



CHILD, EARLY, AND FORCED MARRIAGE IN CAMEROON: RESEARCH FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

Child, early and forced marriage is widespread in Cameroon and particularly prevalent in the north of the country. As a form of violence against women and girls, the practice is extremely harmful to the socio-economic status, sexual and reproductive health, and psychological wellbeing of young girls and women.

The Association to Combat Violence against Women-Extreme North (ALVF-EN) is a feminist organization that aims to eliminate all forms of violence affecting women and girls, including early and forced marriage, in the northern regions of Cameroon. ALVF-EN sponsored a major study to better understand the practice and help its members and other organizations more effectively advocate against child marriage as well as promote women's empowerment. Specifically, ALVF-EN plans to use the findings to advocate for the implementation of a new Code of the Family and Person.

STUDY AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

To determine the nature and scale of child and early forced marriage in Cameroon, the Institut Supérieur du Sahel at the University of Maroua (Cameroon), in partnership with ALVF-EN, surveyed individuals and families on their views of early and forced marriage and its main drivers. They also examined the legal context in which these marriages take place and the profile of girls and women most at risk. Focus groups, in-depth interviews and surveys were used to collect data on perceptions in all ten regions of Cameroon, urban and rural areas alike.

This brief is based on research conducted by the Institut Supérieur du Sahel at the University of Maroua (Cameroon), in partnership with ALVF-EN, supported by IWHC.



“WOMEN BELONG TO ME AND I DO WHAT I WANT!”

YOUNG MALE FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

Individual and Family Perceptions

- More than half of the respondents (61%) stated they know what early and forced marriage is, and that it is forbidden by law. Yet, qualitative data indicates that respondents know more about the traditional and religious norms that legitimize the practice, than the laws against it.
- Eighty-nine percent of respondents expressed the opinion that girls should not have their first menstruation under their parents' roofs, but under their husbands'.
- Fifteen percent of those surveyed believe the practice of child marriage protects young girls.

Traditional and Religious Norms Encourage the Practice of Early and Forced Marriage

- While poverty was mentioned as a factor driving child marriage in the Extreme North (32% of respondents), traditional cultural norms were mentioned as the key driver (41% of respondents).
- Because marriage is seen as a girl's life purpose, a young single woman is perceived negatively, thought to be infertile and even sometimes considered to be a prostitute or a witch.
- In many communities in the Adamawa Region (the North and the Extreme North of Cameroon), marriage honors the whole family. In Muslim families, the daughter's marriage is often organized by the parents, who buy gifts and supplies for the bride's new home. According to Fulani cultural practice, the family must prove that the girl is a virgin on the wedding day. If that is the case, the in-laws provide more gifts.

Legal Context

- Cameroon has ratified several international human rights documents but they are not always enforced; in fact, international agreements are often in direct conflict with national legislation.
- While Cameroon has ratified the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) setting the minimum age of marriage at 18, Cameroon's legal age of marriage is 15 for girls with parental permission, and 18 for boys.
- There is a lack of political will for change at the legislative and judiciary levels.
- Legal proceedings in cases of child marriage are often hindered by government officials and law enforcement. Overall, police ignore the problem, cases are dismissed by the courts, and judges will accept bribes from men who seek to marry underage girls.

Those Most at Risk

- The majority of the cases reported in this study were marriages involving girls aged 13–15, making this age group the most affected (60%).
- Girls from poor backgrounds and/or girls who do not attend school are perceived by the community to be most affected by this practice.

“IT IS DIFFICULT TO GRADUATE BECAUSE THESE PRACTICES ARE ANCHORED IN OUR CUSTOMS.”

YOUNG FEMALE FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Consequences of Early and Forced Marriages

Early and forced marriages have significant consequences in Cameroonian society. The women responding to the interviews emphasized, in confidential testimonies, how early and forced marriage led to the abrupt end of their education and a rupture in their personal development. Many respondents agreed that early and forced marriage leaves girls defenseless and anxious, and they have little confidence and personal autonomy. As a result, they are unable to advance in everyday life and they are not very active in their communities. Married girls are at an increased risk of insults, injuries, and rape. Many young girls who were already mothers reported experiencing grave complications during childbirth and having children born with birth defects, including brain damage. Some young mothers said that they fear sexual relations and are now HIV-positive or have had other sexually transmitted infections. Psychological trauma has resulted in some suicide attempts.

Denunciation of Early and Forced Marriage

At the community level, individuals rarely denounce child, early, and forced marriage. In certain regions, ALVF-EN has initiated community-based denunciation “brigades,” which educate communities about girls’ rights and the harmful effects of child marriage. But the silence of survivors makes it difficult to uncover cases. While involvement is lagging at present, ALVF-EN continues to develop and support a vast network of these brigades as well as “women’s life centers,” (multi-purpose centers to assist women who have experienced or are at risk for domestic violence). ALVF-EN believes that these initiatives are effective in preventing and monitoring early and forced marriage, as well as provide support to its survivors.

Strategies to End and Prevent Early and Forced Marriages

1. Improve the legal framework
Data from key informant interviews reveal that there is no culture of denouncing offenders; until women’s empowerment and rights are embedded in national legal frameworks more broadly, it will be difficult to effect change. The current legal framework in Cameroon is inadequate to fight the practice. Since 1997, women’s rights activists, including ALVF-EN, have been advocating for a new Code of the Person and the Family that would remove a number of provisions that discriminate against women and girls in matters of marriage - including the parental consent exception - and raise the legal age to 18 for girls. Unfortunately, debate on this reform continues to be stalled in Parliament. The formal drafting and adoption of legislation against discrimination and sexual violence that ALVF-EN also advocates for has similarly been delayed. Sustained campaigning and mobilization to change the Cameroonian legislature’s position is needed to effectively address and ban this practice.

2. **Increase girls' access to education, including comprehensive sexuality education**
Young girls, especially those living in poverty and whom are most at risk of early and forced marriage, should have better access to education. The government should improve educational equity so that young Cameroonian girls can enroll and stay in school, by offering free primary and secondary education or by providing academic scholarships. Other measures should be taken by the state to incentivize parents to invest in their daughters' education. In addition, school curricula should raise awareness of the current laws on marriage, as well as the dangers of the practice. Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) that includes lessons on gender equality, power in sexual relations, and sexual and reproductive health and rights is essential. To prevent early and forced marriage, the Cameroonian school system should revise school curricula to include CSE, develop teacher training and support, and organize educational talks on these issues in schools and communities.
3. **Implement a national monitoring service of early and forced marriage**
A national monitoring service, specializing in children's and girls' rights, to track early and forced marriage would be key to develop a better understanding of the practice and the effectiveness of prevention initiatives. The objective would be to collect reliable information on early and forced marriage to disseminate to those working in the field, policy makers, community leaders, teachers, the media, and other key stakeholders.
4. **Develop a platform for agencies and organizations fighting the practice**
Very few government agencies or nongovernmental organizations are currently undertaking initiatives to end early and forced marriage. The government has not committed to develop civil servants' capacity to prevent the practice, which hinders progress. The lack of synergy between civil society organizations concerned with the issue makes strategizing difficult. Pooling skills and expertise, developing a coalition of stakeholders, and encouraging strong governmental responses are key to effectively addressing the practice.
5. **Run a national awareness campaign**
A national campaign, including mass media such as radio and television programs and commercials, as well as outreach to community, religious, and traditional leaders, should be organized. This study clearly demonstrates that early and forced marriage is a destructive and pervasive practice driven in part by a lack of information and awareness.



Association de Lutte Contre les Violences Faites aux Femmes Antenne de l'Extrême Nord (ALVF-EN) empowers and supports girls and young women survivors of early and forced marriage, gender-based violence and displacement in the extreme north region of Cameroon.

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