



Original Research

Circumstances Surrounding the Occurrence of Rape among Survivors in Three Referral Hospitals in Yaoundé, Cameroon

Circonstances entourant la survenance du viol parmi les survivantes dans trois hôpitaux de référence à Yaoundé, Cameroun

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. Sexual assault is a global health and legal challenge. Nowadays it does not only affect women and girls, but also men and boys of all ages with adverse physical and psycho-social consequences in the lives of the survivors. The aim of the study was to describe the circumstances surrounding occurrence of rape among survivors received in three referral hospitals in Yaoundé, Cameroon. **Materials and Methods.** This was a prospective descriptive study carried out over a period of 8 months among participants of all age groups visiting three 3 referral hospitals in Yaoundé. A questionnaire was used to collect participant's data from medical records, and data collected was entered and analyzed using SPSS version 23.0. **Results.** During the study period, 127 cases of rape were recorded. The socio-demographic profile of survivors was mainly female (99.2%), with the mostly represented age ranged from 10 to 15 years (25.2%). Students (61.4%) were the most represented among survivors of sexual assault. Sexual assault usually occurred in the day (41%), at the victim's or rapist's home (39.4%) with verbal threats (27%) as the main constraint and the assaulter usually unknown (51.2%). Vaginal penetration was common in most cases (78%). **Conclusion.** Rape remains a prominent fact in our society, with children mainly affected. Understanding the circumstances that lead to the occurrence of rape is a step in prevention. Preventing rape involves raising public awareness.

RÉSUMÉ

Introduction. Les agressions sexuelles et le viol en particulier, représentent un problème medico-légal majeur. Leurs conséquences tant physique que psychosociale sont désastreuses. La prévention constitue un véritable challenge. Notre travail avait pour objectif de décrire les circonstances dans lesquelles sont survenues les agressions sexuelles chez les survivants pris en charge dans trois hôpitaux de référence de la ville de Yaoundé au Cameroun. **Matériels et Méthodes.** Une étude prospective et descriptive a été conduite pendant une période de huit mois dans trois hôpitaux de référence à Yaoundé. Un questionnaire a été utilisé pour collecter les données à partir des dossiers de patients admis pour agression sexuelle avec pénétration du vagin ou de l'anus (viol). Les données obtenues ont été analysées à l'aide du logiciel SPSS version 23.0. **Résultats.** Pendant la période de l'étude, 127 cas de viol ont été reçus. Les femmes étaient les principales victimes (99,2%). La tranche d'âge la plus représentée était celle de 10 à 15 ans (25,2%). Les élèves représentaient 61,4% des survivants. Les agressions sexuelles survenaient principalement de jour (41%), au domicile du survivant ou de son agresseur (39,4%). Ces agressions étaient perpétrées le plus souvent en usant de menaces verbales (27%). L'agresseur était généralement connu de la victime (51,2%). La pénétration vaginale était la plus employée par les agresseurs (78%). **Conclusion.** Les enfants sont les principales victimes de viol. Comprendre les circonstances entourant les agressions sexuelles constitue une étape importante dans la mise en place de moyens de prévention.

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INTRODUCTION

Sexual assault is a global health and legal challenge that has been a neglected area of research in our country. Rape is a form of sexual assault, a public health problem and a human right violation [1]. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines rape as physically forced or otherwise coerced 'penetration – even if slight – of the vulva or

anus, using a penis, other body parts or an object [2]. It is a silent drama that requires a better approach to its eradication. The aim of this study is to determine the circumstances surrounding the occurrence of rape among survivors in three referral hospitals in Yaoundé, Cameroon. The results of the present study would provide

useful data for decision making in order to prevent the occurrence of rape.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was a descriptive and prospective study carried out in three (03) referral hospitals located in the Centre Region of Cameroon, particularly in the city of Yaoundé, namely the Yaoundé Central Hospital (YCH), the Yaoundé Gyneco-Obstetric and Pediatric Hospital (YGOPH) and the Yaoundé Emergency Center (popularly known by its French acronym as CURY). We included all participants with a clinical diagnosis of sexual assault received at these hospitals between November 2019 and June 2020 inclusive. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Ethical Review board of the Faculty of Medicine and Biomedical sciences and administrative authorizations were obtained from the directors of each hospital. After consultation with the attending physician, participant information was gotten using a pre-established and pretested questionnaire. The confidentiality of participants was ensured. Data entry template was created in Epi-data version 3.1 and later transferred to and analyzed using Statistical package for social sciences version 23.0 in a password-protected computer. Study variables included age, gender, profession, marital status, time and location of assault, type of constraint, type of penetration and relationship to the assaulter. Data were analyzed using Excel 2007 software.

RESULTS

During the study period, 127 cases of rape were recorded. Majority of the survivors in the study population were females (126/127; 99.2%). The 10-15 years age group was the most represented (32/127; 25.2%). Students were the most represented among survivors of rape (82/127; 64.6%). Majority of the survivors were single (118/127; 92.9%) and those with a job accounted for 22.8% of the survivors (Table I).

Table I: Socio-demographic characteristics of the study population

Variables	n	%
Gender		
Male	01	0.8
Female	126	99.2
Age		
[1-5[	15	11.8
[5-10[	25	19.7
[10-15[	32	25.2
[15-20[	18	14.2
[20-25[	14	11.0
[25-30[	13	10.2
[30-35[	5	3.9
[35-40[	2	1.6
[40-45[	1	0.8
[45-50[	2	1.6
Profession		
Student	82	64.6
Pupil	16	12.6
Public sector worker	12	9.4
Private sector worker	17	13.4
Marital Status		
Single	118	92.9
Married	9	7.1

As shown in table II, most of the survivors report that the assault occurred mostly in the day (52/127; 41%). Majority of sexual assault took place at the victim's or rapist's home (50/127; 39.4%). In 33.8% of cases, sexual assault took place in a public place, including schools, cars, and bushes. Two (02) types of constraints were mainly used by the assaulter, verbal threats in 27.6% of cases (35/127) and armed threats in 26.8% of cases (34/127) with items such as knives, cutlasses and guns. Vaginal penetration was the major form of penetration among the survivors (108/127; 85%).

Table II: Distribution of study population according to time and place of assault, type of constraint and type of penetration

Variables	n	%
Time of Assault		
Day	52	41
Night	47	37
Unspecified	28	22
Place of assault		
Home	50	39.4
Bush	24	18.9
School	12	9.4
Workplace	2	1.6
Car	7	5.5
Unspecified	32	25.2
Type of constraint		
Physical	16	12.6
Armed	34	26.8
Threats	35	27.6
Persuasion	13	10.2
Unspecified	29	22.8
Type of Penetration		
Vaginal	108	85
Anal	10	7.9
Vaginal-anal	8	6.3
Vaginal-oral	1	0.8

As shown in table III, the perpetrator of the assault was unknown in 51% of the cases (65/127). In the remainder 49% of cases where the assaulter was known, it was either a family connection in 22% of cases (father, brother, uncle, husband, cousin), a neighbour in 12.6% of cases (16/127) or a classmate in 5.5% of cases (5/127).

Table III: Distribution of study population according to relationship with assaulter

Relationship with assaulter	n	%
Unknown	65	51.2
Family connection	28	22
Friendship connection	6	4.7
Neighbour	16	12.6
Teacher	2	1.6
Colleague	3	2.4
Classmate	7	5.5

DISCUSSION

Preventing rape involves the understanding of the circumstances that lead to its occurrence in order to raise public awareness.

Socio-demographic characteristics

In our study we included 127 survivors of sexual assault. Majority of the survivors of rape in our study were female. This is similar to studies by several authors who found a

female predominance of survivors of sexual assault [3–6]. This is common in our African culture that fosters beliefs of perceived male superiority and social and cultural inferiority of women. Women and girls are vulnerable and need to be protected. In our study, those aged 10 to 15 years were more represented. This high representativeness of minors was noted by several authors [3,4,7–10]. This is also the case by Mbaye et al., who had detected an average age of 13 years for victims [11]. For this phenomenon of rape, underage girls are therefore a vulnerable segment of society. This can be explained by the fact that they are immature, docile and easily manipulated, without any decision-making power. Singles were the most represented among survivors of sexual assault. This was not a surprising finding in our study, as infancy and adolescence constituted the majority of survivors. This result is similar to several studies carried out in a group of sexually abused females in Cameroon [4,12], Senegal [8] and Ethiopia [13].

Time and place of assault

Most of the survivors reported that the assault occurred mostly in the day (41%). This observation was made by Mamadou Makhtar et al. in Senegal [14] who found that 53.4% of survivors were assaulted in the day. This is because children in the course of the day are usually separated from their parents due to their parent's professional constraints or even because the survivors were at school or visiting a friend, thus escaping parental control. However, this was different from several studies carried out by Foumane et al. and Traore et al. in Mali who found that assault occurred mainly at night in 51.8% [4] and 72% [6], respectively. In our study, 39.4% of the sexual assault took place at the victim's or rapist's home. These findings were similar to a study carried out by Faye et al. in Dakar, who found that 36% of rape cases took place at the victim's or rapist's home [15].

Types of constraints

Two main types of constraints were observed in our study: the use of threats, mainly verbal, which was common in 27.6% of cases and armed constraints was observed in 26.8% of cases. This differs from studies carried out by Foumane et al. at the YGOPH in Cameroon and Traore et al. at the Gabriel Toure Teaching Hospital in Mali, where physical constraints, were the main types of constraint in 55.8% of cases [4] and 40.82% of cases [6], respectively. This difference can be explained by the fact that more adults were found in their study compared to ours which necessitated more physical effort for the assaulter to carry out the act.

Type of penetration

Vaginal penetration was the major form of penetration among the survivors (85.0%). This rate is similar to that observed by Foumane et al. who had a rate of 87.8% in Cameroon [4] and slightly higher than the 67.3% [6], 65.8% [8] and 61% [16] observed by Traore, Diallo and Cisse in Senegal, respectively. Though our figures differ slightly, vaginal penetration is almost the rule during rape. These results justify once again the need to systematically

prevent the occurrence of STIs, HIV infection and unwanted pregnancies in sexual assault survivors.

Relationship with assaulter

Contrary to the findings reported by many authors in Cameroon and worldwide [3,6,10] the assaulter was usually unknown in 51.2% of cases in our study. However, Foumane et al. in Cameroon, M. Diallo et al. in Senegal and Facuri et al. in Brazil reported similar findings, with the assaulter unknown in 67.2% [4], 74.8% [8] and 69.2% [17] of cases, respectively. When known, there was a family connection between the assaulter and the survivor in 22.0% of cases. This is almost similar to the 25.5% found by Ngo Um Meka et al [18]; but in the other hand our findings is a lower figure than the 31.4% and 60.5% of cases of intra-familial rape reported by Menick [3] and Foumane et al. [4] in Cameroon, respectively and higher than the 5% reported by M. Diallo et al. in Senegal [8].

CONCLUSION

Rape is common in our setting among infants and adolescents. the assault occurred mostly in the day. the sexual assault usually take place at the victim's or rapist's home. the use of threats, mainly verbal, and armed constraints is common. Vaginal penetration is the major form of penetration observed. the assaulter is usually unknown and when known, there is often a family connection between the assaulter and the survivor. Therefore, there is a need to build comprehensive interventions in order to prevent rape in our setting. Understanding the circumstances that lead to the occurrence of rape is a step in prevention.

Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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