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Domestic violence: Focusing on women – a personal perspective from Cameroon (Bamenda)

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Introduction

This paper aims at contributing to the diverse ideologies on violence against women. It will specifically draw cases from Cameroon depending more on my¹ past and ongoing research on women in Bamenda, Cameroon. It is worth noting that in addition to data from my on-going research, the paper's contribution

also comes through a personal perspective, self-reflection or personal experiences yet not leaving out what existing research has to say about the topic at hand. Furthermore, all these perspectives will be summed up through a personal creative writing (Letter). Violence sometimes come with repercussions that might even be unbearable, and I would have thought that the first reaction from every victim of vio-

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lence, will be to leave the violent environment immediately. On the contrary, from personal observation, talking to victims of violence and reading about violence from different sources, I realized that, leaving the environment or admitting to being violated especially by one's spouse, is not always the case. Many victims I have come across turn to stay mute about the situation not even for their own sake, but mostly because of what the society will say if they have to leave. When society now comes to play, the first thing that comes to mind is culture, it therefore seems, the culture does not smile at unmarried or divorced individuals. Therefore, as English speaking Cameroonians will commonly say, "I sing for the culture", "let us support one another for the culture", "for the culture, we have to promote what is ours"² a man or a woman might also say, "for the culture, I have to be married and do everything it takes to stay married" Therefore, it might be safe to say that, violence, marriage and culture could be interdependent.

Djamba and Kimuna (2015:17) noted that according to the 2011 Cameroon Demographic and health survey, 59.1% of women in marital unions have been victims of physical marital violence. Going by this their statistics, one could say many of these women might have been going through the same situation as in the creative letter below wherein the victim finds it really difficult to speak out especially to family members in the face of violence.

Contrary to what some people think, violence is not limited to physical violence—as many people will minimize a woman's complain if it is not physical and very visible to ev-

eryone. Djamba and Kimuna also indicated in their study that five factors or forms of violence were involved across the different countries they studied; suspicion, emotional violence, sexual violence, physical violence and isolation. One could therefore say that in order for the issue on violence against women to be handled, it has to be looked from every angle, issues of culture need to be taken into consideration and well addressed and finally, even if men cannot understand the plight of women when it comes to violence, women should be able to stand in the gap for one another instead of taking part in covering up cases of these sorts. This could also be achieved by reminding women on the need of valuing themselves more and doing all they can to protect their interests before thinking of what the society might say. By this, we don't mean to have a society of selfish women who will do everything to dethrone men, thereby ending up being violent themselves. Rather, we are talking about building women who know they deserve to be valued as much as their male counterparts and are not in any way less human than the men in their lives or around them. Through my research, I have observed that family dependency is such a strong factor in the area of study. Family members are groomed to show loyalty by protecting one another, whether with immediate or extended family members. There is a saying in Cameroon that; "*na roof di cova all family problem*"³, which literally means that every household has a problem but outsiders do not need to know because the family members have to keep it a secret. This saying in my opinion, has gone a long way to promote

² Statements made by English speaking Cameroonians to show their support for one another and to pay allegiance to the culture

³ Cameroon Pidgin (CP)

violence against spouses especially women as they try had to hold on to the saying while enduring degrading treatments. There is a particular message most of the women I interviewed passed on though in different ways, which has to do with the reason (s) why they choose not to confine in family members. According to most of them, whenever you try to tell your family or friends (especially fellow women) that you are going through “hell” in your marital home, the first thing they mention is *“all marred get problem, na only roof di cova am. Ma sista jus tie ya heart”*⁴ (every marriage has its own problem, it is the roof that covers it up. My sister, just persevere). This now discourages them to speak up, since in most cases, they already anticipate the responses. Some of them even attested to the fact that they grew up seeing their mothers sad at certain points in their lives yet could not tell what was going on. It was after they had gotten married and tried complaining to their mothers about their husbands that they got the true story of what their mothers used to go through. That is or was the moment when, their mothers will tell them they went through worst in the hands of their fathers but had to endure for the sake of the family. These women can only remember how as teenagers, their mothers used to tell them, *“marred na tie heart, just try for be a good wife and always respect ya massa”*⁵ (marriage is perseverance, just try your best to be a good wife and always respect your husband). With this upbringing, they tend to have a strong loyalty for the family and think very high of the importance of maintaining or keeping the family secrets — not exposing whatever takes place within the family is therefore seen as respect for the family. In as much

as the support network of both the immediate and the extended family is very important and helpful, it can also be detrimental for women who approach family members about the violence they are experiencing. This is also partly because family and friends may have divided loyalties and may think that they are being put under pressure to take sides. Another reason for some women keeping violent situations to themselves, is the point that they have to depend on their husbands economically. This was so evident through the comments made by some women in a workshop I organized during one of my field trips to Cameroon. According to them (though they did not directly mention they were going through domestic violence), some of them have no choice but to stick to their husbands as they have no property of their own nor will they be able to take care of themselves and the children if they decide to walk away. This therefore goes without saying that, the lack of money could be one big determining factor for domestic violence. Apart from the above reasons, in some situations, talking about one’s husband’s abusive behavior can lead to a divorce and it is something many women want to avoid due to the fact that, they do not want to leave their children through divorce or separation (see Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1967). Coming back to the role of upbringing, it was noticed through the experiences some women shared that, they strongly hold on to what they grew up seeing or hearing or what could be seen as intergenerational dependencies. This implies that if she was brought up to think that violence on her person is not something to worry about or that she could always find a reason to stay in abusive relationships, then there is a high possi-

⁴ CP

⁵ CP

bility that she will not react any different in the face of her daughter being abused too. Moreover, some of them stay in there simply because they are still going through the trauma of living with divorced parents.

It is also worth noting that, some family members use religion and past experiences to convince and coax women experiencing violence to forgive and cover up their violators. According to MD Delaney, RN Mbuh and MW Delancey (2010: 393), violence against women in Cameroon is perpetuated both at the government and at the private level. At the private level or family level, women can be subjected to physical, psychological and verbal abuse especially from their husbands. They equally considered that, the fact that many societies are (still) engaged in the payment of bride price, allows the husband to consider the wife as a 'personal property'. To them, among the many forms of abuse, there are; spousal rapes, harmful cultural practices such as breast ironing and female genital mutilation, forced wife-inheritance, and widowhood rites that cause physical and psychological suffering to the women. MD Delaney et al. equally pointed out that, domestic violence in the form of physical abuse is the most common form of violence against women. The most difficult part about this according to them is that, the laws do not impose effective punishment on men who commit acts of domestic violence and spousal abuse is not a legal ground for divorce (MD Delaney et al. 2010:393). This forces some women to bear whatever they are going through against their own will. As mentioned by Djamba and Kimuna (2015:18), male domination is usually seen through the physical violence against their female partners or wives, which to me, it is just one of the many ways through which men show

their dominance. They further mentioned that at least one-third of women have been physically violated by their intimate male partners.

Lately, there have been a lot going on in terms of violence against women on social media (which cannot be minimized as a lot is being shared through social media in this dispensation). There were about three cases (just to name a few) of women being killed by their partners because of love or betrayal that made waves among the Cameroonian community on social media. What I found intriguing about the stories, is how much the deceased women were blamed for being at fault by many commentators. In my opinion, blaming women for always provoking violence against them even on social media where many people depend on for lessons on social matters, is just one of the many ways of forcing women to stay quiet when being abused. Moreover, accusing them of talking too much and telling them to keep their problems to themselves under the guise of "every home has a problem", could go a long way to cause more harm than good. It will be worth mentioning that some of the victims sometimes even resort to suicide because they find it difficult to comprehend how they cannot even depend on their own families nor the society in those moments when they feel hard-pressed. Some cases end up speaking up but no one ever believe them or they are simply ignored.

Therefore, putting all these findings together, violence against women could be summed up and seen from the angle of; upbringing, intergenerational dependences, trauma and economic reasons. It is in this regard that I thought it wise to bring all of the aforementioned points for the sake of indicating how interdependent these different

points could be. This has been done in the form of a letter. Hence, the following letter is fictional, made up through putting pieces of different experiences shared by different women to form a story (from me) yet could go a long way to tell the story of a young girl in Cameroon going through a situation like this. It is about a young girl whom after enduring domestic violence for some time decided to speak up through a letter to her mother. She wished things were different, she wished her mother had trained her differently, especially in connection to marriage and self-love. Ashuembom who is the young girl writing the letter, kind of blamed her mother, though in a polite and respectful manner, for not teaching her the importance of self-love. Her mother was so concerned about bringing her up to be a wife that she never cared to teach Ashuembom what it meant to keep her self-esteem intact. She has been working hard to maintain her mother's teachings for so long until it came to this point where she could no longer bear it. It was therefore either she addresses the situation with her mother or continue to subject herself to domestic violence.

A letter to my mother....

"Dear Mama,

It has taken me so long to write this but my mind will only be at rest if I let you know what is going on. Mama, I am writing this in tears because the pain has been unbearable, sometimes I feel like I do not have enough tears left to shed. Mama, I wish you told me a lot of things at my tender age, I wish you told me that valuing myself will indirectly make others around me value me. If only you told me that it is important to stay healthy with a sound and peaceful mind, with my sanity intact than trying against all odds to stay

married. I can remember vividly how you told me that men are ultimate and should be put first in every situation, you insisted that a woman's place is in the kitchen and that her entire life should be dedicated to a man, doing all within her capacity to please him. Even with the education you gave me mama, it seems everything was to prepare me on how to handle my husband and be a complete servant to him. Unfortunately, mama I am beginning to see the results of the training you gave me, I expected everything to be so smooth in my marital home, while I mind my business just trying to please my husband like you taught me, but unfortunately it is not the case. I have been going through domestic abuse even before I officially got married to my husband. Do you remember the day you came to me trying to convince me to get married to Akuhmbom? Can you remember when I told you I couldn't because he was very violent and will beat and abuse me at every given opportunity? How you even tried to put the blame on me, trying to make it my fault that he was abusive? You spent all your time teaching me how to be quiet and submissive when a man is angry but you did not tell me how to value myself in the mist of all that. Mama all you were interested in was for your daughter to get married because you even told me how shameful it will be for me to still be single at the age of 30. The society had made you believe that getting married was more important than trying to stay alive such that you feared with all your heart not to be shamed by your friends. Now this is what I am facing, the level of domestic violence I am going through, I am not sure I will live to testify if I keep on staying here. It is not just about me not being allowed to talk especially when my husband is talking or when his family is around, he has turned me into his punching bag. My in-laws have the right to get into my home at will and do whatever they want, they talk to me with little or no respect yet I am not permitted to complain. Can you imagine that five months ago I was slapped by my brother-in-law

just because I told him I did not have enough time to wash his clothes. As if that was not enough, when I complained to my husband, he rained all sort of abuses on me and warned me never to disregard his brother again. Oh. I swear mama if you see me you won't recognize your daughter, I have been physically, mentally and emotionally bruised and drained. When I was jobless, I depended on my husband for everything even down to my basic needs and that was the period I had the highest embarrassment in my life. My husband will insult me at every given opportunity, I was reminded all the time that jobless people do not spend much and was told of how much of a liability I was in the family. I had to give my husband every details about my needs and why it or they were so relevant.....yes mama this even got to a point where my husband will even insult me when I ask for cash to get sanitary pads. When I could not take all the insults and abuse, I decided to look for a job which, was a tug of war for me to even start working as he insisted that I must stay home as a full time housewife. After going through all the struggles to get a job, my husband dictates to me on how to use my own salary and makes sure he collects everything and only gives what he deems necessary to me. Writing this letter itself is one of my top secrets because if he reads it you can imagine what he will do to me.....I am tired mama, I need to leave this marriage and I will need your help. Oh yes, I know what you can say but please don't say it, don't tell me to be patient, don't tell me to avoid his problems and not to provoke him, don't tell me that if I can avoid his beatings then I will be fine because even the insults I receive from him are worse than the beatings sometimes and you cannot deny that, that is also another terrible form of domestic violence. To make everything worst, he is cheating on me with many different women. Please help me mama, please take me out of this misery, do not give me the

impression that women do not fight for one another, mum please, you are a woman and I know you can understand me better".

In pains....

Ashuembom.

When Ashuembom's mother received the letter, she was really hurt but will she be able to take her daughter out of the situation? Her reply will tell us what she feels about her daughter's situation, if she regrets the up-bringing she gave her daughter or if she even found her complains relevant or necessary.

"Ashuembom my dearest daughter,

Ohhh 'weh wom⁶' (oh my child) ... you know how you have always made me proud right? 'Wan'(child) just keep praying God will make a way for you, it is not good for you to complain too much my dearest one. Every marriage has its own problems and only the ceiling covers it ohhhh!!, stop talking about it so you don't expose your husband to the enemies. Maybe I should tell you a bit about my relationship with your father, it has never been a bed of roses like it seemed. When I completed my primary school, my parents married me off to your father even without my concern. I was advised by my mother to always respect my husband NO MATTER what was happening and this included respecting my in-laws and treating them like my husband too..... 'And my pikin you know say for da wa day dem plenty woman dem nobe di go school nor?'⁷ (...and my child, you know in those our days, many women were not going to school right?) But I had the chance to be educated by your father. Due to the nature of

⁶ Babanki (Kedjom) language (a language in the North West Region of Cameroon)

⁷ CP

his job, 'e be get to di attend plenty of dier official meeting dem⁸ (he had to be attending so many official meetings) and they were always required to come with their spouses. Daddy did not want any situation where I will embarrass him during those gatherings with his colleagues so, he made sure I got educated. Despite being educated, I was not allowed to work because I had to take care of you people and do other household chores, women are even lucky these days that they have the opportunity to work, though you had to fight hard with your husband like you mentioned. Baby girl, I depended on your father for my every need and though he never insulted me for that, his family did not let me be. I was accused by in-laws for misusing my husband's money and was highly disregarded for that yet I had to put up my best behavior. I was never allowed to talk back at my in-laws no matter what was being said or how it was said. Daddy himself was a very strict man and had anger issues and I am quite sure you can remember this very well too. Can you remember some of those nights I had to spend in your room? Those were the nights I was avoiding a fight or was trying to end one, those were the nights your father after a heated argument told me not to come close to him or I would be well beaten. I had to move away so that you my kids will not understand, to avoid creating a scene and also to give my husband the due respect that he deserved. My husband had so many concubines outside and you can testify how I accepted all the children he had with those women and took care of them like they were mine. I did all of these not because I was stupid but I simply wanted to protect our family and I am quite sure you can see we escaped all the gossips around. If I did not follow my mother's advice to be a submissive woman, I would have made so many mistakes in life, I should have

been telling people around that my husband was abusive meanwhile he was only trying to discipline me. No matter what happened, Ashue my daughter, I loved my husband the more and you can testify how much I loved and still love your father. There was no way I could leave my husband for those women, I fought really hard to keep my marriage. If I had my way, I would have rather handled those women because I knew they were the ones seducing your father, but I feared creating a lot of scandal for your father. Ohhh.....I cannot forget one faithful day your father told me to leave if I can't accept the fact that he had other women outside, he even reminded me of the fact that the women are always ready to take my place if I finally decide to leave. I almost cried my eyes out that night but that was the day I made up my mind to fight harder, I decided to do anything he asked of me just to make sure that he does not kick me out to bring in any of those good for nothing women who were like wolves waiting to devour a sheep. My daughter, this is exactly how married should be, keep your family problems to yourself and do not tell anyone. There are a lot of women out there who are going through worst situations...oh 'weh wom, wu te kuh tor ndoh mbi yen njih, mu wu koh gah'⁹ (...oh my child, if only you knew how this world is, then you would not have complained). Do you even know that Ngum's husband got her well beaten last week until she lost a four months old pregnancy? Her situation is surely worse than yours because I heard she even has a big scar on her back that was given to her by her husband with a hot iron. E di even plan for commot ye de maret but for me, e for only go stay for deir house for some time before e go back, maret na for better for worst so na tin for bear am..... hmmm but I di talk so, da ye situation really bad yeh¹⁰ (she is even planning to ask for a divorce but

⁸ CP

⁹ Babanki (Kedjom) language

¹⁰ CP

in my opinion, she would have just stayed at her parent's place for some time and go back to the husband. Marriage is for better and for worst so it's something for people to bear.....hmmmm! but all these things I am saying, her situation is really bad). So my dear, as you can see your situation is even better, please my dearest, just keep respecting your husband, avoid provoking him and make sure no matter what he says or does don't talk back at him, make sure you always dress well and look good for him, cook his favorite meal all the time and you will discover that he will gradually stop all the negative behavior on his own.... 'ma lorne wu'¹¹ (I am begging you), so that your daughters will also learn from you this good culture I am teaching you, he is the man and should be respected.

Love you without limitations.....Your mum

Conclusion

After explaining how difficult her situation is and what she has been going through for quite some time, I would have expected Ashuembom's mother to ask her to leave the marriage or at least the toxic environment for a while. On the contrary, she had to employ more strategies to convince her abused daughter to continue putting up to the situation. Apart from comparing one's situation with that of a neighbor especially by family members and mothers in particular, it is also a common culture to use their(mothers) own past to make you understand that they had gone through same thing and worst. This to me can sometimes act as an emotional blackmail as one could be made to think that just because your mother could bear it, then you have to bear it too. The use of religion as earlier mentioned can also be seen

in the letter where it is used as a tool to comfort victims. A woman will be asked to pray for her violent husband for as long as it takes instead of being advised to protect herself. In addition to that, women will be questioned and low-key blamed for being the cause of the violence perpetrated on them and will be asked to do everything (dress well, smell good, respect your husband more, talk less, protect your home, improve on your cooking and house-keeping skills etc.) to amend the situation. The strange part to me which is the driving force for this paper, is the fact that, women who should understand fellow women better when they complain about cases like this, are rather the main actors in perpetrating these actions. On the other hand, it is worth knowing that many women who take part in pushing other women into violent situations, might be ignorant of their actions as some might be doing all these with good intentions—thinking ensuring that a sister or daughter maintains her marriage, could simply be another way of saving her the embarrassment of being unmarried in the society. This implies that, if the topic of domestic violence is being addressed, then it might be worth talking on what could be done to curb the situation. In this case, addressing the women and their believe on singlehood, divorce and culture, might go a long way to change the perspective.

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¹¹ Babanki (Kedjom) Language

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