



## **MMS Bulletin #159**

*The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on mental health worldwide*

### **Results of a study of 40 cases of domestic and gender related violence in Cameroon**

## **Stories of war: healing the wounds of gender-based violence in times of crisis**

By Togho Lumumba Mukong

*More than one in three women suffer some form of Gender-based Violence (GBV) in their life time. Though it is less prevalent in certain parts of the world than others, it is a global phenomenon. GBV has been given a female face as most victims are women and young girls; though men also suffer from GBV. In times of war, the rate of GBV increases and the victims suffer from complex trauma. The loss of loved ones, displacement and loss of property is compounded by violence especially domestic violence. We share four stories to drive home the issues.*



Trauma centre. Photo: © Mission 21

This paper summaries a study of 40 cases of domestic and gender related violence and what

we do within programmes of Mission 21 Cameroon.

Violent conflicts are fertile grounds for individual and collective violence. Conflicts change the dynamics of societies and in most cases increase the vulnerability of the most vulnerable. According to the data provided by GBV sub cluster partners in Cameroon, a total of 603 GBV cases were reported to GBV specialized services providers in 2020. (OCHA 2021: CAMEROON Situation Report Last updated: 4 Aug 2021)

## ***Mission 21 trauma healing and resilience centres***

Mission 21 runs three centres which provide psychological counselling and support to traumatised displaced persons and other vulnerable people in society. At the start of the counselling programme, we expected people to be healed from the violence experienced as a result of war and the pains of moving forcefully from their ancestral homes. Little did we know, many especially, women and young girls are suffering from violence where they found shelter and supposed safety.

In our centres we offer psychosocial counselling and other support – health, education, food and non-food support as well as business start-up capital.

## ***Study results***

The Bamenda Centre went operational in 2020 and as part of our reporting, we selected and studied 40 files of clients who visited it in that period. The aim of the study was to inform us to take better decisions for our future programmes.

### *Age*

The age range of the victims of violence registered in our centres range from 6 to 62 years. Children below 15 make up 7.5 percent of the population under study. 10 percent are youths between 16 to 24. People above 55 constitute 2.5 percent of those studied.

### *Sex*

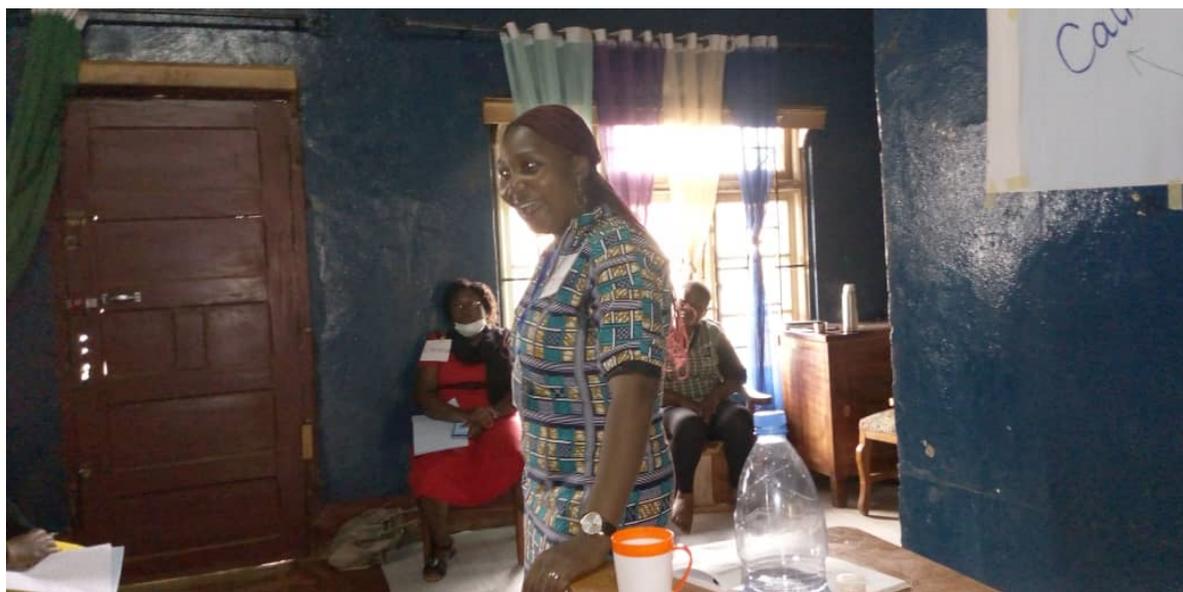
The majority of our patients are women (83.9 %) compared to men which make up a tiny fraction (16.13 percent of those who come into the centre for counselling).

### *Marital status*

The marital status of victims is roughly equal, with 54.84 percent considered as married (this includes persons in long term concubinage) and 45.16 percent say they are single.

### *Types of violence*

In our centre we experienced three types of violence - physical, psychological and sexual. Most victims suffer multiple forms of violence. 31 victims reported psychological violence, 17 physical violence and 8 experienced sexual abuse.



Trauma centre. Photo: © Mission 21

## Perpetrators of violence

We have classified six categories of perpetrators of violence as seen in the table:

Perpetrator	Number of cases	Percentage
Husband	15	37.50
Wife	6	15.00
Family	6	15.00
Society (dysfunktional solcial structure that lead to insecurity)	5	12.50
Self-inflicted	5	12.50
Stranger	2	5.00
	<b>40</b>	<b>100</b>

## Consequences

- *Disconnected families:* Disconnection was reported between the perpetrator of violence and the rest of the family. In most cases, husbands are the main culprits, the children side with their mother (abused). Children know best what happens at home, and will not, like the rest of society put the blame at the feet of the victim.

- *Health:* 5 clients of the 40 reported health complications –acute gastric pains, hypertension, excruciating pains all over the body, nightmares and insomnia.
- *Emotional:* All victims of violence, especially women, live in fear of the perpetrator. For them, life is not worth living, they are absent minded, have suicidal thoughts and prefer a life of solitude; their self-esteem is gone.

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### Remaining in abusive environment

- *Religious and Cultural Factors:* Due to strongly held religious believes, people continue to live in toxic environments. One pastor, abandoned by the wife who has constant nightmares and insomnia cannot sue for divorce because it is against his religious belief. Our patriarchal structure continue to put women into tight corners, who cannot run away from abusive marriages. We recorded cases of women who were forced into marriage by their families (especially fathers); though suffering in the marriage they can't opt out.
- *Economic Dependence:* Married women in Cameroon generally depend on their husbands for economic sustenance. At least one woman in our study continue to live with a husband who is an alcoholic and physically abuses her because she has no source of independent income.
- *Fear of the Perpetrator:* At least 2 women in our study fear to leave because the husbands are described as wicked and would come after them if they leave home and one has abandoned therapy because of fear.

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### **Four case stories**

Anne

**Anne** is a mother of 2 daughters from 2 different men. She was emotionally and psychological traumatised from the multiple rape of her 2 daughters by the same person. Ngwe and Lum are 6 and 8, sisters of the same mother and different fathers, they have both been raped by the half-brother of Ngwe within the family house. Anne does not live with either of the fathers, she lives with her daughters who visit and spend time with their respective fathers. Ngwe's half-brother lives with the father, an influential person in society with economic, administrative and political connections. Anne knew about the rape instances of Lum but could do nothing because of the power clout of Lum's father. The children were also traumatised and Anne could not help. Her powerlessness, betrayal by her partner's son and lack of support from her partner made her emotionally disturbed. She could not really concentrate on doing anything positive for herself.

She walked into our centre a confused, disoriented and devastated person, knowing only one of her daughters – Lum has been raped. To get her out of her own situation, we had to work first with the children. During the counselling process, it became known that Ngwe had been raped as well by the half-brother. Anne's traumatic situation compounded.

Using Christian based counselling procedures, the girls accepted the situation and forgave the victim. Their forgiving process also helped Anne to be free from the anger and unforgiveness towards the partner and the perpetrator of the sexual abuse. Anne was given start-up capital to start a business, today she can take care of herself and daughters in a small way. A legal redress procedure will commence soon within the centre's access to justice scheme. Anne said aside from legal procedures she is happy that there are people who can listen, believe their stories and are willing to do something about it for the helpless. For the rape victims, all they wanted is to see the perpetrator beaten (a clear form of punishment), though this has not happened, there is comfort in the fact that someone listened to them.





*Taking trauma to the cross. Photo: © Mission 21 Trauma Healing and Resilience Centre Bamenda*

Jane (39)

**Jane** is a mother of 3, who has a 22-year-old son and has been in an abusive relationship for 20 odd years. She got into a toxic marriage at the age of 16, marriage at 16 is unlawful in Cameroon. Like most stories of intimate partner abuse the relationship normally starts well and gradually turns sour and becomes toxic. It took

her a long time to realise the predicament she is in and now she is hypertensive and bitter. She has no good word for her husband, says he is wicked and manipulative and is now separated from him.

Prior to the separation, she suffered multiple abuses but the physical abuse was more often and violent. The husband as bread winner denied her access to money, abused her verbally, made her feel useless and of no use to society. She stayed under this abusive roof because of her children, economic disempowerment and a patriarchal family background.

At our centre, she has gone through a six-week period of assessing the situation – role of actors in the traumatic experiences, including her own role, reasons and the process of moving forward.

Though not completely healed and still afraid of her ex-partner, she is willing to seek legal redress and take control of her affairs again. Next, she will be discussing with the lawyer within our access to justice component of the centre.

Clariss (49)

**Clariss** suffers from multiple traumas. She is a mother of 5 married to a husband who doesn't treat her well. She is psychologically abused and tormented. She lives with the scars of an unplanned pregnancy at her youth which forced her into her present marriage. Her husband does not only neglect her but neglects responsibilities towards the children.

She has been working with trauma counsellors for 10 months. Her recovery plan was based on tilting her thought process from herself neglect and defeat towards a positive self-image. She went through an hour of counselling every week and has gradually develop a positive view of the future. During sessions, she no longer wears a gloomy outlook but puts on a smile. Her morale and outlook have been boosted by her daughter's employment.

She has come to terms with the treatment of forced marriage by her family, she is planning, with help from our centre to write a letter to her late father. In the letter, she wants to express her feelings of frustration and explain to him all she would have love to tell him if he were alive. She wants her father to know that she trusted about his decision and it ruined her life. She has forgiven him and is on her recovery journey. She will be a better parent to her children.

James (about 54)

**James** is married to one woman and has two children. He is a forester but presently doesn't do anything because he lost his sight as a result of physical assault due to the ongoing crisis. When all these happened his wife and children cared less about his condition and abandoned him. He managed to displace himself to Bamenda where he now resides with his younger brother.

He is undergoing psychological and emotional violence as a result of him being abandoned by his wife and children for two years now and also lack of resources to follow up treatment for his eyes. A counsellor from one of our partner organizations (Bamenda Coordinating Centre for Studies in Disability and Rehabilitation (BCCSDR) visited James as a referral case. The counsellor had a psychological first aid session with him. During the session he talked of feeling depressed from loneliness and neglect from his close family.

Subsequent sessions have followed and James is more open and welcoming. He testifies to feeling better after every session as he has the opportunity to decongest the burden hidden deep down his soul. He is happy there is a place he can go to or from where someone can visit him and listen to him share his pain.

He is looking forward to putting his life together and starting up a business if he is able to have some capital. He also hopes that by the Grace of God his health can be restored.

We continue to stay by him until he can have his full life back.

## ***Our work will continue***

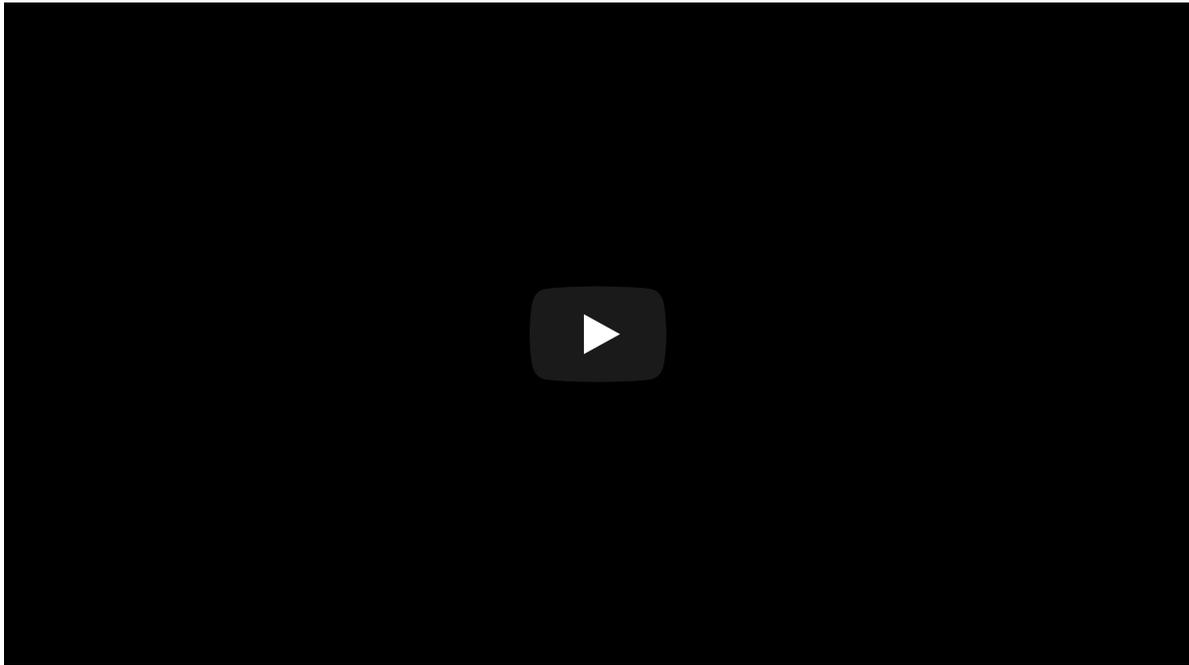
The present war situation in our primary regions of operation compounds and makes complex the gender-based violence situation. The dynamics of violence at home is not easy to handle as it is entangled in a web of cultural and traditional norms, religious beliefs and economic imbalance between men and women.

As an organization operating in such a difficult context, we will continue to provide counselling, economic support and other life-saving support to victims of gender-based violence, especially internally displaced people (IDPs). Build collaborative relations with other agencies and build capacities of our team and partners.

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