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## **When Personal Dreams Derail, Rural Cameroonian Women Aspire For Their Children**

By Akuri John<sup>1</sup>, Susan Weinger<sup>2</sup>, and Barbara Barton<sup>3</sup>

### **Abstract**

Data gathered from a convenience sample of 36 women who reside in rural villages lying on the outskirts of Buea, Cameroon is not consistent with the “culture of poverty” proposition which states that personal characteristics of the poor tie them to a life of poverty. These findings run counter to an assumed “culture of poverty” in which persons do not hold career aspirations and socialize their children with attitudes that assure the generational transmission of poverty. Respondents, as a case vignette illustrates, conveyed that besides marriage they had wanted a career in order to achieve a living wage. After their own career dreams were dashed, they devoted themselves to the hard work of farming and petty trading in the hope they could help their children escape subsistence living. Results of this study point away from policies that would seek to change the outlook and habits of mothers living in poverty and toward external changes that would permit them earnings commensurate with their persistent efforts.

*Keywords:* poverty, Cameroon, women

### **Background**

Cameroonians experienced a severe downturn in their country’s economy during the 1980s and have yet to recover from it (Gros, 2003). Seventeen percent of Cameroonians live on less than \$1 dollar per day and 51% live on less than \$2/day (World Resources Institute [WRI], 2007). On average a Cameroon is likely to be eight times poorer than a typical citizen of the world (Hardford, 2006). Fifty percent of the population lives below poverty level (Saha, 2008). Even when the costs of living are taken into account, a higher percentage of rural residents compared to urban residents experience poverty (Gros, 2003).

The economic downward spiral and its aftermath show in the material deprivation and living conditions of many Cameroonians, and especially among those living in rural poverty. The gap is widening markedly between the rich and the poor in terms of income, nutrition, health and education (Fon & Fon, 2008). Consumption of goods and services fell 30% since the mid 1980s as the inequality of wealth increased (Gros, 2003). It is telling that 36% of households own zero durable goods. Wealthy urban households are more likely to own a stove and TV set and 13% of these households own cars. Forty percent of city dwellers have electricity in their homes and only 22% do in rural areas. Entrenched poverty also shows in the degree of food insecurity. Thirty-six percent of poor children are dangerously underweight and 29% of children under age three suffered

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chronic malnourishment in 1988 (Gros, 2003). Those living in poverty have less accessibility to hospital care and are more likely to rely exclusively on traditional healers (Gros, 2003). Clean drinking water is available to 77% of urban dwellers, but to only 27% of rural residents (Gros, 2003). Relatively few citizens can afford piped-in water and most access their water through wells, public fountains and rivers (Gros, 2003). It is no wonder then that the life expectancy for both men and women is estimated as between 46-54 years (WRI, 2007). Education has also suffered. Government and households have spent less on education since the economic decline resulting in 29% of young people in urban areas not graduating secondary school and 46% not graduating secondary school in rural areas (Gros, 2003). In rural areas especially, the disparity between the number of boys and girls receiving basic education is increasing (*World Bank*, 1999). The adult literacy rate is 60% for women and 77% for men (CIA, 2009).

Given the serious repercussions of poverty for human well-being, researchers have sought to understand the reasons for its existence. According to the “culture of poverty theory,” the causes of poverty lay at the feet of the poor themselves (Boxill, 1994; Schneider, 2005). The “culture of poverty” concept suggests that persons who live in poverty make adjustments to the context of their lives and in doing so instill certain attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors in their children. This nearly assures that poverty will pass from one generation to another (Deglau, 1985; Ludwig & Mayer, 2006). Anthropologist Oscar Lewis conducted research about extreme poverty in agrarian communities in Mexico largely with farm laborers and unskilled workers (Lewis, 1961). From his studies, he presented 70 traits of persons living in poverty, including feelings of inferiority, lack of impulse control, little ability to delay gratification and plan for the future, and an overall sense of resignation. Those who accepted the “culture of poverty” idea reinforced the impression that persons raised in poverty are more likely to devalue work, hold low aspiration levels, shun service to family and community, be highly ‘in-the-moment,’ and be aversive to self-sacrifice and self-improvement (Boxill, 1994; Williams, 2006).

The “culture of poverty theory” has been extensively criticized for decades by social science researchers as equivalent to “blaming the victim.”<sup>4</sup> Rather, they attribute poverty to malfunction at the macro-level and societal structural problems in economic, political and social systems (Beall, 2000; Faver, Cavazos, & Trachte, 2005). At the national and global level, structural forces work against individual effort to advance out of poverty by tightening employment markets, absencing job training programs, and limiting as well as racially stratifying educational opportunities (Abouchedid & Nasser, 2002; Beall, 2000; Diaz, 1994; Schneider, 2005).

Scholarly evidence that debunks the “culture of poverty theory” has not prevented it from rearing its head in popular writings and occasionally in professional literature (Cosby & Poussaint, 2007; Ludwig & Mayer, 2006; Williams, 2006). Even though scholars have rejected this theory, apparently some policymakers still embrace it. This

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<sup>4</sup>The idea of a shared so-called ‘culture’ revolving around poverty misrepresents the notion of culture itself. Culture involves sharing a common history and experience that produces a set of values, beliefs, institutions and traditions. Persons of a given culture may have similarities such as religion, ethnicity, geographic location, artistic expression, language, accepted symbols, and patterns of social and interpersonal relationship (Harper-Dorton & Lanz, 2007). Improperly connecting ‘culture’ to poverty defies the many threads, nuances, shared meanings that bond people of the same culture together.



distinction is crucial because policymakers who accept the “culture of poverty theory” design programs that attempt to ‘cure’ individuals by ridding them of characteristics that hold them in poverty, whereas policymakers who disbelieve this construct look to relieve the poor from oppressive economic and political systems. With so much at stake, it is important to continue to do research which contributes relevant information alongside the claims of the “culture of poverty” construct until the debate is resolved. The Cameroonian women interviewed for this study do not in the aggregate display character traits assigned to them by the “culture of poverty” notion; nevertheless they remain trapped in poverty despite their efforts. This study examines whether the women participants who live in rural poverty had always thought that this would be their plight or whether they had other aspirations for themselves and now for their children. In cases in which they experienced unfulfilled dreams, the paper addresses what if anything got in their way of achieving them. Their aspirations for their children are also considered.

## **Methodology**

### *Sample*

The convenience sample consisted of 36 women who resided in seven rural villages that lay on the outskirts of Buea (Bokwango, Bokova, Bwasa, Bolifamba, Muea, Bova, and Bonakanda) with populations roughly between 250-8,000. Residents generally do not own cars; the road network to, from, and within their villages are not completely tarred; and not all residents in these villages have electricity. Much of their food comes from their subsistence farming. Though the larger villages have piped-in water, residents of the smaller hamlets do not. Sometimes respondents indicated that their husbands did not reveal to them the amount of their earnings. Nine women did not know their own weekly earnings or “can’t say,” and the other 27 respondents estimated that their weekly household income ranged between 750 cfa’s and 15,000 cfa’s, averaging 5,048 cfa’s. (approximately 12.22 USD).

The respondents ranged in ages from 24 to 76 years with an average age of 48. There were roughly 1/3 of respondents in each of three age groupings: 24-39, 40-54, and 55-70. Eleven respondents (30%) never went to school, 22 (61%) had acquired two to seven years of primary school, and three (8%) reached secondary school but left before graduating. Over half (22) of the respondents were currently married, seven widowed, five divorced or separated, and four were unmarried. Of those 32 currently or previously married, 80% of these marriages were monogamous and 20% were polygamous marriages, which are also legal in Cameroon. All the women were Christian from different denominations: Catholic, Presbyterian, Baptist, and Pentecostal, except for one who said that she has no religion. Twenty-six respondents (72%) listed Bakweri as their tribal group, four affiliated with Wum and one each recorded their tribal group as Bakossi, Ndop, Befang, Maboh, and Bali. Tribal groups vary in terms of culture, traditional practices, and original geographical location; tribal affiliation might influence women's aspirations. Two of the respondents did not have children and answers were not marked for another two women. Otherwise, respondents had from one to up to 13 children with the average number of children being between four and five.



### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Five female graduates or soon to be graduates of the Women and Gender Studies Program at the University of Buea were recommended by their professor(s) to the researchers as being very able to conduct research interviews, having already had such experience in their degree programs. The researchers thought that having female Cameroonian interviewers would increase respondents' comfort level in the interviewing process, and hence permit the data to be more accurate and meaningful (Miles & Crush, 1993; Schoenberger, 1992).

Throughout the three week data collection process in November, 2006, the interviewers and researcher(s) met each morning and late afternoon in order to discuss the process of the research; troubleshoot any procedural problems; make any necessary adjustments; and discuss interviewers' reactions, insights, and understanding concerning the data they were gathering.<sup>5</sup>

The interviewers traveled together each morning to one of the seven villages in succession. They fanned out through the village and approached women regarding the possibility of participating in the research. Potential participants were informed about the affiliation of the authors conducting the research, that the research focused on the lives of regular Cameroonian women, and would involve an in-depth interview which would be tape recorded. More times than not, the women approached declined to participate. Their reasons included that they did not have the time, did not want to talk about themselves, and previously given information out to government representatives and that nothing was done on their behalf with this information. One person who refused thought the interviewer was a "spy." Nevertheless, usually by the third person they approached, interviewers received an invitation to enter the home of the potential respondent and relay more about the research particulars.

After receiving informed consent verbally, interviewers used a structured interview questionnaire consisting of 42 questions. The researchers used informed verbal consent rather than asking participants to sign a consent form in an attempt to be consistent with local research procedures and to respectfully accommodate those who would not be able to read a consent form. This article focuses primarily on data received from questions about respondents' own aspirations and hopes for their children such as, "What hopes did you have for your life when you were a little girl?", "Did these hopes change as you grew older?", "Were there any obstacles to stop you from becoming what you wanted?", "If you were to begin your life over again what would you do to avoid these obstacles?", "What are your hopes now for your life?", and "What are your hopes

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<sup>5</sup> Procedural problems included batteries running out or tape recorders breaking down. This was resolved by interviewers carrying extra batteries and having designated interviewers carry extra tape recorders. Walking long distances to and from villages was too taxing for the interviewers so they were provided with transport money to use taxis. Another problem that the interviewers initially discovered was that villagers assumed that they were government workers. The interviewing team and researchers talked about how to communicate very clearly that the research effort was not connected to the Cameroonian government. The need for follow-up questions was discussed during these meetings after researchers discovered a lack of clarity or completion in some of the information gathered. Sometimes the researchers' push to probe more during interviewing felt like criticism to the interviewers, so that issue needed to be processed for maintaining positive morale. Interviewees had emotional reactions to the participants' sense of self-importance or lack of self-worth as well as the hardships they were living through including serious health issues. This group discussion was supportive of the emotional needs of the interviewers who conducted intense interviews daily.



for your children?" One of the authors translated the questions originally written in English into Pidgin English and the interviewers further refined this translation so that it would be better understood by the respondents.

At the close of the first interview, respondents were asked if the interviewer could return for a second interview if the researchers were unclear about the interviewee's communications or needed additional information. Sometimes the interviewers did not ask follow-up questions during the first interview on points that the researchers thought needed elaboration, so the researcher(s) formulated questions for the second interview that would encourage explanation. For example, an interviewee who said that as a child she had hoped to be an electrician was asked during the second interview how she had acquired this aspiration. In another instance, the second interview permitted an interviewee, who had mentioned during the first interview that she continued going to primary school after her parents died, to elaborate about how she managed to accomplish that. Hence, the second interview served to enrich, particularize, and add complexity to the data collected. In all cases, the respondents agreed to a second interview. With the exception of one participant, the respondents wholeheartedly welcomed the interviewers back on their second visit, indicating that rapport had been built and that they felt positively about the interview process. Though a few said that it had been difficult to answer questions about themselves because they were not accustomed to thinking about themselves, 35 (97%) respondents said either that they had learned from the process, enjoyed meeting the interviewer, or were pleasantly surprised that researchers would be interested in their lives and ideas.

The interviewers completed one tape recorded interview each day. Within a couple of hours while the interview was fresh in mind, they transcribed the tape. These handwritten transcriptions (which were subsequently typed) were turned into the researcher(s) at the end of the day. After receiving each first interview transcript, at least one of the researchers searched for themes, contradictions, exceptions, and omissions and formulated questions for a follow-up interview for purposes of clarification and elaboration.

After the second interview was transcribed, the researchers searched for themes in light of this new or clarified information. An inductive analysis of the data allowed themes to be extracted from the typed transcripts of both first and second interviews. The authors read and reread these notes underlining phrases and ideas that appeared central to the respondents' communications as well as writing words or phrases in the margins to capture topics such as "multiple means of earning," "optimistic that children can make it," and "sickness in family." We compared responses between the respondents to extract themes (Patton, 2002, p. 465). Furthermore, we listed some of these emerging characteristics as headings of columns so that they could be tabulated. Column headings included "career dreams," "type of derailment of career dreams," "dreamt of marriage only," "dreams for their children," and "illness." Such tabulation was also a check that the data reflected our findings.

Feminist ethnography guided the selection of above methods used for conducting this research (Jacobs, 2004; Lengel, 1998; Naples, 2003). Power differentials between those researched and those conducting the research were considered from the inception, leading to diversity among the researchers and selection of Cameroonian interviewers. The Cameroonian researcher and interviewers had insider status, as advocated by some



feminist ethnographers, that enabled them to speak pidgin English and understand culturally laden communications and beliefs. Also training of interviewers encouraged the development of more egalitarian relationships with participants as proposed by this methodology. Reflective practice, indicative of feminist ethnographers, was instituted in daily meetings between the researcher(s) and interviewers. These open discussions helped researchers and interviewers be receptive to participants' perspectives and reflect upon their interactions with them. Furthermore, researchers dialogued throughout the research process as a means to check each others bias and distortions. In summary, feminist ethnography that stresses an ethic of caring and responsibility to those studied served as a compass in the conception of our methods as well as our team deliberations and field decisions.

## **Findings**

### *Case Vignette*

The accounting of our findings can be foreshadowed by introducing the reader to a representative respondent, Justine (a pseudonym). Although each woman in the sample has her own individual perspectives and challenges, Justine has issues and viewpoints that illustrate the research findings. We, the authors, thought that a case study might help the reader easily connect with the findings of the study. The authors composed this illustration based on what "Justine" communicated to the interviewer and note direct quotes in quotation marks. For illustrative purposes, suppose Justine is 44 years old and has six children, four girls and two boys. She is Christian, in a monogamous marriage, and has achieved a primary level education. (Particulars about her identifying information and small details of her story have been changed to keep her identity confidential).

Justine's parents could not afford to continue to pay for her schooling even though she had only reached the primary level. Her mother became ill with a disabling condition. Money that would have paid for her school fees was redirected to her mother's health care. Justine married her husband at age 14. They came from the same village and grew up together. As a child, he repeatedly told her that she was going to be his wife. He "corrupted me (her) with his sweet words." Justine got pregnant and promptly married. She wanted to get married to be "like others" and had "developed that interest for him." She thought that "marriage was just everything because I didn't understand what life was." Though she regrets not having finished school first so that she could have become the teacher she had wanted to be, she enjoys her life. A supportive husband and the equivalent of household earnings of 10 USD per week allow her to "get some of the things that I want" and live the way that she wants to live apart from suffering from an "aching arm." Occasionally, she has been able to pay for medical care at the hospital and from a traditional healer, but her arm pain has not abated.

Justine enjoys doing all the things that she believes make her a good mother, such as household chores, farming and selling. Her husband helps her with the farm work which provides food for their family of six children. Any extra produce, along with food that she cooks, she sells along the roadside. From these meager earnings and her husband's small earnings from construction work, she attempts to pay for their children's school fees and to have sufficient money to engage socially in a woman's group.

Even though she is proud that she has worked hard in every way to make a profit, if given a second chance to relive her life, she would have taken it upon herself as a child



to do trading to bring in enough money to pay for her own school fees. With an education, she believes she would have earned more and been able to meet her own needs and the needs of her children with relative ease. These additional earnings would have meant a great deal to her because she would have been able to assist her brother's children which she cannot do today because of her limited means.

Justine regards education as bringing in more benefits than just money. "If you aren't educated," Justine claims, "you don't know what you are doing." She imagines that as an educated woman she would have had the opportunity to meet and know many people from whom she could have learned a lot. To this day she regrets not being able to read and write. She moves on in the conversation and in her life to the importance of supporting her children so that they can go to school. She hopes that they become teachers, accountants, and financial managers. She knows that her husband alone cannot afford them the opportunities to be what they want to be. She hopes for a long life so that she can remain an effective sponsor for her children and give them the support that had been unavailable to her. She reveals that her aching arm gets in the way of her work and she worries continuously about how to provide her children's school fees.

She has confidence that her children will be successful, barring some unforeseen circumstances such as witchcraft. She advises them to concentrate on their "bookwork," avoid bad company, and take on the responsibility of caring for her in her old age.

This vignette illustrates that as a child Justine had a dream that was aborted by a family mishap. Once derailed while living in poverty, she remained permanently derailed. Nevertheless, she stayed invested in life, and with her husband she does all that she can through farming and petty trading in the hopes that her children will have the education that she so values but was denied. Even as she worries about diminished productivity because of her aching arm, she maintains a positive view of her children's future, and directs them toward responsibility and achievement with her advice and support.

#### *Hopes for a Career/Trade/Job*

Eight respondents, seven of whom had never been to school, had considered marriage as their exclusive destiny. However, the overwhelming majority of respondents, like Justine, had dreamt of following a chosen career path. As young girls, in addition to expecting to marry and have children, 27 (75%) respondents wanted to have a profession, trade, or lucrative job to be "big and responsible." They dreamt of becoming a nurse or teacher (12 respondents), seamstress or hairdresser (six), office worker, administrator or business person (five), doctor (one), electrician (one), magistrate (one) or customs officer (one).

Some prefaced statements about their dream career choice by saying that they knew their parents did not have money for them to complete their schooling. They reactively shaped their aspirations to comply with reality, such as desiring to be a seamstress rather than to achieve professional status. This ability to adapt and accommodate to the reality of their lives is a prominent feature exhibited in this data.

Also, their career aspirations were in accord with gender roles, such as being a seamstress or a nurse. They aspired to positions that they observed women could assume. One woman who envisioned being an electrician had witnessed a role model: "I used to admire the way she dressed and also how she used to work with electrical cables. So I wanted to be like her."



Children dream about what they know, therefore the trades and professions that they mentioned are activities and roles that they encountered in their own lives to varying degrees. The respondents who talked about working in an office were vague about what their job would actually be. Rather, they gave a surface description that they would dress well for work, take home a regular pay check, and not have to do difficult farm labor.

#### *Hopes Derailed Early*

Just as it happened to Justine, all of the women respondents who dared to dream of a specific career path had their dreams derailed. Some respondents (seven) explained that their dreams shattered when they could not pursue their education simply because poverty was too severe and their parents lacked money for school fees. Usually they mentioned some event(s) or situation(s) that put them over the edge, such as when one of their parents died (eight) or both of their parents died (six); a brother died who provided financial support (one); a parent fell ill causing earnings to decrease and/or a family member's illness diverted household earnings to pay for medical care (three); they got married at young ages (eight); they got pregnant and had to stop their schooling (two); corruption blocked a respondent's advancement (two); parents did not equally value educating their daughters or disabled child (three); and/or they were expected to care for their younger brothers and sisters rather than attend school (two).

*Illness in family of origin.* Justine attributes her mother's illness as toppling her teaching aspirations. Indeed the data shows that poverty and illness are interconnected and that familial illnesses contributed to the derailment of some respondents' dreams. Their families of origin were poor and their parents struggled to meet their children's basic needs and send them to school. Operating on such scarce resources meant that parents could not offset any increasing cost or mishap. Illnesses in the family were held responsible by three respondents for overturning their dreams. An illness within the family could deplete parental resources by the cost of even minimal healthcare. When parents grew ill and incapacitated, they were prevented from laboring as strenuously. One respondent simply stated how illness diverted her life's direction: "I wanted to be a teacher as a little girl, but in class six all my hopes changed; my father fell ill and there was no money, no one to pay for my education." In many cases, illness broke a rung in the ladder that the parents were attempting to provide for the respondents. These respondents attributed the deepening of poverty to the onset of familial illness which separated them from their career aspirations.

#### *Deaths within family of origin*

Sometimes illnesses lead to deaths which definitively destroyed dreams. Fourteen (39%) of the respondents had lost at least one parent during childhood and six (17%) of these respondents experienced the death of both of their parents. One respondent was age seventeen when her father died and she could not complete the very last stretch of secondary school. Financially, his death not only deprived the family of the earnings of his labor, but much of the assets of the family were confiscated by his family of origin. (In Cameroonian law, a widow of a monogamous marriage has a right to a third of her husband's property, but often "customary law" or tradition allows the husband's family of origin to dispossess the widow. Frequently, the widow does not employ legal proceedings due to fear of "witchcraft"). She explained how necessity required her



sacrifice, "My uncles were taking property from us. I dropped from school so that my younger brothers and sisters could also attain a certain level of education with combined help from my mother and I."

Another respondent explained how her brother's death impeded her achievement. Her older brother paid for her training as a tailor and purchased a sewing machine for her that was promptly stolen. She could not afford another and hesitated to ask him to replace it. He died suddenly and she lamented, "If he were alive, I might not have gotten married when I did and I would have been a big and prosperous tailor today."

Parents need to make hard choices as they weigh where to put their meager resources so that their family has the best chance for survival. A respondent with physical disabilities had wanted to go to the university, but knew that she had to scale back her ambition. She asked her mother to send her to trade school, but her mother "didn't think it was worth it to send a disabled child to school." Her father died when she was a toddler and her mother asked her to wait until the other children completed their schooling. Her turn never came. Her mother died when she turned twenty. She remained in her parents home and sells food that she cooks outside her door to passers-by because she cannot physically get to the marketplace. She worries that she will not be able to support her only child past elementary school.

#### *Pregnancy terminates schooling*

Although not the reason for her dropping out of school in the first place, Justine, as a teenager, became pregnant, which is in itself a reason why some girls must forgo their education. Two respondents who became pregnant were not given the option or were not encouraged to return to school following their delivery. These respondents thought their fathers perceived them as a "burden" following their pregnancy or were "indifferent to the matter." A respondent in this situation had told her father that she wanted to go back to school, but he alleged that there was no longer money to send all four of his children to school. She disbelieved: "I have the feeling that my father was not interested in sending me back to school . . . because our family situation had not changed from what it used to be before I got pregnant."

The first author's professional experience, in working with women and girls as a social worker and lawyer, confirms that a Cameroonian girl who becomes pregnant is likely to receive disapproving social pressure from the first day it is known to the day she gives birth to the child. Often parents would withdraw her from school and sometimes send her to learn a trade such as dressmaking and house-keeping. Education for daughters is not yet a priority for many parents; girls are meant for marriage. Indeed, if she conceived with an older man and he asks to marry her, this offer is usually accepted by the girl's family.

#### *Early marriage by default*

Justine married at a young age and this alone can be a barrier preventing girls from completing their education. Clearly, most of the respondents' parents believed that their daughters should go to school for at least some primary years of education. Without adequate funding to attend school, early marriage became the fallback. In some instances, marriage was parentally arranged when respondents were very young; this precluded the



respondents from continuing in school. One respondent who wanted to be a nurse explains how her father accepted the “bride price” and consigned her into marriage:

My father took money from a man behind my back. I wasn't given any opportunity or right to say anything about it . . . I thought of how I was going to abandon school when I really wanted to study. I couldn't believe that I was going to leave school without any certificate. I cried and cried.

Sometimes when their fathers ask them to get married, the women felt little choice in the matter. Respondents themselves strongly valued marriage and poverty itself showed girls that their only option was to marry:

My father couldn't even afford to send me for a trade so I got married and became a housewife and mother. My father asked me to get married. I had to show respect so I did. I had refused the first two suitors and was afraid that if I didn't accept the third one there wouldn't be another.

Another respondent who wanted to be a teacher explained matter-of-factly, “there was no one to pay for my education so I looked forward to being a housewife.” Typically, soon after marriage, the teenage girls or young women become pregnant and their lives become focused solely on family preservation, their dreams given up. There is immediate familial and societal pressure on newly married couples to begin to have children, thus the formal educational opportunities of these respondents were virtually over when they married. None of these young married women resumed their education, although later in life, one respondent mentioned that her husband offered to assist her financially to attend trade school. Another respondent whose father could not afford to further her education prior to her marriage appealed to her husband to allow her to continue, but he “had no interest in sending me to school.” She offered the explanation, “Men feel that when they send their wives to school the wives may divorce them when they become rich and self-reliant.”

### *Corruption*

With poverty, early marriage, parental illness and death, gender and disabilities discrimination, and early pregnancies confronting respondents, there is a gauntlet of obstacles bringing down their dreams. Additionally, two respondents identified that systemic corruption impeded their path. One respondent mentioned that even in public competitive exams there is “bribery and corruption.” She turned away from her dreams when she realized that “you can be very intelligent, but you will not succeed. I felt discouraged when I found that there will be no one to bribe for me.”

### *Facing Reality: Change Focus*

Justine did not stew over the fact that she was not able to become a teacher. She, along with other respondents, moved on from their early hopes and faced the realities of their lives. Without the option of realizing their dreams, they committed themselves to farming in order to feed their families and/or to earn additional cash through selling farm products or other petty trading. Some respondents farmed more than others and sold farm products as a mainstay of their earnings. Others did all kinds of petty trading, such as



selling their homemade foods, e.g., bean cakes, corn beer, acra, fish pie, and puff-puffs (a donut-like pastry). Some respondents would buy goods, such as local beers, and transport them from a city for sale in their villages. In other words, respondents embraced motherhood and devoted themselves to cultivating food and earning money in ways they found available to them. A respondent who had wanted to be a nurse now farmed, purchased jewelry and shoes from the city to sell in her village, and informally styled hair. The accounts of respondents depicted their resiliency, determination, hard work, and investment in facing life after environmental burdens tore them away from their dreams.

#### *Dreams for Children to Succeed*

Justine's dream is that her children will receive the education that she did not obtain and have professional jobs that escaped her. Similarly, almost all the respondents who were mothers replaced their personal hopes with dreams for their children. They want their children to receive training or education that will allow them to access jobs that will permit easier lives than they themselves were afforded, as illustrated in the following comments: "All I can do now is to struggle and take good care of my children, to educate them so that they will not go through what I have experienced when they are grown-ups," "My life is my children . . . want my children to reach the position that was destined for me," and "I pass my dreams onto my children. I register them in different trades and provide what they will need to be well trained." Most were concerned with raising their children to live beyond survival struggles, but some wanted their children to be administrators, pastors, and doctors, and one wished her son to be president.

#### *Illness is Obstacle*

In spite of her serious arm pain, Justine performs farm labor and sells baked goods to help pay for her children's school fees. She only worries that her health problems may prevent her from working hard enough and long enough on her children's behalf. It is a real worry because illness prevented 16 (44%) respondents, half of whom were under age 50, from working harder on behalf of their children and most, regardless of age, hoped that their health would recover so that they could do so. Usually they could not afford medical care and hence had to endure health risks, discomfort, and/or pain. One representative comment shows the devastating impact of illness: "the greatest suffering I have had in my life is because of my sickness. Because of my sickness, I have become very poor and desperate . . . I can farm very well but my illness has broken me. I am no longer efficient." Several believed that their pains were caused by injuries suffered from performing rigorous farm work. Some older and sick respondents held onto the hope of helping their children through financial trials. One such respondent states, "If I don't plant crops on my farm, my family cannot eat. Even though I am sick now, I still struggle to farm and make ends meet for my family."

Eight (25%) members of the sample offered, without being asked, that they had had one or more children who had died. One respondent, who suffered from the deaths of six of her children, believed that their lives could have been saved if she and her husband had been able to afford medical care for them. At the time of the interview, two of her remaining children were ill. Four other respondents mentioned that one or more of their children had serious illnesses. A third of the respondents mentioned that their husbands had died. It is likely that if they were asked directly about their own health, the health of



their immediate family members, or any deaths that had occurred, these numbers would have been higher.

#### *Desire to Expand Earnings*

In the same doggedly determined way, many respondents expressed hopes of expanding their trading or farming incrementally so that they could have better chances of adequately feeding their children, paying their school fees, or purchasing trade tools for them. Representatively, this respondent wanted to keep her children on a path toward realizing their dreams: "If I have money I will expand my business to sell groundnuts (peanuts) and rice beans in large quantities so that I can sponsor my children properly" (i.e. pay school fees). Most respondents, however, recognized that they are caught up in trying to make ends meet and cannot even make minor changes to advance their earning power unless they have the good fortune of receiving minor financial support. Again and again, respondents voiced their motivation to provide for their children's and in some cases their grandchildren's, present and future well-being. They know what to do, but often lack the little funding it would take to put their plans into effect.

#### **Conclusion**

Like Justine, many of the respondents conveyed that besides getting married, they had wanted an education and envisioned themselves having a career. They had career goals in contrast to the "culture of poverty" concept that generational immersion in poverty leads to the absence of dreams. These aspirations were thwarted early in life by poverty often punctuated by becoming pregnant or married at a young age, parents' deaths, illnesses within their families of origin that drained resources, and/or favoritism of educating male children. Extreme poverty sometimes combined with gender roles that geared girls to become the family caretaker, created obstacles to their career aspirations. The poverty was so severe that any derailment of their early aspirations became a permanent one that could not be overcome.

Consequently, they realized early on that predetermination rather than self-determination was to be the framework for their lives. Even so, these women did not become hopeless, helpless, and without initiative in accord with the "culture of poverty" concept. Rather, they overwhelmingly stayed invested in working and providing for their families and hoped that their children would find openings for success and escape from subsistence living.

They appeared to have adjusted to reality and moved on in their lives. As adults living in poverty in the Cameroonian context, formal education was no longer possible for them. Neither did they have access to training in dressmaking and housekeeping offered by the national Women Empowerment Centers set up to raise women's standard of living. For the most part, the women we interviewed could not meet the eligibility requirements for such training, which included completion of primary school and partial payment of the training. Furthermore, without capital or access to landed property, our respondents did not have the option of acquiring loans to start commercial activities. Hence, they resorted to farming, which requires very little capital investment but a great deal of physical labor. Some used the savings earned from farm produce to buy basic commodities to sell in order to reap meager profits.



Most respondents wished for a small loan from a family member so that they could incrementally increase their farming or petty trade in order to help their children be free of the mire of poverty that held them in place. Not all of this is self-sacrifice and exclusively for the well-being of their children. They consider their children as their “old age pension,” and their last hope to escape the survival tightrope. Cameroonian society stresses this reciprocal relationship between parents and children. Some successful children are able to build their parents better houses, provide them with regular allowances, and pay their medical bills. The women respondents reported working hard in attempt to help their children succeed, so that in turn the children will put an end to their economic distress during their elder years. Though some of the women respondents in their sixties received allowances from their children, these familial old age pensions did not lift them out of poverty.

The connection between illness and poverty is highlighted by the data. The number of illnesses and early deaths in their family of origin and in their marital home, which respondents brought up spontaneously, was disheartening. Respondents connected illnesses in their family of origin with further impoverishment of their families and elimination of chances to delay marriage and purchase further schooling. Similarly, many confronted illnesses and deaths in their marital family in regards to loss of children and early loss of husbands, which left them in despair and sometimes with increasing financial deprivation and stress. Furthermore, some attached the intensity and strenuousness of their workload, particularly farming, with causing debilitating pain and illness that threatened their ability to work, survive, and advance the well-being of their children. Most of the ill respondents could not afford to pay for medical care. When women fall sick, their entire family is often affected because of the multiplicity of roles that they serve in the family. When a woman herself is sick and she cannot afford her treatment, she recognizes how her inability, albeit unintentional, is causing hardship to the family. This vicious cycle between poverty and illness deepens and worsens both.

In summary, this research shows that the “culture of poverty” concept used by some proponents to explain generational poverty is not applicable to these rural women participants living in “third world” poverty. In contrast to the claims of the “culture of poverty,” these women do not give up and purport to be helpless; they generally remain committed to laboring in order to support their families and advance their children in spite of the odds against them. Like Justine with her painful arm, they report working even when they are ill or have chronic pain. When their own dreams are destroyed, they looked toward advancing the economic prospects of their children. Most express themselves as eager for a small advance to expand their trade or farming endeavors to be able to eke out more earnings. It appears that in face of the reality of their lives, they manage overall to remain somewhat hopeful and encourage their children to make more of their own lives. Although this study, with its limitations, certainly cannot claim to disprove the “culture of poverty” construct, it does stack up on the side of that body of research that weighs against tagging the character, attitudes, and viewpoints of individuals living in poverty, for the reasons that poverty continues to grip their lives.



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