

Qualitative Study of Child Maltreatment in Cameroon

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Abstract: Child maltreatment sometimes referred to as child abuse and neglect, is a global problem with serious negative life-long consequences. Unfortunately very few studies have been carried on this issue in Cameroon. This study seeks to throw some light on this worrisome social ill focus group discussion. During these discussions children below 18 who have been or currently undergoing maltreatment were guided to talk about the definitions, types, causes, perpetrators and consequences of this worrisome but often hidden social ill. Various forms of malpractices on children such as sexual abuse, neglect, physical and emotional harm were mentioned as some of the ills perpetrated against them by step mothers, uncles, non-relatives and sometimes their parents. Even though the most frequent forms of these abuses varied from one region to another, some of them such as neglect, sexual abuse and physical harm were reported in almost all the regions. Early and forced marriage was declared by some discussants in the northern regions especially among the Moslem community. The reported causes of these ill-treatments are jealousy from childless step mothers, ignorance, false accusation of witchcraft and stealing, polygamy, poverty, consumption of alcohol and substance abuse. The consequences negatively affect all domains of a child's life and have resulted to delinquency, retarded development, HIV/AIDS infection, etc. The gravity of the issues discussed calls for further enquiries as well as solutions.

Keywords: child, maltreatment, abuse, neglect

I. INTRODUCTION

Child maltreatment sometimes referred to as child abuse and neglect, is a global problem with serious life-long consequences. It is the abuse and neglect that occurs to children under 18 years of age. It includes all types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and commercial or other exploitations, which result in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power. Exposure to intimate partner violence is also sometimes included as a form of child maltreatment (Wright, S.E., 2015).

Child maltreatment is complex and difficult to study. Statistics on child maltreatment in Cameroon are rare as in many other countries. Many cases of child abuse are not reported to the police or social welfare services. They have equally been very few studies that have been carried on it. Child maltreatment though real in Cameroon is often relegated to the background in favour of other preoccupations such as child malnutrition (Mbassa, M.D, 2005)

Nonetheless, international studies reveal that a quarter of all adults report having been physically abused as children and 1 in 5 women and 1 in 13 men report having been sexually

abused as a child. Additionally, many children are subject to emotional abuse (sometimes referred to as psychological abuse) and to neglect.

Every year, there are an estimated 41 000 homicide deaths in children under 15. This number underestimates the true extent of the problem, as a significant proportion of deaths due to child maltreatment are incorrectly attributed to falls, burns, drowning and other causes (Alicia, R.P., 2020). In armed conflict and refugee settings, girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence, exploitation and abuse by combatants, security forces, members of their communities, aid workers and others (Sebre S et al, 2003).

Child maltreatment causes suffering to children and families and can have long-term consequences. Maltreatment causes stress that is associated with disruption in early brain development. Extreme stress can impair the development of the nervous and immune systems. Consequently, as adults, maltreated children are at increased risk of behavioural, physical and mental health problems such as: perpetrating or being a victim of violence, smoking, depression, poor academic performance, high-risk sexual behaviour resulting in unintended pregnancies and exposure to STDs infections,

There is an economic impact which includes costs of hospitalization, mental health treatment, child welfare, and longer-term health costs (Ngoura, C, 1993).

Child abuse is indeed a social ill in Cameroon and in many other countries but it is difficult to uncover as it often takes place in homes and is hardly reported. The Demographic and Health Survey that collects information on gender-based violence hardly focuses on children and the information collected is essentially statistical and does not enable an in-depth understanding of the universal ill. It is with this understanding that the Central Bureau for the Census and Population Studies of Cameroon organized a series of focus group discussions in each of the country's ten regions in order to have a clearer understanding of this social ill in terms of causes, perpetrators, types and personal experiences of the victims.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted by the Central Bureau for Censuses and Population Studies, BUCREP. As a structure officially authorized to gather socio-demographic information in Cameroon, BUCREP is exempted from seeking ethical clearance before carrying out its operations. However, before this study was carried out, its procedures were examined and approved by BUCREP's Scientific Committee. Before

opening the discussions, discussants signed a consent form. For very young discussants, the consent form was signed on their behalf by the structures that host them.

II. BRIEF REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Child abuse (maltreatment) is an international phenomenon. Poverty and substance abuse are common social problems and no matter the location, show similar trends in correlation to child abuse. Although these factors can likely contribute to child maltreatment, differences in cultural perspectives play a significant role in the treatment of children. In certain nations, the battle for equality within the sexes plays a large part in child upbringing. Some women feel a considerable amount of pressure on carrying out their motherly duties, obtaining an authoritarian parenting style, acting, dominating and being emotionally distant from her children while overly involved in her own career, (Sebre, S et al, 2003).

Cultural differences as they affect child abuse can be studied from many perspectives. Parental behaviour is genuinely different in different cultures. Each culture has their "own range of acceptability" and what one may view as offensive, others may see as tolerable. Behaviours that seen normal to some may be viewed as abusive to others, all depending on the societal norms, (Lau, A. Set al, 2006). African parenting perspectives specifically hold different ideals from Western Culture. Many African societies describe their traditions as including physical and emotional closeness that ensures lifelong bonds between parents and children as well as establishing parental authority and child discipline through harsh discipline. Differences in cultural beliefs demonstrate the importance of examining all cross cultural perspectives when studying the concept of child abuse.

In 2006, between 25000 and 50000 children in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, had been accused of witchcraft and abandoned, (Byrne, C., 2011). In Malawi, it is common practice to accuse children of witchcraft and many children have been abandoned, abused and even killed as a result, (Dowden, R., 2006). In Akwalbom and Cross River States in Nigeria, about 15000 children were branded as witches (<http://www.cnn.com/2009/world> Africa.

The website www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pub/PreventingCM.html treats many aspects of child maltreatment by focusing on the risk factors and consequences. According to the website, abused children often suffer physical injuries including cuts, bruises, burns, and broken bones. In addition, maltreatment causes stress that can disrupt early brain development. Extreme stress can harm the development of the nervous and immune systems. As a result, children who are abused or neglected are at higher risk for health problems as adults. These problems include alcoholism, depression, drug abuse, eating disorders, obesity, high-risk sexual behaviours, smoking, suicide, and certain chronic diseases. It emphasizes the fact that child maltreatment is a public health problem.

In a study to determine the incidence and socio-demographic features of child sexual abuse in an African setting, the files of 5082 children seen between August 1, 1992 and July 31, 1997 at the Centre for Mother and Child Protection in Yaoundé, Cameroon, were retrospectively reviewed. Sexual abuse was recognized in a cohort of 104 children of both sexes. The incidence of sexual abuse in the studied population was 2.05%. The victims were more often girls than boys: 95.2% vs 4.8%. Assaults usually occurred during pre-puberty (41.4%) and puberty (20.2%). However a non-negligible number of cases, all involving girls, occurred before the age of 10 years (29.8%). Assaults by women occurred but were uncommon (7.8%). Rape was the most frequent form of abuse (97.1%). About 25% of cases occurred within the family. These findings confirm the existence and incidence of child sexual abuse in an African setting and raise the taboo on the absolute phallographic power of fathers and uncles over young girls and women in general. This study also provides new evidence of the vulnerability of women in Africa as a result of their traditional status in society,

(https://www.researchgate.net/publication/13203198_Sexual_abuse_in_children_in_Cameroon [accessed Sep 26, 2019].

Theoretical Considerations

This study uses two general theories on child maltreatment: the socio-cultural and the psychodynamic theories and theories that examine child maltreatment by non-natal caregivers.

General Theories: Socio-Cultural and Psychodynamic Theories

According to these theories, children under 4 years of age are at greatest risk of severe injury and death from abuse. Abuse and neglect can occur in families where there is a great deal of stress. The stress can result from a family history of violence, drug or alcohol abuse, poverty, and chronic health problems. Families that do not have nearby friends, relatives, and other social support are also at risk. Poverty, on-going community violence, and weak connections between neighbours are related to a higher risk of child abuse and neglect. Abused children are usually impaired in intellectual, social and psychological functioning. Most cases of child abuse are committed by parents. Most abusing parents are around 25 years old reflecting the fact that majority of abused victims are infants and younger children. Mothers are most frequent abusers. Abusing parents are characterized by a history of anti-social behaviour and psychological problems. A general atmosphere of instability and disruption surrounds the child abusing family indicated by frequent discord among married parents, as well as separations and divorce. On all measures of socio-economic status, child abusing families have low achievement and face stresses of poverty and associated condition. Abusing families are distinguished by the transience and inability to maintain social contacts with community or affiliations with social organizations. Neither the socio-economic nor the psychodynamic theory is

adequate. It is necessary to come out with an alternative theoretical framework which incorporates environmental factors and relates significant factors about child abuse victims and perpetrators and produce the most comprehensive explanation.

Theories on Child Maltreatment by Non-Natal Caregivers

Special emphasis is placed on theories of child maltreatment by non-natal caregivers in this study because in the course of focus group discussions, many instances of maltreatment coming from this category of persons were reported. In order to explain the origins of violence against children at the hands of non-natal caregivers, social, evolutionary, and biological theories have been proposed. Many of those theories explain only the occurrence of either child physical or sexual abuse, stressing the importance of considering different forms of maltreatment as separate phenomena with distinct sets of risk factors (Giles-Sims & Finkelhor, 1984).

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According to the social-evolutionary theory, sometimes also referred to as sociobiological theory, stepchildren are overrepresented as victims of neglect as well as physical and sexual violence due to stepparents' lack of concern for their non-genetic offspring's wellbeing (Daly & Wilson, 1985, 1994). This theory predicts that both stepmothers and stepfathers will neglect, desert, or refuse investing in non-genetic charges. However, this theory offers no explanation as to why parents also neglect, physically abuse, and sometimes kill their genetically related offspring, except for The SAGE Handbook of Domestic Violence 5 situations where resources are scarce and the survival of one, usually the stronger child, is favored over the survival of the genetically inferior child.

Theoretical perspectives on violence against children by stepparents In order to explain the origins of violence against children at the hands of non-natal caregivers, social, evolutionary, and biological theories have been proposed. Many of those theories explain only the occurrence of either child physical or sexual abuse, stressing the importance of considering different forms of maltreatment as separate phenomena with distinct sets of risk factors (Giles-Sims & Finkelhor, 1984).

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Another theoretical framework for studying violence against children in stepfamilies is stress theory. Giles-Sims and Finkelhor (1984) argue that stepfamilies experience higher levels of conflict and stress than intact families. Stressors associated with divorce and stepfamily formation include moving, economic strain, and loss of parental support (Amato, 2000). Inability to cope with such life stressors may lead directly to family violence, including child abuse, or indirectly through, for example, substance abuse. Stress theory, unlike the above-presented frameworks, helps to explain the association between child abuse and low family income, large household size, and family disruption (Adler-Baeder, 2006; Giles-Sims & Finkelhor, 1984). However, this perspective would indicate that stepfamily structure is not a risk factor for child abuse per se. Rather, stepfamilies create an environment more conducive to child abuse due to increased occurrence of stressors associated with family violence, including alcohol abuse, child's behavioral problems, adverse contextual backgrounds, and weaker social networks.

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Labeling theory Rooted in the tradition of symbolic interactionism, Gelles and Harrop (1991) proposed that the observed increased incidence of child physical abuse in stepfamilies can be accounted for by labeling theory. Specifically, the authors argued that because social workers expect more children living in stepfamilies to be maltreated, they are more likely to formally report cases of alleged physical abuse involving stepchildren. Therefore, research based on formal reports of child abuse may be inherently flawed. Although formal reports can offer some unique insights into how child abuse by stepparents can be manifested, they should not be used to assess the prevalence of child maltreatment across family structures.

Research Questions

How do children view child abuse, what are their experiences with abuse, what are the various forms of abuse that they have encountered or have witnessed, who abuses them and what are the consequences?

Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to allow child victims of maltreatment and witnesses of child abuse to:

- a. define Child Maltreatment or abuse

- b. identify types of child maltreatments undergone or witnessed
- c. identify perpetrators of child maltreatment
- d. find out causes of child maltreatment
- e. examine attitudes adopted towards perpetrators
- f. Vi-allow discussants reveal its consequences as they have or are facing.

Selection of Discussants

Discussants for this Focus Groups came from all of Cameroon's ten regions. Each region provided four discussants aged 12-18. These discussants were identified by the Regional Delegations for Social Affairs. Discussants were victims of maltreatment. Efforts were made to include at least one member of each sex in each of the focus group discussions. The discussants were to be representative of the major ethnic components of the regions.

III. CONDUCT OF THE DISCUSSIONS

The focus group discussions took place behind closed doors. The children were guaranteed confidentiality of the information that they provided. Those who conducted the interviews were people not known by the discussants. Each interview team was made up of three interviewers. While one person was conducting and directing the discussions, others were taking down notes and registering the discussions using a Dictaphone. The main aspects of discussion centred on the definition, causes, perpetrators and consequences of child abuse. At the end of each focus group discussion, one of the discussants was allowed the opportunity to recount his or her personal encounter with abuse either in the presence or in the absence of others.

Characteristics of Discussants

Discussants were children 12-18. In total, they were 40 in number. In each region, there was a focus group discussion, making a total of 10 for the whole country. 22 discussants (55%) were girls and 45% were boys. 80% of the discussants had both parents alive and 20% were orphaned by one or both parents. 70% of the children were currently attending schools, while others had either dropped from school or had never been to school. Their school attainment levels were slightly lower than for the general population. 60% of the discussants were currently living with either one or all the parents. 3 of them representing 7.5% had once been married and they came mostly from the Northern regions.

Definition of key Concept-Child Maltreatment

- i) *Child Maltreatment*: It is a behaviour towards a child that is outside the norms of conduct and entails substantial risks of causing physical or emotional harm (Alicia, R.P., 2020)
- ii) *Physical Child Abuse*: This involves a caregiver inflicting physical or engaging in actions that create a high risk of harm. Assault by someone who is not a caregiver or in position of responsibility of the child is

not specifically child abuse. Specific forms include shaking, dropping, striking, burning. Physical abuse is the most common cause of head injury in infants (Alicia, 2020). In other words, it is physical harm or injury is inflicted on children and/or purposely failing to prevent them from physical injury.

- iii) *Sexual Child Abuse*: It involves adults, adolescents or children engaging in sexual activities that children do not understand, are not able to give informed consent and can occur on a contact or noncontact basis (Sneddon, 2003). It can also be defined as any form of sexual gratification between a child and adult or slightly older children. Forms of sexual abuse include intercourse, which is oral, anal, or vaginal penetration, molestation, which is genital contact without intercourse and forms that do not involve contact by the perpetrator, including exposure of the perpetrator's genitals, showing sexually explicit materials to a child, and forcing a child to participate in sex act with another child or to participate in the production of sexual material. Sexual abuse does not include sexual play, in which children close in age view or touch each other's genital area without force or coercion (Alicia, R.P;2020).
 - iv) *Emotional abuse* consists of behaviours such as belittling, terrorizing and isolating children from others, rejection, name calling, shaming, withholding love, and threatening, and inappropriate socialization.
 - v) *Child neglect* occurs when an adult fails to protect a child from any form any type of danger or persistent failure to care for him or her. It could involve insufficient attention and emotional availability to the child and lack of stimulation, food, clothing, shelter, hygiene, nutrition, supervision, medical care or education that could result in harm to the child (Sneddon, 2003).
- N.B The four different forms of maltreatment often coexist, and overlap considerably.
- vi) *Perpetrator of Child Maltreatment* is person responsible for child welfare who commits an act of maltreatment against the child. Thus parents and other relatives, people living in the child's home have occasional responsibility, teachers, bus drivers, counsellors, and so forth may be perpetrators. Unrelated people who commit violence against children who they have no connection to or responsibility for (e.g school shootings) are guilty of assault, murder, and so forth but are not committing child abuse (Alicia, R.P; 2020).
 - vii) *Child Marriage* refers to any formal or informal union involving a boy or a girl below 18 and adult or another

child. A large majority of child marriages involve girls (UNICEF, 2014).

III. RESULTS OF THE DISCUSSIONS

This section treats discussants' definitions of child maltreatment, the perpetrators, the causes, attitudes adopted towards perpetrators and its consequences.

Definitions of Child Maltreatment

The under-reporting and recording of child abuse and neglect makes accurate estimation difficult but what constitutes child abuse except for extreme violence against children is not clear to many including perpetrators and the victims (Cawson, P., et al., 2000). Before beginning this study, it was necessary to get victims' views of what constitute abuse.

The following are some of the definitions that were advanced "conflicts between parents that make life very uncomfortable for children", John, 13 year old boy in the North West Region. "wickedness from step mothers", Jeanne, 15 year old girl in the South Region living with the father and step mother, after the mother's death, "hurting the feelings of children", Mvondo, a 14 year old boy in the Centre region, "lack or refusal to understand children, Mariatou, 16, West Region of Cameroon". Another definition which was given by many discussants especially female discussants was "forcing children to do what they do not want especially to marry or to have sexual intercourse". This definition came mostly from female discussants.

Types of Child Maltreatments

During the discussions, the discussants mentioned all major forms of child maltreatments- physical abuse, sexual and emotional abuse and neglect. They did not group the various forms of maltreatment in the normal classes as done in this study. The classification is carried out by the author. As already discussed, the boundaries between various types of maltreatment are not rigid.

Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse which is sometimes called psychological abuse is a pattern of behaviour that damages a child's sense of self-esteem and negatively impacts his or her emotional development. It is the most common form of child abuse. It can occur in conjunction with physical abuse, sexual abuse and is one of the hardest forms of abuse to recognize. (Amy, M., 2021).

Accusations and Labelling as Witches and Wizards

Children are often accused of many wrongs. One form of such accusations is linked to witchcraft. Accusations of children for witchcraft are well documented in Africa. Children accused of witchcraft are often subject to psychological and physical violence, first by family members and circle of friends..... (Unite for Children, 2009).

During the focus group discussions, a fourteen year girl from the South West Region recounted how she was accused by the step mother of practicing witchcraft against her and her children. The girl said she was beaten and chased out of the home and forced to accept that she was responsible for all the sad events such as deaths, academic failures, and unemployment and so on happening in the family. "I accepted that I practiced witchcraft because I did not want my step mother to kill me. In fact I do not know what witchcraft is. I have left our home and now I am living under the protection of the Apostolic Church". In the same line, Justine, 16 living in the East Region, said, "Cases of child accusation of children of practicing witchcraft are common in the East Region. Once accused, the child is often beaten and banished from the community. Many of them become homeless".

In another form of accusation, a boy of 16 years in the South Region recounted how his step mother frequently accuses him of stealing money, food and some household items. "Once anything gets missing in the house, my step mother without investigation labels me as the thief and immediately makes my father to believe it. It took time for my father to realize that the actual thief was not me but my step brother. Before this discovery, I had suffered false accusations, beatings, and deprivation of food unjustly. While my father has apologized to me, my step mother has refused to offer any such apology" the boy said.

Neglect

Neglectful parenting is very strongly associated with poverty. It often occurs where there are large numbers of children being cared for by a young single mother with little social support. Substance abuse, mental health issues and domestic violence often add to already limited parenting capacity and serve to exacerbate the situation. It is a fast growing form of child abuse worldwide (Barnett, O., et al., 1997).

High Workload, Deprivation of Food and Insults

Children working as house servants in Cameroon are often over burdened with work, have less access to food and are often insulted (Ngoura, C, 1993). A girl, 16 from the North West Region of Cameroon working as a house help in Yaoundé, how she was maltreated in the following words, "I was brought to Yaoundé to work as a domestic servant from my village. Since I started this work, I do all sorts of jobs. I clean the house, I take care of the children whom I also accompany to school, and I cook for the household and equally provide care for my employer's mother who is very old and sick. I periodically work on my employer's farm which is about 5km from where we live. I start work at 5am when everyone in the house is still sleeping and keep on working still midnight. I work every day including Sundays as I live with my employer. I have not gone on leave since I started this work three years ago. I receive orders from my employer, his wife, my employer's children and other relatives in the household and even those who come for visits. I have been instructed not to eat when I have not done a

certain amount of work. I am insulted almost on a daily basis. I have been twice seriously beaten for breaking plates. The children as well as adults of the household where I work call me a poor girl, a fool or a good-for-nothing child” Situations like the one described by this girl may be witnessed by many other children especially those living with people who are not their biological parents.

In another instance, a 15 year old boy, in the East region narrated how he is often refused food by his step mother once he commits a fault. He said the food he eats was of lower quality and quantity compared to what other children eat. “Apart from sometimes refusing to give me food, my step mother often insults me”, the boy said.

Early and Forced Marriage

Forced marriage and early marriage is a form of culturally-justified violence against girl children as well as a violation of human rights that is endemic in many countries. Child marriage can be considered a form of forced marriage because children are often unable to give informed consent (Edna, A., et al, 2013). Child marriage is often the result of entrenched gender inequality, making girls disproportionately affected (UNICEF, 2014).

Child marriage is one of the most frequently mentioned types of child abuse in the Northern regions and some other parts of Cameroon. This is exemplified by this narration from a 17 year old girl from Akwaya, South West Region-“in my tribe, there is what is called “Money Woman” in which a girl is given out for marriage at birth. In my case, my parents started receiving gifts from a man thirty-five years older than me when I was born. The aim was to cause me to marry him when I grew up to about 14 years. When I was fourteen, I was asked to marry him; I refused and was exiled from home”

In another narration concerning early and forced marriages, “Safiatou, an 18 year old once divorcée said” when I was fourteen, my parents said I must marry early in order to enjoy the pride of marrying as a virgin. This I did but two years ago, I found that I had no love for the man who forcefully married me. Today, I am no more in the union, I am actually divorced”

Child Sexual Abuse

In a global study by the World Health Organization (WHO) (2014), it was reported that approximately 20% of women and 5-10% of men were sexually victimized as children. The consequences associated with child sexual abuse include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and substance disorders (Mullers & Dowling, 2008). Research findings also revealed that sexually abused children experience more problems than children who were maltreated in other ways (Lewis, McElroy, Harlaar, & Runyan, 2016). In addition, incestuous abuse by a relative results in more negative consequences than sexual abuse perpetrated by non-relatives (Stroebel et al., 2012). Step-children are argued to be at increased risk of sexual abuse

perpetrated by step-parents for several reasons, as suggested by theoretical frameworks presented earlier.

During the course of this study, a girl, 18 and a mother of a two year old baby who once worked as a house help in Ngaoundere in the Adamawa region recounted how her employer raped her regularly. This is what she said, “When my employer’s wife travels out of Ngaoundere, he came to my room late in the night and requested me to have sex with him. The first time, I refused and he forced me and later I found that continuous refusal will make living situation in the household worse. I had to give in until I had the opportunity to escape”. It can be assumed that similar abuses had occurred to other children but are not disclosed.

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is the second most reported form of child abuse accounting for 25% of all cases of child abuse. The parent or caregiver who abuses the child may not have the intention to hurt the child, but rather the child’s injury may have resulted from overly harsh discipline or physical punishment (Conrad, M.S; 2021)

Many cases of physical child abuse were reported in the case of this study. In one case, Mahamadou, 16, who hails from the Far North Region, narrated his experience of physical abuse by his stepmother in the following words, “when my father is absent from home, my step-mum beats me often for any little error I commit. This scar on my head came from the last beating I received from her”.

In another case, Mary, a girl of 17, in the North West Region showed us wounds on her back which were a result of the flogging she received from her father who met her conversing with a strange boy. As she said, “My father forbids us (girls) from conversing with men. If he sees any of his daughters talking with a man, he beats the daughter without mercy. His is a strict disciplinarian who is firmly against any pre-marital relationships with men irrespective of a girl’s age”.

Causes of Child Abuse

When asked to mention some of the common causes of child maltreatment, discussants mentioned: ignorance of the rights of children, polygamy, child disobedience, discrimination and maltreatment from step mothers, polygamy, and jealousy from childless step-mothers.

Ignorance of the Rights of Children

During the discussions some children expressed the view that perpetrators of child maltreatment are ignorant of their rights. This can be summarized by the words of a 16 year old boy in the Littoral Region, “Some of the uncles, parents, elder sisters and brothers who abuse us are not aware that we have the right to protection, love, respect, education and life. They think that they can do anything they want on us and go free. My uncle usually tells me that he knows what is good for me better than any other person and that he needs nobody’s interference in his quest to see me grow up according to his

rigid guidelines. He always insists on the fact that he will not spare the rod and spoil the child. With this principle, he beats almost every time we commit an offence. We are not allowed to play. He feels that we should spend all the time either reading or doing other assignments that he always gives.”

Polygamy

In a polygamous setting, the father is usually not able to accord equal attention to all the children. Talking on the contribution of polygamy to child abuse, a girl of 15 in the North Region of Cameroon used these words: “My father has four wives and focuses his attention on the youngest wife and her children. He has no time for other children. He doesn’t care about our education, health or feeding. He repeatedly emphasises that he will not continue to send me to school as I am already ripe enough for marriage. At the same time, he continues to send the children of his favourite wife to school”.

Discrimination and Maltreatment from Step Mothers

According to the sociobiological theory that is examined above; children living with non-natal parents are more likely to experience violence than others. During the different focus group discussions, many children cited undue favours from their step mothers towards their biological children in terms of care; provision of food, etc. This creates frustration among the non-natal children. As a boy, 14 in the Adamawa Region puts it, “since my mother died, I have not received the care I used to receive from her. Our step mother pays far greater attention on the needs of her own children than she pays towards our needs. When our father is at home, she gives the impression that we are treated on equal bases. When my father goes out of the home, he continues to treat us poorly. Since our father is always out for work, we are badly treated most of the time. If we tell our father that our step mother does not treat us kindly our situation may even get worse”. A girl aged 15, who lost the mother three months before the discussion in the North region, recounted that her step mother has no child and she does everything to cause her father who shows much love towards her not to do so.

Poverty of Parents especially of the Father

Poverty is a cause of many social problems including child maltreatment or abuse. During the focus group discussion in the Far North Region one discussant, a boy of 17, said this “when our father is poor, he becomes very aggressive towards us, his children and our mothers. He does everything to prevent us from coming to him to ask for money to buy anything. He even asks us to withdraw from school. He hardly has enough financial resources to meet the needs of his 16 children and three wives, all of whom depend on him for many basic needs”. Even though poverty is not a cause of child maltreatment, it is an important risk factor.

Excessive Consumption of Alcohol and Drugs by Parents and Caretakers

Strong links have been found between child maltreatment and alcohol and drug use, especially when they are harmful or hazardous. A number of studies have established that alcohol is a significant contributory factor to child maltreatment and it is associated with marked increases in the risk of hazardous or harmful drinking in later life (WHO, 2019).

Excessive consumption of alcohol was mentioned by many discussants as a cause of child abuse. In explaining how alcohol consumption causes their father to maltreat them, a girl aged 14 in the Littoral region, said that her father consumes alcohol and smokes “dangerous cigarette” regularly. She said after drinking and smoking, he returns home late and drunk, wakes up all members of the household and insults them for hours before going to sleep. She said these disturbances keep sleep away from them for hours and the fact that he spends almost all his resources on the consumption of alcohol and cigarettes places the burden of the upkeep of the household on their mother who is a petty trader dealing in food items.

Setting Difficult-to-attend Academic and Behavioural Standards on Children

Some parents want their children to be at the top in terms of academics and social behaviour. In this way, they sometimes set standards that may be difficult for the children to achieve. In this connection a 15 year form three boy in the North West Region recounted how his father sets difficult-to-attend goals and forces him and his brothers and sisters to attend them in these words-“My father is very strict. He always wants his children to be the best in school and to behave properly. We are not allowed to play or to watch the television. When we do not follow his roles or attend the goals set for us, he insults, beats and sometimes refuses to buy us dresses during Christmas”.

Conflicts between Parents

The impact of inter-parental conflicts, on the whole family system, has been well established. Being exposed to destructive conflicts is traumatic and damaging for both children and adults. Exposure to inter-parental conflicts may directly affect children’s well-being and psychological adjustments (Chang and Yeung, 2009, Cumminings and Davies, 2010).

At the start of this study, one discussant, a 13 year old boy, in the North West Region defined child maltreatment as “conflicts between parents that make life very uncomfortable for children”. This shows how children can be negatively affected by conflicts between parents. He said he cries every time his father insults or beats his mother. Some other children mentioned these conflicts as a source of discomfort and fear in their homes.

Child Disobedience

Child disobedience also known as childhood non-compliance can have a variety of causes. At times, it is due to

unreasonable parental expectations or it might be related to the child's temperament, or school problems, family stress or conflicts between parents (American Academy of Paediatrics', 2004

When children disobey their parents, they may be punished but sometimes the punishment is excessive. A boy of 15 in the North Region narrated how his father, a military man beats him regularly by kicking and slapping every time he fails to follow his instructions. He said after each beating episode, he usually lives with pains for a couple of days.

Perpetrators of Child Maltreatment

During the various focus group discussions, the following were mentioned as perpetrators of child maltreatment: step parents especially stepmothers, biological parents, uncles, elder brothers and sisters, etc. One discussant, a girl of 18 and a mother of one elaborated by saying that "the perpetrator of child abuse depends on the type of abuse". She said for female genital cutting which she was a victim; she could not only accuse her family but all members of her village especially those considered as custodians of their tradition. Some discussants talked of situations where children have been raped by close relatives who live in the same households. Non-natal caregivers were particularly cited as perpetrators of child abuse in this study. In another case a girl who had been raped several times by the person who employed as a domestic worker cited persons who employ children to work in their homes as perpetrators.

Attitudes towards Perpetrators

An important aspect of the focus group discussions for this study was the discussion of attitudes adopted towards perpetrators of child maltreatment. The various attitudes adopted by children towards their abusers include escape from the home and reporting the abusers to the parents when the abuser is not one or both parents. A boy of 12, in the East Region of Cameroon, said, "Child abusers are bad people who need to be avoided, reported to the police or the pastor".

Consequences of Child Abuse

Consequences of child abuse mentioned by the discussants were many and touched all domains. As one discussant, an 18 year old girl in the South West Region put it, "the results of the repeated episodes of rape that I went through when I was younger and working as a domestic servant are many and will never leave me, they include the fact that I have an unwanted baby, I am HIV positive and often sick and mocked at. Some people take me to be the cause of the rapes. I have so much hatred for the man who raped me and brought me this shame that I can kill him if I am given the chance". A boy, about 15 in the North West Region, said, "Before the church took custody of me, the ill treatment exercised against me by my step mother had pushed me to the streets, stealing, joining a group of smokers of Indian hemp and to leave school". A girl of 17 in the Far North Region, who was once married said, "My being forced into marriage at the age of 14 has caused

me much harm, I was forced to leave school, I am divorced without a job". One of the discussants from the East Region reported that she has witnessed situations where children accused of witchcraft were beaten, starved, banished and allowed to die. She said those who survived the ill treatment are forced to leave their community with physical and emotional scars.

Recount of Personal Encounter with Maltreatment

At the end of the focus group discussion, some of the discussants were encouraged to recount their personal experiences with maltreatment. One female discussant, a girl of 18 in the South West Region and mother of a girl child, aged 2 years said that when she was 12 years, her mother and father died of AIDS. Her aunt decided to take care of her but due to lack of means, she looked for a job for her to work as a babysitter. After working for a year, her employer, a man of about 50 decided to make love to her once his wife was at work. She initially refused but due to continuous pressure and use of force, she was forced to give up her refusal. At 16, she found that she was pregnant. She reported to the author who decided to chase her away. She went to the aunt who was not ready to welcome her back. She sought and received permission to live with a religious organization that takes care of abandoned children. She ended up by saying "My life is almost completely ruined". "Will this religious body continue to take care of me and my child for a long time?" "How will my future and that of my child be?" "Please help me; I am a lost orphan." "This evil man did not only leave me pregnant but equally infected me with HIV".

IV. CONCLUSION

Focus group discussions for this study have revealed that child maltreatment in various forms is very widespread in all the regions of Cameroon. Many memories of this maltreatment will stay with the abused children all their lives and hinder their full development and integration into the society. Child abuse can be reduced if appropriate measures are taken to curb it. One of the issues to be tackled in the fight against child abuse in Cameroon as revealed by this study is information and education on the rights of children such as the right to love, education, proper nutrition and shelter. Some traditional and religious beliefs that label children as witches need to strongly be fought against by the judiciary and religious bodies, traditional authorities and Non-Governmental Organizations. Laws which prohibit various forms of child abuse should be enforced. This is especially true for the law against girls marrying before the age of 15, a phenomenon which is common in the Sahel regions of Cameroon. The minimum age to enter marriage with the consent of the parents set by the law still seems to be quite low and needs to be raised. This study has equally revealed that the practice of polygamy, substance abuse, poverty, conflicts within couples, separations and divorce all contribute to child abuse in Cameroon and people need to be educated on these issues. A recurrent issue in this study is the maltreatment of children by non-natal caregivers in Cameroon. There is

need to carry out a study that focuses on this. There is need to intensify family planning so that parents can plan and have the number of children they can adequately take care of.

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