

# Women's experience of infertility-related violence: Insights from a qualitative study in Cameroon and Kenya

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# INFERTILITY IN CONTEXT

- **Disproportionate burden.** Sub-Saharan Africa period infertility (16%).
- **Cross-cutting, gendered consequences.** Stigma, gender-based violence, and broader social, health, and economic consequences.
- **Programming gap.** Focus on treatment of infertility misses the opportunity to address infertility-related social norms, stigma, and gendered power dynamics.

# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are local perceptions and conceptualizations of the **causes, preventative measures, and social norms** associated with infertility in Cameroon and Kenya? Do these differ across reproductive life stages, social identities, or geographic areas?
2. How do **infertility-related knowledge and social norms influence reproductive agency and contraceptive behaviors** in Cameroon and Kenya? How do these relationships differ across social identities? What are the most trusted sources of information on infertility?
3. What are the **priorities, opportunities, and gaps in the current landscape of infertility-related SBC programming** in Cameroon and Kenya?

# RESEARCH AIM

Investigate **individual, community, social and systems factors** influencing women's and men's **reproductive agency and behaviors**, particularly **(in)fertility-related knowledge** and **social norms** and how they influence **reproductive agency**.



# METHODOLOGY



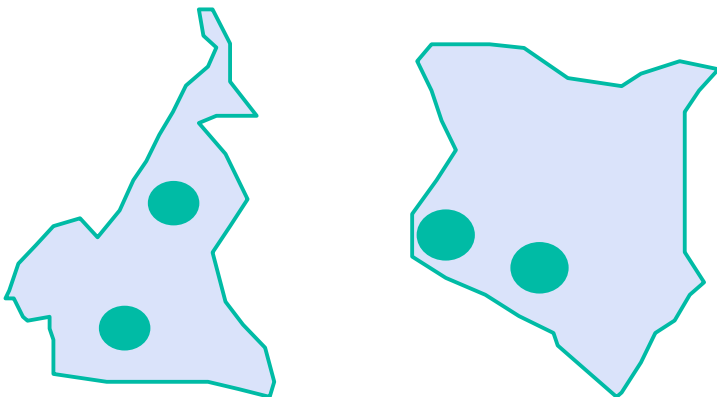
## DESIGN

Formative research to inform SBC intervention development



## SITES

Rural and urban sites in Cameroon (Nganha, Yaoundé) and Kenya (Homa Bay, Mukuru)



## DATA COLLECTION

**September - October 2023**

**56 IDIs** with women and men

**12 FGDs** with women, men, and reference groups

**22 KIIs** with health service providers, traditional healers, and community leaders



## ANALYSIS

Collaborative deductive and inductive thematic coding by research teams working across organizations and countries



# **Women's experiences of infertility-related violence**

# Fertility norms in Cameroon & Kenya

- ✓ Infertility is not widely discussed due to sanctions such as **stigma, judgement, and gossip**.
- ✓ Social norms related to the **high value of having (many) children**
- ✓ More children brought **stability and economic benefits**, fewer children brought marital (and interpersonal) disharmony.
- ✓ Fertility-related norms such as **proving one's fertility** early and often drove (mostly women's) reproductive behaviors.

Norms created contexts of **fear and gendered blame** in which some women experienced **infertility-related psychological and/or physical intimate partner violence**.

This violence manifested as beatings, being hit with objects, verbal abuse and name calling, and shaming by intimate partners, extended family, and community members.



*We talk about having children often [in our community]....This is, first of all, to guarantee inheritance. **We have to populate...Customs and traditions must be perpetuated.** Also just to add, we call the man who has many children, a virile order.”*

**MAN, 21-49 YEARS**  
**FGD, URBAN CAMEROON**

*I have been **beaten by my husband.** Sometimes when he goes to his brother and comes back, he starts questioning why I haven't gotten pregnant...he doesn't want to feed someone who is not having children...My husband's family seem to have **abandoned or discriminated me** in some way*

**WOMAN, 33, IDI, URBAN KENYA**

**Social Norms around fertility.....**

# Consequences of infertility for women in Cameroon & Kenya

- ✓ Women seen as '**ultimately responsible**' for infertility
- ✓ Infertility often assumed to be a result of **female's poor sexual and reproductive choices and sanctioned behaviors**.
- ✓ Blame often used to justify **infidelity, divorce/abandonment and polygamy**.
- ✓ Women experienced **physical and psychological violence** at the marital, interpersonal, and community levels.
- ✓ Women reported a **diminished loss of control and reproductive agency** to cope with infertility, often feeling **manipulated or coerced** into sexual and reproductive decisions.



*I have tried several ways. I have tried because **I have gone through a lot of abuse.** My husband has been **beating me, calling me barren.** I have tried all the possible ways, even changing sex partners to see if I will be able to get but I haven't."*

**W O M A N , 3 3 , I D I ,  
U R B A N K E N Y A**

*Women are also **disrespected** and continuous **infighting** and communication breakdown between the couples. **Most women are abused** especially by their in-laws, aunties, and even their grandmothers. There is fundamental pressure [on men] from family and in-laws to look for an alternative partner and sire a child. Some women also become withdrawn from their peers and social groups*

**K I I , H E A L T H C A R E  
P R O V I D E R , U R B A N K E N Y A**

*In [another] family the other guy went so far as to **beat her up.** They pushed her out of the house, sent all her things outside. **She wasn't even protected by her husband.***

**F E M A L E , 2 1 - 4 9  
Y E A R S , F G D ,  
U R B A N C A M E R O O N**



# **Infertility-related physical violence.....**





Sometimes he **insults me** or when I say something he either doesn't listen or responds by telling me to **shut up because I can't bear a child**. In such a conversation he tells me that I should not even talk when or where other people are talking. **He beats me as well**.

W O M A N , 2 2 , I D I ,  
U R B A N K E N Y A

Mothers in particular will start shouting, singing loudly: "no, it's the woman, you've got to change, you haven't got a good woman"....**they'll start calling her a witch, because in any case, when there are no children in the house, the woman is blamed**. We don't try to find out if the man is really fertile. No, they start calling the woman a witch, [saying] "Ooh, she ate the children! So that has a lot of influence.

M A N , 3 0 , I D I , U R B A N  
C A M E R O O N

In general, when your wife doesn't give birth and we go to tell the mother-in-law, **she asks her son to simply divorce his wife...** then she asks him to remarry. That's what a lot of mothers-in-law do.

W O M A N , 2 1 - 4 9 , F G D  
R U R A L C A M E R O O N



# Infertility-related psychological abuse



# Implications



Women in urban and rural Cameroon and Kenya described multiple forms of violence - **psychological and physical** – stemming from infertility-related stigma and norms.



The breadth and severity of this violence highlight a clear gap in **programmatic support beyond clinic walls** for women facing infertility in these settings.



There is a need for **context-specific social and behaviour change interventions** which foster agency in women and men to achieve their self- determined reproductive goals and live a life free of violence.



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**THANKS!**