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

A lived experience and some reflections from the field

COVID-19 and the other hidden pandemics

By Marie Angele Abanga

While the world reacted in total panic and disarray in the first months of 2020 with the seeming news that the new Corona virus discovered in China in December 2019 was seemingly here to stay and disrupt what was otherwise considered 'normal'; some of us (victims of Domestic Violence, Gender-Based Violence and mental health conditions), were already dealing with hidden pandemics and at wits end. To me, the Covid-19 pandemic isn't the worst pandemic for my category, it just brought to intense light what we go through and now might as well perish or take matters into our own hands.



Photo by Setyaki Irham on Unsplash

The colliding pandemics

I was a panellist on a show last year aptly dubbed when pandemics collide (H4AB, 2020), and the other pandemic that was being referred to was the domestic violence pandemic that has been going on for years and for which no vaccine has been found. I consider this other pandemic to be a hidden one, you know the one none really seem to want to see or address unless a life is lost you know.

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WHEN PANDEMICS COLLIDE

COVID-19 & Domestic Violence

August. 22. 2020
2pm EST
19h UK
19h Cameroon

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AfriqTodayTV on
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Photo: © Marie Abanga

I drew from my experience as a domestic violence survivor, and wondered how I would cope or would have been able to escape had it been now. I was married for 6 years and survived multiple forms of abuse including being dragged around by my hair and kicked in the side until my young sons had to come crying and hold their dad's leg to stop. This incident in particular, coupled with the loss of my daughter and the emotional abuse I received thereafter, made me plan my escape for a year and five months. I stayed in that house, but lost of joy to leave until the day in May 2011 when I left the house and country altogether. I couldn't take my 3 sons with me and you can imagine my devastation and it further hit my mental health. I had gotten so traumatized that I picked up a knife to kill myself in 2009 (Therapist MAG, 2020). When the covid-19 pandemic hit and the restrictive measures and lockdown were ordered, I had a disturbing traumatic response (Therapist MAG, 2020) and was only able to get grounded again because of all the tools and coping mechanisms I now know of.

Hopeless situations?

What about the many women who are trapped in domestic violence situations today and don't know where to go given we are all on the high alert, dead worried about our lives with the threat of new variants and dreary statistics on the news? Where can they even go to with borders closed, shelters full and well abusive partner now at home with you round the clock? How much support do victims of domestic violence have or can expect to have to begin with? In my country Cameroon, victims are still more often than not blamed for staying and not speaking up earlier than later, like what help is first of all available for them to even recognize what they are going through or be assured that if they leave they wouldn't be sent back or tracked down?

The following is an excerpt from the report **A Double Pandemic: Domestic Violence in the Age of COVID-19** (Bettinger-Lopez, C. et al., 2020):

As more countries report infection and lockdown, more domestic violence helplines and shelters across the world are reporting rising calls for help. In Argentina, Canada, France, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States, government authorities, women's rights activists and civil society partners have flagged increasing reports of domestic violence during the crisis, and heightened demand for emergency shelter. Helplines in Singapore and Cyprus have registered an increase in calls by more than 30 per cent. In Australia, 40 per cent of frontline workers in a New South Wales survey reported increased requests for help with violence that was escalating in intensity.

Confinement is fostering the tension and strain created by security, health, and money worries. And it is increasing isolation for women with violent partners, separating them from the people and resources that can best help them. It's a perfect storm for controlling, violent behavior behind closed doors. And in parallel, as health systems are stretching to breaking point, domestic violence shelters are also reaching capacity, a service deficit made worse when centers are repurposed for additional COVID-response.

Since the covid-19 pandemic started, I have worked with 33 women who reached out to me both virtually and in person for psychosocial support with the domestic violence they were going through. I do the best I can but feel defeated sometimes. I imagine all the violence taking a toll on their mental health and the adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) their children are exposed to and how these ACEs will in turn affect their own mental health tomorrow. I sadly can't say what can be done because these two pandemics seem to be hidden exactly because the powers won't find a 'vaccine' to solve the the underlying reasons for these two pandemics.

THE WOMAN EXPERIENCE PRESENTS
Mental Health in the Cameroonian community

LIVE SESSIONS

Page: The Goretti Experience 



Host: Goretti

Guest: Ms Marie A Abanga

**Psychotherapist and lawyer,
founder of Hope For The Abused
and Battered (H4AB)**

**WEDNESDAY JULY 8TH AT 8PM
(UK & CAMEROON)**

Photo: © Marie Abanga

The **UN Women** had this to say about the situation of domestic and gender based violence in my country (UN Women, 2020):

In Cameroon, It is estimated that a total of 2,2063,753 people are in need of gender based violence assistance in all regions of the country: 465,271 people in the Far North region, 375,087 people affected by the Central African Republic refugee crisis and 915,425 people affected by the crisis in the North West and South West fall under the "physical and mental wellbeing" consequence. Stress, alcohol consumption, and financial difficulties are all considered triggers for violence in the home, and the quarantine measures likely to be imposed will increase all three. Economic hardship won't allow women to fulfill their responsibilities for procuring and cooking food for

the family, causing household tensions and increasing risks of violence. Mobility restrictions (social distance, self-isolation, extreme lockdown, or quarantine) will also increase survivors' vulnerability to abuse and need for protection services.

We don't have any choice anymore it seems though, the covid-19 pandemic is on a 'positive' note 'forcing' us to stop and listen to one another. To share our hidden scars and say how the pandemic is actually affecting us much more than the threat of the virus getting into our nose or mouth is.

What am I doing in a nutshell?

I have thus decided to keep stepping up and raising awareness all I can. I use my lived experiences both as a domestic violence survivor and a person living with a mental health condition (PTSD) diagnosed in 2014.

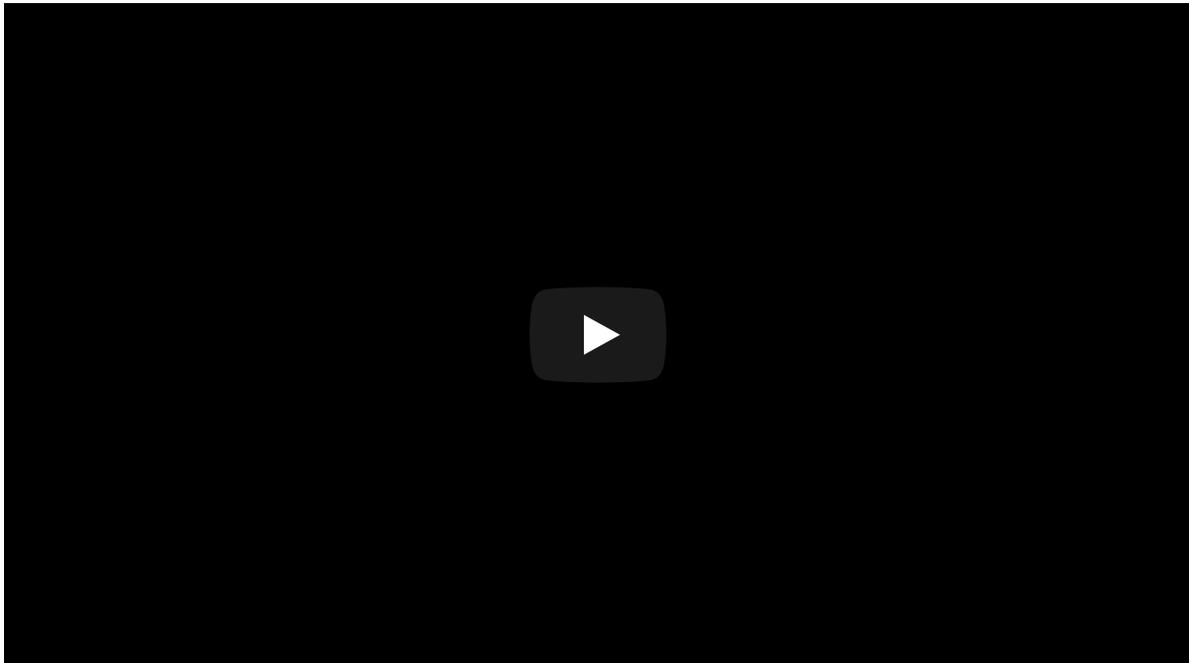
Mental Health Matters Advocacy Work in a sketch



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