of violent acts against women and girl children to the Cameroon context.

Cameroon has ratified the recommendations of international conventions aimed at eliminating various forms of violence against women and girl children. Notable examples are the ratification of:

- the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948;
- the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Violence and Discrimination against the Woman adopted by the United Nations in 1979;
- the Convention on Children's Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1989;
- the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action of the World Conference on Human Rights of June 1993 (A/Conf.157/25), and the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against the Woman adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in its Resolution 48/104 of 20<sup>th</sup> December, 1993;
- the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995; and
- the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights with special emphasis on the rights of women adopted in Maputo in 2003.

At the national level, the following measures are being taken to end violence against women and girl children:-

- the updated National Population Policy Declaration issued in 2004 includes measures to eliminate violence against women;
- A special ministry has been created to take care of the promotion of the status of the women and girl children-the Ministry of Women affairs was created in 1998 and later changed to the Ministry for the Protection of the Family and the Woman in 2004. The missions of this ministry include- the promotion of the status of Cameroonian women through education, improved access to credit facilities, decision making, gainful employment, prevention of all forms of discriminations and violent acts against women and girl children, the promotion of the right of women to inheritance, etc.

- International organisations operating in Cameroon such as United Nations Population Fund, UNICEF, WHO, UNAIDS, UNDP as well as local non governmental organisations such as the Association for the Fight against Violence on the Women, the Cameroon Association of Female Jurists, etc have been actively engaged in the advancement of women and the fight against violence carried on them;
- The Family Code that will surely come to improve upon the situation of women is still being elaborated.

Legal dispositions have been included in the Cameroonian penal code to protect women against violence which she is often a victim. These dispositions include:

- Article 296 of the penal code which prescribes an imprisonment term of 5 to 10 years for any man who uses physical or moral constraint to have sexual relations with a woman no matter her age (rape).
- Article 279 of the penal code which prescribes a punishment of 5-10 years imprisonment and a fine if necessary on any body who uses physical or any other method to cause injury on the other person or persons;
- Article 356 of the penal code prescribes an imprisonment term of 5 to 10 years and a fine on anybody who forces the other into marriage;
- Article 357 of the Cameroonian penal code which prescribes an imprisonment term of 3 months to 5 years and a fine on any one who makes an abusive request for a bride prize.

Concerning the girl child, the Cameroonian penal code in articles 294, 295, 344, 345, 347, 350 and 356 protects her against

- Prostitution;
- sexual abuse (rape, incest, etc.) ;
- participation in the production of pornographic material;
- forced marriage;
- Physical violence, etc.

Despite all the above measures, violent acts against the women and girls take place daily in many parts of Cameroon. Studies have shown that most of these violent acts are committed by men. Some social and cultural norms permit the practice of sex-specific violence such as female genital mutilation or subjecting women to humiliating widow rites. One of the key reasons for the persistent high rate of violence against women and girl children in Cameroon is the fact that some are either ignored or are even accepted by the society.

### **Table1:Types of Violent Acts Committed Against the Women and Girl Children in Cameroon**

A variety of violent acts are practised on the women and girl children in Cameroon. They include physical assault, psychological violence, early and forced marriages, female genital mutilation, commercial exploitation, etc.

#### **Female Genital Mutilation and the Ironing of the Breasts**

Many attempts have been made to stop female genital mutilation in Cameroon both at the international and national levels. At the international level, the elimination of this practice was one of the key recommendations of the International Conference on Population and Development that held in Cairo in 1994 as well as the recommendations at the Beijing

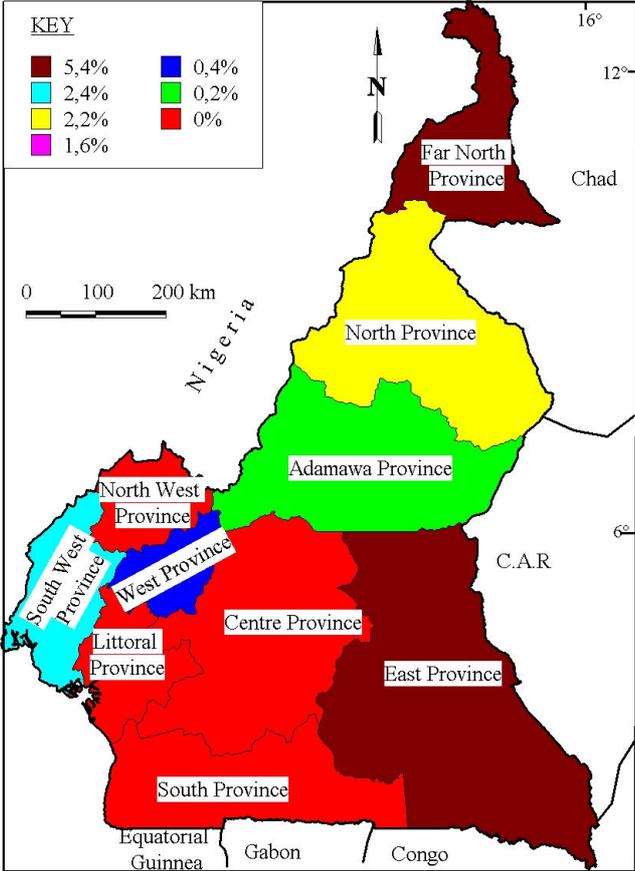
Conference on Women. At the national level, the National Action Plan for the Fight against Female Genital Mutilation was adopted in December 1998. Despite these efforts made by the government of Cameroon and local and international NGOs, this special form of violence against girl children still persists especially in the South West and Far North Regions of Cameroon.

Female genital mutilation is believed to reduce the sexual desire of the women and girl children thereby assisting them to remain virgins as long as possible and faithful to their husbands when they later marry but this practice constitutes a permanent health risk. This act which is usually performed by traditional methods without the use of anaesthesia often lead to severe pain, haemorrhage, and other complications that often result in difficulties of conception and child delivery. It equally increases the exposure of the concerned women to HIV/AIDS and tetanus infection. It also reduces the possibility of attaining full sexual satisfaction as it hinders victims from reaching orgasm.

**Table 2: Proportion of Women who had Undergone FGM at the Time of the 2004 Cameroon Demographic and Health Survey by Region**

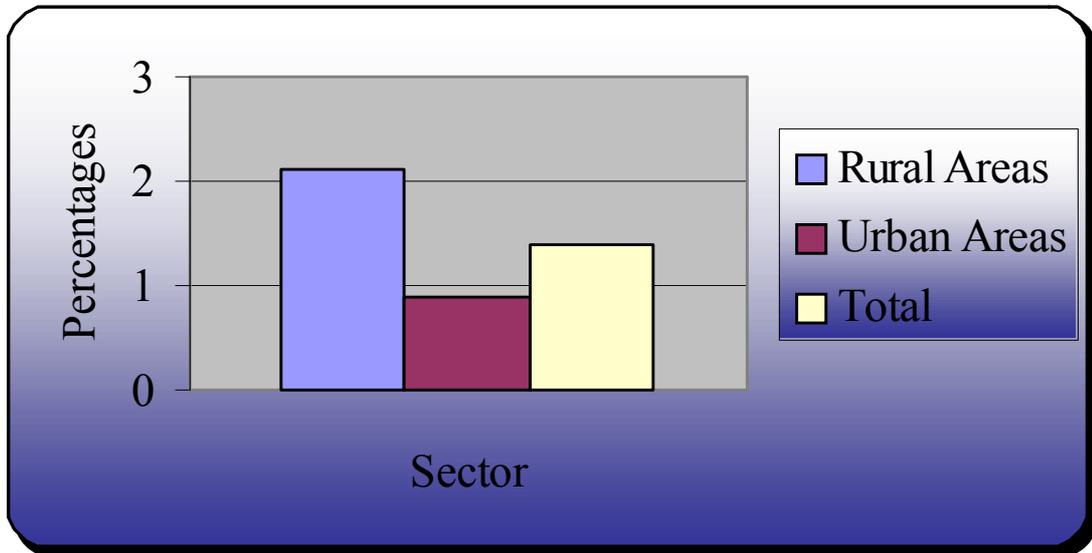
Region	
Adamawa	0.2
Centre	0.0
East	1.6
Far North	5.4
Littoral	0.0
North	2.2
North West	0.0
West	0.4
South	0.0
South West	2.4
Total	1.4

**Map 1 Percentage Distribution of Women who had Undergone FGM by Region**

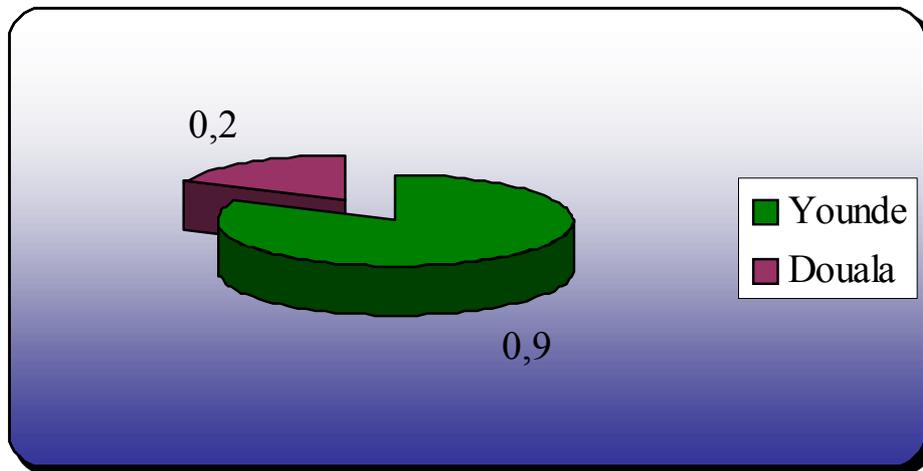


Source: 2004 Demographic and health Survey of Cameroon

**Fig 2: Proportion of Women who had Undergone FGM at the Time of the 2004 Cameroon Demographic and Health Survey by Rural-Urban Residence**



**Fig 3: Proportion of Women who had Undergone FGM at the Time of the 2004 Cameroon Demographic and Health Survey in the two Major Cities of Yaounde and Douala**



Source: 2004 Cameroon Demographic and Health Survey

Another form of violence against girl children in Cameroon is the modelling of the breasts. This usually involves the use of very painful methods such as breast ironing to keep the breasts of young girls especially those who start developing breast by the age of nine small. A study carried by the German Technical Corporation (GTZ) in 2006, showed that 24% of adolescent girls and 50% of girls who show early signs of breast development had undergone this form of violence in Cameroon.

## Sexual Aggression

Physical violence exercised against women and the girl children takes many forms. It can take the form of sexual aggression which involves the use of force to have sexual relations with either a very young girl or a mature woman. Sexual aggression can even take place within marriage circles. It can also be practised by some one who is very close to the young girl such as the father, teacher, the pastor, the doctor, a brother, etc. This involves a form of abuse of confidence. Forced sex intercourse is usually carried out without the use of the condom and is often accompanied by injury, STD infection and unwanted pregnancies.

In other cases, sexual aggression may take a milder form where the aggressor uses persuasive methods such as the use of money or the offer of non-financial items to lure the woman or the girl child into sexual relation. The men involved in such sexual acts are usually quite older and financially viable than their female partners (sugar daddies) and most often have more other sex partners. Sexual relations occurring under such circumstances expose the girl child to various forms of unpleasant effect including injury which leads to high rates of infection by sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS, early and unwanted pregnancy which at times compromise educational career of victims and reduce their chances to develop their productive potentials and increase the risk of dieing from pregnancy and child delivery related complications.

Cases of sexual aggression on women and girl children in Cameroon are usually under reported. Women and girl children who undergo these unfortunate circumstances usually keep quiet to spare themselves of the shame usually associated to this by the societies they live in. Some times, they keep quiet for fear of being accused of provoking the situation. Information collected during the 2004 Cameroon Demographic and Health Survey shows that in 2004 alone, 13.0% of Cameroonian women underwent sex under physical constraints.

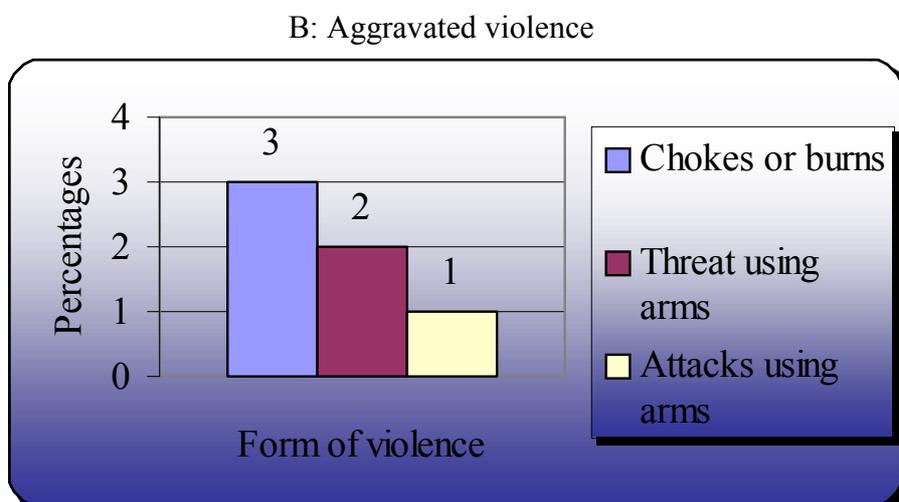
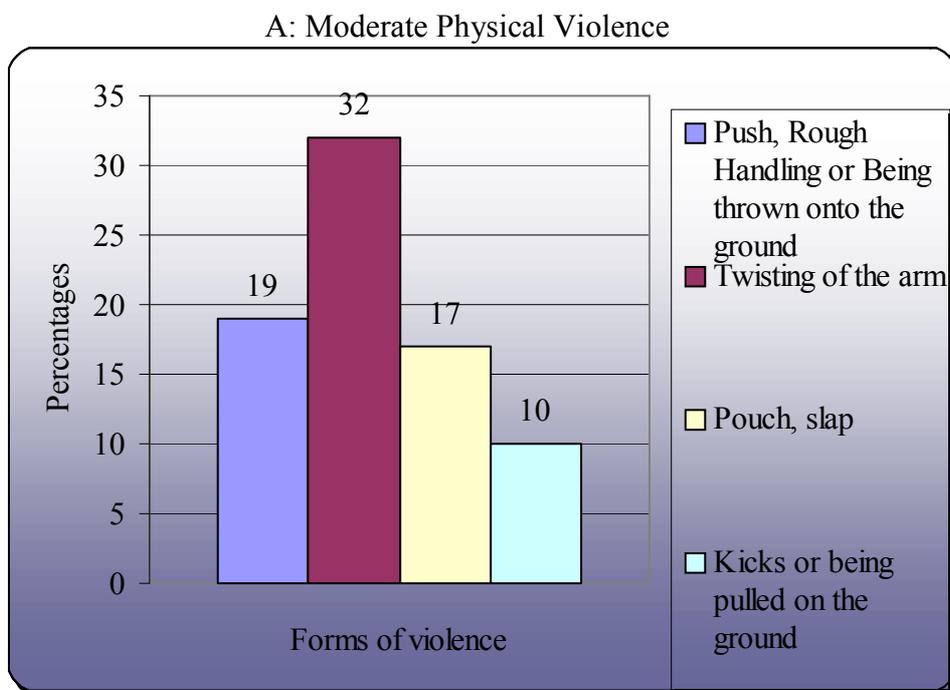
**Table 2: Percentage of Women who were Constraint to Undergo Sex 12 Months before the 2004 Cameroon DHS**

Type of Violence	%
Sexual Relation under physical constraints	13
Sexual Relation under other forms of constraints	3

## Physical Assault

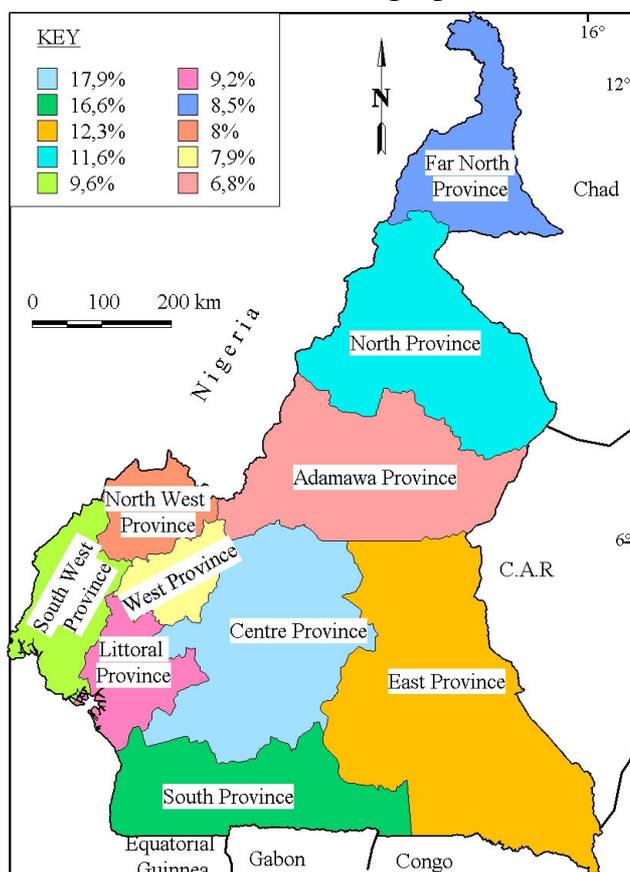
Apart from sexual aggression, other forms of physical assaults on the women and the girl children involve inflicting pain and injury on the women using the hands, the head, the cane, arms, etc. Although such aggressions usually takes place within the households, coming from especially the husband (domestic violence), young girls are usually physically assaulted by the boyfriends. In some parts of Cameroon especially the Centre and South regions, some people claim that beating the woman is a sign of deep affection and beating the woman is generally more accepted in these regions than other regions of Cameroon. Men usually beat their wives under the influence of alcohol. Some men claim that since they spend much money on the bride prize paid to marry their wives, they can do almost anything that they want with them including the practice of physical or psychological violence on them. Cases of such violence in Cameroon are many as shown on the diagram below:-

**Fig. 4: Proportion of Cameroonian Women who underwent Various Forms of Physical Violence 12 months preceding the 2004 Cameroon Demographic and Health Survey**



During pregnancy when the lives of the child and the mother are at risk, women in Cameroon still undergo violent treatment. Although the prevalence of violent acts exercised against women during pregnancy vary among the different regions and between rural and urban areas of Cameroon, they are widespread and take place in all the regions as shown by figures 4 A and B.

**Map 2: Percentage Distribution of Women who Underwent Violent Treatment during Pregnancy 12 Months Before the 2004 Demographic and Health Survey by Region**



**Table 3: Rural-Urban Distribution of Violent Actions on Women during Pregnancy 12 Months Before the 2004 Demographic and Health Survey**

Sector of Residence	Percent
Rural	11.4
Urban	10.4
Total	10.9

Town	Percent
Yaounde	10.8
Douala	15.3

Source: 2004 Cameroon Demographic and Health Survey

In spite of the fact that violence is generally known to be initiated and exercised by men against women, few women in Cameroon also initiate and exercise violence against men especially their husbands while others exercise it in self-defence as shown in table 4.

**Table 4: Percentage of Cameroonian Woman who had Exercised Violence Against their Husbands within the Last Twelve Months Preceding the 2004 Demographic and Health Survey**

<b>Exercise of Violence on women</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Women who did not undergo or exercise domestic violence	57
Women who underwent domestic violence without exercising it	37
Women who underwent and exercised domestic violence	4
Women who did not undergo but exercised domestic violence	2

### **Commercial Exploitation**

The commercial exploitation of children especially of girl children is very widespread in Cameroon. It involves exposing them prostitution, pornography and child trafficking particularly of the girl child for sexual exploitation and forced labour. Sometimes, the girl child is sent to work far away from the parents thereby becoming a victim of physical or sexual aggression. Girl children who have lost their parents due to HIV/AIDS infection or other causes often lack sufficient financial support and are often forced to prostitution in order to survive and may end up being infected by HIV/AIDS themselves. Statistics on the commercial exploitation of the girl child in Cameroon are difficult to come by but it is widespread especially among girls from the North West Region.

### **Forced and Early Marriages**

The legal age for women to enter into marriage in Cameroon is 15 but according to the results of the Third Demographic and Health Survey of Cameroon carried out in 2004, the median age for entry into marriage was 17.6 years. This national average conceals wide variations within Cameroon with a median age at first marriage for women in three Northern regions of 15.4 years and 20.6 years for Yaounde and Douala. Some girls especially in the northern parts of Cameroon enter into marital unions as early as 11 years. Girls who enter into early marital unions are usually either forced or tricked into it with little or no regard for their will. There is a close link between early marriage and early fertility which may lead to obstructed delivery and high rates of maternal deaths. There is also a close link between high rates of early marriages and high divorce rates. Divorce exposes the woman to prostitution with the many negative consequences that are connected to it such as high exposure to infection by sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS.

### **Psychological Violence against Women and Girl Children in Cameroon**

Apart from physical violence, women in Cameroon also undergo psychological violence. Psychological violence involves acts that affect the integrity of the woman. It also involves many forms of humiliations that women face both domestically and out of the household. In cases of childlessness within marriage, the woman is often accused of being the

cause, often without any scientific basis. This is very common in Cameroon and other African societies where childbirth is closely linked to stability of marriages and the psychological comfort of the woman.

**Table 5: Percentage of Cameroonian Women who had Undergo Psychological Violence 12 before the 2004 Cameroon DHS**

<b>Type of Psychological Violence Exercised Against Women</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Women whose husbands places no confidence on them in financial matters	23.2
Women whose husbands want to know at all moment where they are	51.3
Women whose husbands often try to prevent them from seeing their families	14.1
Women whose husbands do not allow them to make friends with other women	25.6
Women whose husbands often accuse them of infidelity	24.1
Women whose husbands are jealous when they talk to other men	67.2

#### **Other Forms of Violent Acts against the Women in Cameroon**

Other forms of physical and psychological violence practised in Cameroon include humiliating widowhood rites which oblige women in some societies to stay without having a bath for the three days or one week following the husband's death, denial of the right to inheritance, sexual harassments, etc.

#### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Violence against the woman and the girl which is manifested in many forms is still widespread in Cameroon despite many efforts to end it. There is need for the education of those who perpetuate this violence especially men on the negative consequences of such acts on the woman, the girl child and society as a whole. The laws and the regulations established to fight violence against women in Cameroon have largely remained on paper. There is real and urgent need to put them into practice. Many NGOs that are involved in this fight are unfortunately operating in the urban areas while there is need to focus their attention on the rural areas where violence against the woman and the girl is more prevalent. The situation of violence against the woman and the girl child in Cameroon is so preoccupying that both the government, NGOs, religious bodies and the traditional authorities need to double their efforts in order to achieve any significant results. There is need to promote the collection of good quality data, carry out research and promote the application of policies aimed at fighting the various forms of violence against the women and the girl children in Cameroon.

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