

Enquiry



# **What's stopping women with disabilities from reporting gender-based violence?**

Research from Northwest Cameroon



# Gender-Based Violence in Cameroon

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**Women with disabilities are two to three times more likely to experience violence than women without a disability and are less likely to disclose incidents of sexual violence and domestic abuse.**

In Cameroon, being a woman or girl with a disability in a patriarchal society that also openly discriminates against people with disabilities, puts them at high risk of gender-based violence – a risk that has been further exacerbated by the ongoing political crisis in the region. In addition, the prevailing cultural norms in Cameroon and the Northwest in particular, girls and women with disabilities like their male counterparts are considered by the community to be safe from sexual violence, as the society sees it as unusual and shameful to have sexual relations with them.

**For many women, reporting is extremely difficult. Not only do women with disabilities face a barrage of social pressures which inhibit reporting and twist the narrative to focus on blaming the victim, but, in Cameroon, there is also no specific legislative framework to combat violence against women and girls, including by criminalising domestic violence, sexual harassment and marital rape.**

While women are offered *some* protection under the Cameroonian Penal Code and International Codes and Conventions, this does not go far enough with law enforcement failing to take violence against women seriously (as it is viewed as a private matter, not a matter for the courts). This presents a significant gap in the fight to stop violence against women.

The impact of violence on women and girls with disabilities is significant. Physical harm includes genital damage and haemorrhaging, as well as pregnancy and abortion, as well as medical costs for families. Violence against women and girls causes significant mental harm, undermining their sense of self-worth and leading to feelings of loneliness, depression and suicidal thoughts. The absence of justice also leads to the probability of continuing to interact with the perpetrator. This further exacerbates the vulnerability and reduces the ability to speak up for women and girl survivors with disabilities.

# Addressing Gender-Based Violence

**A study by the Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Services (CBCHS), with support from CBM Australia, sought to better understand the barriers preventing women with disabilities in the Northwest Region of Cameroon from disclosing incidents of sexual violence and domestic abuse.** By identifying reasons why women and girls do not report sexual violence, and better understanding how women view sexual violence and domestic abuse, the study highlights areas that civil society groups, local and international humanitarian actors can better consider responding to, and at the same time empower women with disabilities to report on these abuses and seek assistance. *All women and girls should be able to live without fear of violence and abuse.*

## Methodology

The study used qualitative research to document the perspective of women with various impairments (visual, hearing, physical, and psychosocial), as well as their caregivers and gender-based violence service providers. The study is unique in that it included women with disabilities in the research process, in identifying and scoping the problem; recruiting study participants; collecting, interpreting, and analysing data; and presenting key findings. Engaging women with disabilities in this inclusive research required flexibility, with generous time available for training and support for the data collection process.

While CBCHS facilitated the research process, the Northwest Association of Women with Disabilities (NWAWORD), and the project's Gender and Disability Inclusive Development Community of Practice were engaged as partners, providing valuable insight and expertise on the issue. Study participants remained in control of the key decisions about the focus and direction of the research, while the CBCHS provided assistance and identified options for progress at different stages in the research.

The research process was made accessible, with careful consideration given to ethics, confidentiality, the venues used, communication methods, information, and transport. A disability etiquette checklist was used to ensure appropriate language was used, and sign language interpreters engaged for women who are deaf. There were 23 participants were recruited through purposive sampling, including three girls in their teens.

# The context to understanding sexual violence and abuse

Collecting qualitative data from women and girls with disabilities who are survivors of sexual violence and domestic abuse, as well as their caregivers and gender-based violence service providers, the study found the following:

**A limited understanding of sexual violence:** women with disabilities understood sexual violence to mean “forced sexual intercourse”, and failed to recognise other sexual activities, such as exposure to pornographic material, unwanted sexual contact or exposure, and sexually sensitive language are also forms of sexual abuse.

**“You cannot qualify a man touching your breast as sexual violence because he did not penetrate you.... because sex or sexual violence is when there is penetration.”**

This limited understanding of what is sexual abuse is one reason why women with disabilities are not disclosing and reporting incidents of sexual violence.

**Women understand domestic abuse comes in various forms:** women with disabilities understood that domestic abuse occurs in many forms, and gave examples of physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, and basic human rights violations,

such as access to quality healthcare, and the right to an education or to worship. Even a right to citizenship is often lacking, as many parents of children with a disability do not obtain birth certificates for their children with disabilities, meaning that child cannot get a national identity card, and one limitation (of many) is that they have no legal status.

**“We are abused verbally, and they call us names which hurt us.”**

**“I am usually left alone in the house without food, and they prohibit me from going out which makes me feel like a sub-human.”**

**Abuse is normalised:** women with disabilities reported being maltreated by family and community members because of their disability and gender, often on a daily basis.

Widespread and lifelong abuse and neglect across a number of fronts is seemingly normalised and expected by both women with disabilities and their families.

**“Domestic violence is when people beat us because of our disability especially us women with disabilities.”**

# Why women don't report sexual violence and abuse

**Fear:** Many women with disabilities are afraid of the perpetrator who may threaten them or what their family members will think of them if they report sexual violence or domestic abuse.



“The man who forced me to have sex with him, said that if I tell anybody, he will kill me, and I am afraid to die.”

“I cannot tell my father anything... Because if I tell my father, he will beat me and chain me with these chains to this bed so that I don't go anywhere. I cannot tell my father.”

## **Disbelief and accusations:**

Women with disabilities are afraid their family, community members and authorities will not believe them and fear they could be accused of lying. This is related to the misconceptions about women with disability as potentially not credible and as people who do not have a sexual life. That is why they are not trusted, given the general belief that someone cannot have sexual activity with a woman with disability. For these women, past experiences of mistreatment towards women with disabilities who reported incidents of sexual violence and domestic abuse is preventing them from also reporting. Many also do not know how to articulate what happened to them.

“My friend was once raped and she reported it to the quarter head but to her surprise, she was instead accused of telling lies and she became an object of ridicule in the community. Due to such past experiences, we are reluctant to report abuse in order not to find ourselves in similar situation.”

“I reported an incidence of rape and people in the community did not believe me and were asking questions about how a mentally impaired person could be believed.”

**Blaming the victim:** Often family and community members will put the blame on women with disabilities when they disclose incidents of sexual violence and domestic abuse.

“When I was raped, I told my grandmother and she said I like going out too much, so it is my fault.”

Some women with disabilities also blame themselves, believing their actions led to their abuse.

**“I could not report because I was the one who went to his house knowing that nobody was around, and I have been going to his house - at times dressing indecently.”**

Blaming the victim indicates that many family and community members, as well as some women survivors themselves, do not understand that sexual violence and domestic abuse are never justified, no matter how a woman behaves.

### **Controlling women’s**

**movements:** Many women with disabilities are not only afraid of going out but are often prevented from doing so by family members or caregivers – if they do, they may be punished. A lack of money, access to public transport, and knowledge of how to get around town also prevent reporting.

**“We are treated very badly, for example as I am sitting here (pointing to the ground), they won’t allow me go outside or to do anything. Everything will be given to me here including food, and I think it is because of this treatment that causes some of us to be afraid and not to talk about our abuse to other people.”**

### **Depending on the perpetrator:**

Many women with disabilities depend on their perpetrators for their livelihood. In many cases, the perpetrator is also their caregiver and family member. They fear the ongoing ramifications of reporting.

**“I cannot report because the person abusing me is my cousin, he is the one**

**who gives me food, and when we are alone, he starts to do those things.”**

**Opening old wounds:** Many women avoid reporting because they do not want to relive a traumatic experience. This points to the need to ensure support services, such as counselling, are available for women.

**“When he did what he did, I felt humiliated ...I was ashamed and annoyed, so I did not want to cause myself more pain, so I decided not to report.”**

**Stigma:** When a woman with a disability reports, family and community members will often use that information to make fun of them, leading to further isolation.

**“I do not report because the person will tell others... and at times they do not tell the real stories. Again, if you tell someone, he or she might use it to abuse you in the future if you have problems.”**

**Shame & self-pity:** Often women with disabilities are too ashamed to report sexual violence and domestic abuse and fear they will become a disgrace to their family, community, and even their perpetrator.

**“It was a shameful thing for me to go and sit down and be telling someone about this kind of thing, that this man has done something to me in that kind of way... I was scared that if I talk it was going to be a disgrace to the man... so I decided to stay quiet.”**

## **Pressure from friends and**

**family members:** Friends and family members often discouraged, and even threatened women with disabilities not to report incidents of sexual violence and domestic abuse. Friends advised against reporting, telling them they complained too much and that if they did report, they and their family would be laughed at, and they would not be trusted again.

Within families, female in-laws made women with disabilities who were living in their families' homes feel as though they were in no position to report incidents.

Where the perpetrator was a family member, it would often be treated as a family secret. This makes supporting women survivors or getting accurate information about violence against women extremely difficult.

**"My husband's sisters always threaten me that I should not dare complain because I am staying in their brother's house, and my husband now uses her as a weapon threatening me that if I report he will call his sisters to come and beat me."**

Family members were concerned that if an incident was reported, it would ruin the family's reputation. Disability alone is already heavily stigmatised in countries like Cameroon. If a woman with a disability was to then report sexual violence or domestic abuse, many families fear they would not be able to cope with negative community reaction. Thus, women with disabilities will remain silent to protect the family name and pride.

**"My mother and sisters always tell me not to say anything to people in the community as this might cause people to run away from them."**

**"If the abuser is a family member, the abuse is considered as a family secret that should remain in the house."**

**Communication barriers:** A lack of community awareness around disability and accessible services have left many women with disabilities afraid to tell their story for fear of being humiliated.

**"When we talk people do not understand us, so I am afraid to tell somebody because he or she will laugh at me."**

Even when women wanted to report, many did not know how to, or what support services were available because information was not accessible. For deaf women, few people understand sign-language, and there are very few interpreters to assist with reporting.

**"I didn't know where I can go to because people ... don't understand sign language. The abuse left me pregnant, and I never knew I was pregnant."**

**Lack of faith in an inadequate judicial system:** while women knew they could report to police, they said police were corrupt, and reporting would be a waste of time. **They also did not trust that police would respect their confidentiality.** If they wanted to report, they feel the judicial system in Cameroon is too slow, too expensive, and does not accommodate people with disabilities.

**"Justice in Cameroon is for the rich and not for the poor. If I report, the abuser will corrupt the officials of the legal system and the case shall be dismissed."**

## **No national identity card – no**

**reporting:** To report abuse in Cameroon one must have a national identity card, and a birth certificate is needed to obtain this.

However, a CBCHS study in 2019 found that parents of children born with a disability often do not initially apply for a birth certificate, given the reported shame and shock that comes along with the birth, and negative beliefs that sees children with an impairment as “good for nothings”

and “cursed”. Applying for a certificate later in life was viewed often as spending “unnecessary” money on a person with a disability.

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“I cannot report to the police or other government authorities because they will ask me for my national identity card- which I don’t have.”  
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**False promises:** Many women with disabilities stated they did not report abuse because they believed it when their perpetrator promised that they would be nice to them – even though the promise was rarely kept.

## **The only opportunity for sex**

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The research also revealed that some women with a disability derived pleasure from the sexual encounter, even though it was abusive, and so chose not to report it. This was mostly in the case of women who had been abused consistently by the same abuser. While it is challenging to accommodate this perspective, the study found that in the absence of other ways of accessing sexual activity, some women felt this was their “only option”.

While the research team approached the study with the view that sexual abuse was detrimental, it became challenging when some respondents explained that “It makes me feel like a woman as nobody [else] wants to approach me”. The researchers found there was a view that women with disability are generally less likely, or it takes longer to develop intimate relationships because of men’s (and families’) perceptions of them as of “lesser value” as a spouse than a woman without a disability. Young women with disability feel they have less opportunities for dating, courting and marriage. The study found that women with disabilities are often ignorant of their right to choose who to relate with sexually, and that rather than accepting an abuser, they should be able assertively make a choice of who their sexual partner is, and not just give in to abusers. The perspective that an abusive sexual encounter is better than no sexual encounter is an important finding.



# Conclusions and lessons learned

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The conclusion: This study revealed that the main reason why women with disabilities in Cameroon do not report incidents of gender-based violence is fear – fear of family pressure, fear of the abuser, fear of the unknown, fear of losing livelihood, fear of stigma, fear of trauma, and fear of not being believed. While this can be viewed as an internal issue, it is also very much a consequence of societal pressures that make women and girls fearful. Thus, it is important that development programmers adopt a comprehensive approach to responding to violence against women and girls with disability with strategies that empower women and girls know their rights and know that they do not have to accept abuse, and to raise awareness of gender-based violence among the community and improve support services and reporting methods.

## Recommendations for program implementers

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Understanding what sexual violence and domestic abuse is, and where and how to report incidents is critical to preventing further abuses. These recommendations will assist the CBCHC and Organisations of People with Disabilities (OPDs) to implement strategies that address the concerns mentioned above, helping break down the barriers that prevent women with disabilities from reporting incidence of sexual violence or domestic abuse.

The research team made recommendations that are highly relevant in many developing country contexts, including in emergencies.

### **Educate women and girls with disabilities on sexual violence**

This is a priority given that many of the women and girls with disabilities involved in the study did not know what constitutes sexual violence. CBCHC should develop and distribute sexual violence educational material to women with disabilities.

### **Include community awareness raising in project designs**

When development organisations are designing projects that raise awareness about disability rights, ensure that this sensitive issue of sexual violence and domestic abuse against women and girls with disabilities is covered.

Use opportunities through radio programs, church groups, women's groups, village cultural meeting venues, and market sessions, as well as through other platforms that women with disabilities are involved in. Examples of success stories should be included.

### **Ensure women and girls know how to report abuse**

A list of support services should be shared with women through local OPDs, and other organisations that work with women with disabilities so referral pathways can be identified, and support accessed. The CBCHS's disability programs should work with the gender-based violence and Child Protection Areas of Responsibilities/Sub-clusters in

updating and printing the referral pathways to facilitate access for women and girls with disabilities.

### **Build capacity for service providers**

Women and girls with disabilities often do not trust those to whom abuse is reported. These service providers should be trained on inclusive case management approaches that empower women and girls with disabilities to disclose and seek help.

### **Help women and girls have faith in the justice system**

Women and girls with disabilities and their families need to be reassured that justice can be served (without offering a bribe). To enable this, they must know where and how to report, and see successful cases being pursued.

### **Facilitate access to justice for women and girls**

Groups working to protect the rights of women with disabilities should be encouraged and capacitated to assist women with disabilities to access the justice system. Support could include transport or booking in appointments on behalf of the woman. This will reduce waiting times and encourage others to report abuse.

### **Provide free counselling services through Helpline**

Assist women with disabilities to understand and process their abuse by linking them to counsellors via a Helpline. This will increase positive coping strategies and encourage women to report abuse and seek help.

### **Develop survival strategies**

Women with disabilities should be given the skills and empowered to advocate for their right to justice when they are abused. They should know how to, and that it is their right to report when they are abused.

### **Accessible information**

Develop an easy-read manual on sexual and gender-based violence advising people who are hard of hearing or those with cognitive impairment regarding what sexual and gender-based violence is and how to report it.



**CBM Australia**

[www.cbm.org.au](http://www.cbm.org.au)

+61 3 8843 4500

PO Box 196, Richmond VIC 3121, Australia



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Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Services

PO Box 1 Bamenda

Northwest Region, Cameroon

+237 677764781

[piustih@cbchealthservices.org](mailto:piustih@cbchealthservices.org)

[www.cbchealthservices.org](http://www.cbchealthservices.org)