

WUCWO



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CONRAD N.



FOUNDATION



A shout from the heart of African women

Preliminary Results

Discrimination and violence of women in Africa

June 2023



INTRODUCTION

"Listening to transform lives" is the motto of the World Women's Observatory (WWO) created in June 2021 by the World Union of Catholic Women's Organisation (WUCWO). Its mission is to give visibility to women who seem "invisible", especially the most vulnerable, in order to inspire and generate: pastoral strategies by the Church; synergies by civil society NGOs; public policies by States; contributions to the international agenda and positive responses from every person of good will that can favour the integral human development of women, their families, communities and peoples.

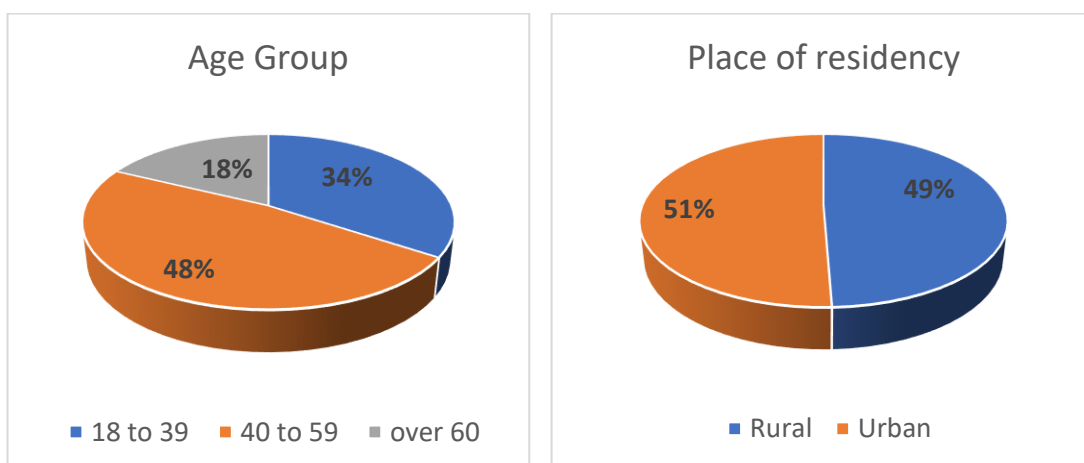
Through the project in Africa, "Violence and discrimination against women", we want to give a voice to those who continue to suffer in silence. We also listened to testimonies about the work that many religious and lay women have been doing for many years on the ground on behalf of those who suffer from violence and discrimination. It is our intention to raise awareness through a social campaign that collects the experience and life stories of women survivors of violence and/or discrimination, and through the dissemination of specific reports on these issues. In short, we want to listen and give visibility and then to transform the reality of gender-based violence and discrimination, eradicating them through the networking of congregations and organisations in society.

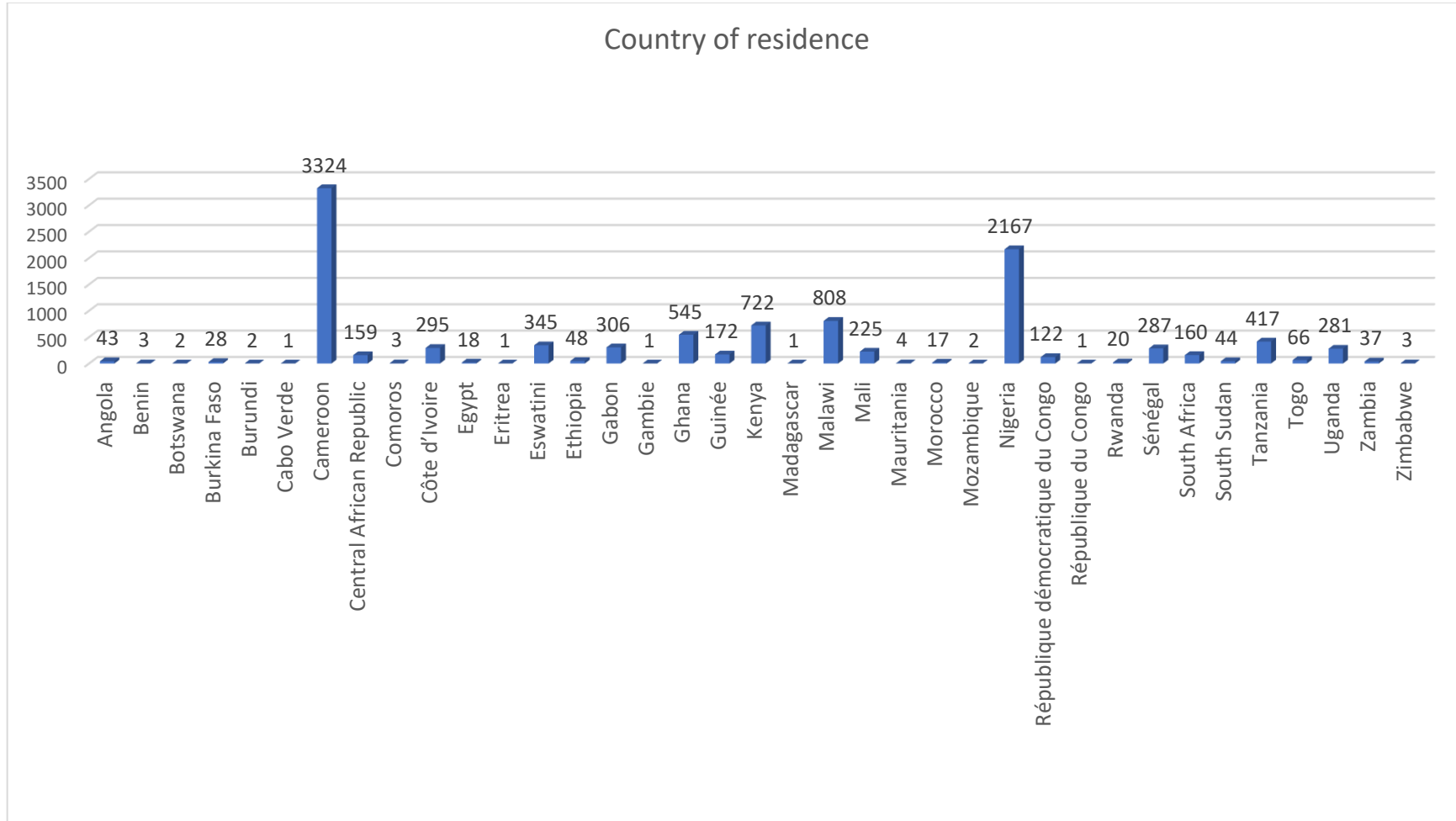
It is also our intention, through workshops, and webinars, to train women as pastoral co-responsibles in the prevention and care of victims and in raising awareness of gender-based violence and discrimination.

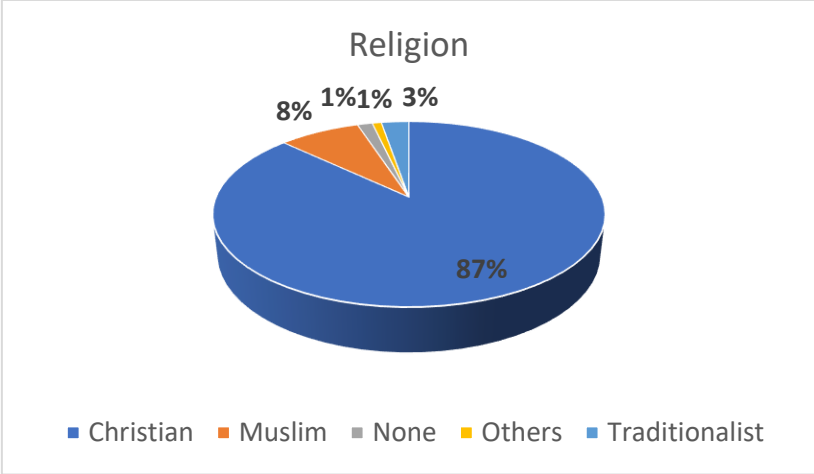
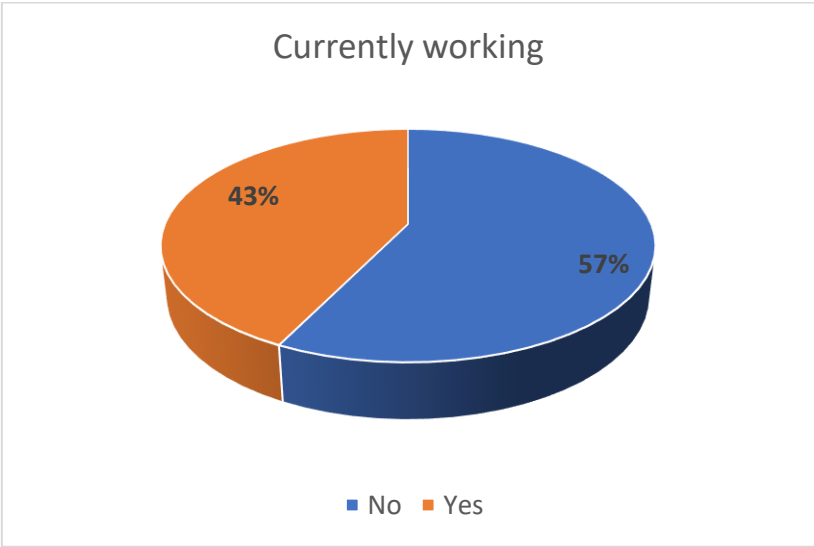
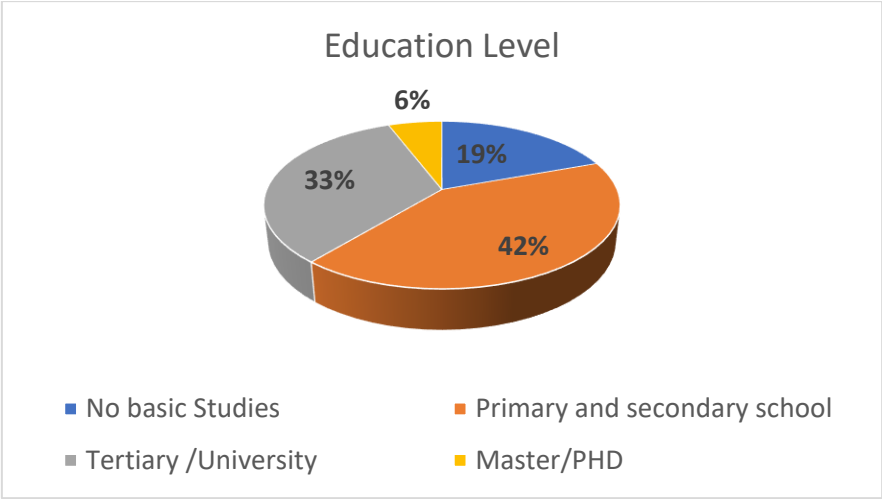
Therefore, we want to promote sustainable links between secular institutions and religious congregations, in order to generate a stable network to constantly update social campaigns, the promotion of projects and the different advocacy actions necessary to prevent violence and discrimination against women.

SNAPSHOT OF RESPONDENTS

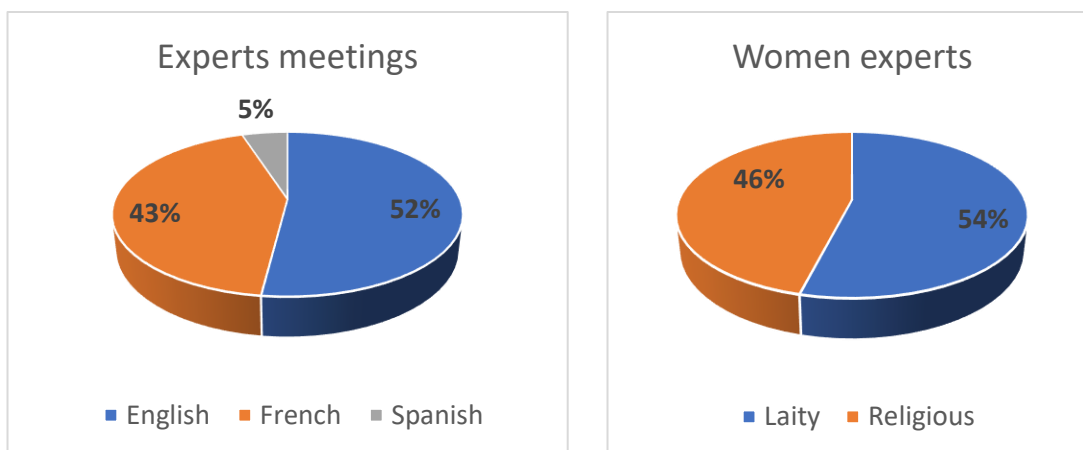
Characterisation of the 10,680 women who answered the survey







Characterisation of participants in meetings with 110 women experts



FROM 36 countries: Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burundi, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Madagascar, Mauritania, Morocco, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Seychelles, South Africa, South Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

LISTENING TO AFRICAN WOMEN

We listened to African women through two channels: expert meetings and the dissemination and completion of a survey entitled "A shout from the heart of African women"¹. For 5 months, we listened to **10,790 African women from 37 different countries**. Among them, **110 are women experts**, working permanently in contact with their communities, who shared in groups the expressions of violence and discrimination against women in their countries and enriched the exchange with the contribution they have been making from their institutions in the territory for many years. Of these experts, 59 are lay women and 51 are religious women.

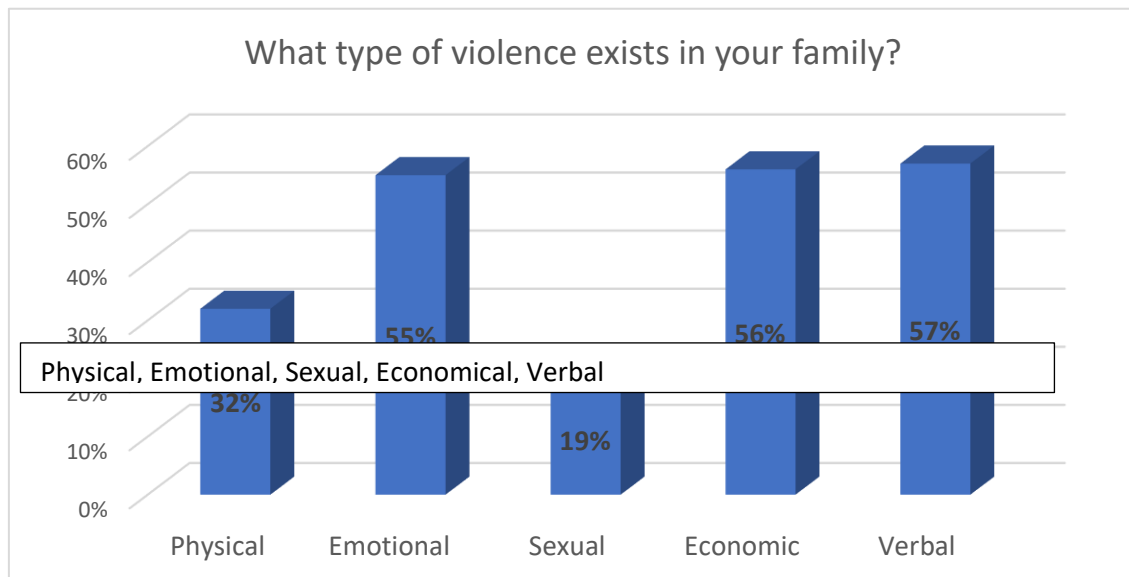
Through the completion of the survey, we also listened to **10,680 women of** different social status, educational level, ethnic groups and religions; women to whom we wanted to give the opportunity to express themselves and be heard, from the Observatory, in order to make them visible.

This first listening step allowed us to understand that, in Africa, a patriarchal and male-dominated culture still persists in most countries. Hence, almost all social structures tend to discriminate and violate the human rights of women and girls. It is visible at all levels, at home, at school and even at work, and unfortunately women often resign themselves to it. These problems start in childhood and affect all ages and levels, women who stay in the village as well as the professionals.

Violence adopts many forms: psychological, verbal, physical, sexual, economic and, increasingly, online violence. Discrimination is seen in education, choice of marriage, pregnancy, widowhood, work and potential professional growth. Poverty and the lack of the minimum to lead a dignified human life perpetuate these ailments, constituting an obstacle to development and peace.

¹ To access the surveys in 5 languages, visit the Global Observatory for Women website <https://www.worldwomensobservatory.org/en/copia-de-encuestas-discriminacion>

The results of the surveys show that 39% of women do not suffer from gender-based violence within their families; 7% prefer not to answer to this aspect, and 54% of women state that they suffer from gender-based violence in their families. The different types of violence are explained in the following proportions:



Among the common problems that many countries in the African continent are currently facing the following have been most mentioned: forced and early marriage; loneliness and abandonment; economic violence; human trafficking; domestic violence; and lack of access to high quality education and job training. In this section, we summarise some of the testimonies collected in these meetings and we share some of the conclusions of the surveys that complement the analysis of the listening.

It was also possible to gather different recommendations expressed by African women: the importance of prevention and continuous awareness-raising; the strength of networking; the need to change some laws; the value of women's empowerment for their greater autonomy; the key to greater access to education and the scope of public policies that favour women.

The following is preliminary analysis of the attentive listening that we have been engaged in during this first phase of our project in Africa.

1) Forced and early marriage;

"The woman is the property of the man. The wife is expected to be submissive". (KENYA)

Harmful traditional practices continue in many African countries. One problem we heard very frequently from women experts is that of early and forced marriages, with the characteristic of early pregnancies and the need to leave school as a consequence. Of the 10,680 women surveyed, 17% acknowledged having been victims of forced and/or early marriages.

In Zimbabwe, "there is a high rate of unwanted pregnancies and early marriages, which leads to a vicious cycle of rape and endless discrimination", according to Zimbabwean women experts.

From Tanzania: "Many girls get pregnant, suffer a lot and have no right to speak out or fight". Likewise, "forced marriages and traditional rites that force women to have sex with their husbands even when their health is failing are a daily reality in Benin". Meanwhile, in Ghana, "child marriages are increasingly common because girls are forced to marry, especially men who are old enough to be their grandfathers".

Zambian women experts told us that "in rural areas most girls are not educated, because at 15 they are exposed to married life, and this is the time when they suffer the most and feel the least valued". This is also the case in Tanzania, where "girls get married from 12 to 15 years old, while boys are allowed to marry at 18. Because of poverty, "some parents give their children into early marriage thinking that this will save the family's wealth", as is the case in the Central African Republic. Even actions such as "giving one's daughter in marriage in payment of a debt owed" are normal, for example, in Guinea Bissau.

Many experts from different countries promote and demand a change in the laws that rule married life and certainly support in raising awareness so that these discriminatory practices against women cease to happen.

2) Loneliness and abandonment

"It was said that she was someone who should be where she was not seen" (BURUNDI).

In society, many African women experience cultural practices that dehumanise them and lead them to live in deep and silent solitude. Women's limited participation in social life is detrimental to them because they are unable to make decisions and their rights are restricted as a result. Women remain silent.

The situation is aggravated in some countries suffering from severe crises. Such is the case in the Central African Republic, where "the various crises suffered have contributed to insecurity and aggravated violence and discrimination. Many women are victims, having their dignity as well as their physical and moral integrity damaged". In Burkina Faso, "currently with the crisis, violence against women is recurrent". Women experts from the Democratic Republic of Congo told us that: "the situation has worsened because of the conflict. Women are raped by all means possible. Unfortunately, even the children of these women suffer severe abuses." In other countries, however, such as Gabon, "the government opens 16 days of activism against violence against women every year on 25 November", encouraging women to raise their voices.

Victims remain silent, they do not report. Public institutions have often been identified as places of violence, "especially by omission and lack of service provision, which means that impunity does not generate confidence in reporting", as women experts from Guinea Bissau told us. In Zimbabwe, "corruption impedes women's access to justice and cases of abuse are swept under the carpet, leading women to have little faith in reporting assaults." Also, "the general thinking in most cases is: who is going to take care of my daily needs and those of my children if this man is sentenced or imprisoned?" as we heard from Zambia.

Women are considered second-class citizens. In Cameroon, "women do not participate in family decisions, nor do they have the right to inherit". One aspect of the loneliness and neglect experienced by many women is precisely the issue of inheritance. Ten per cent of the women surveyed reported having experienced various widowhood rites as a sign of cultural violence.

There are numerous examples of "disinheritance and odious widowhood practices", as women experts from Nigeria told us. In Zambia, meanwhile, "when the man dies, all property passes to the man's relatives and the woman returns to her village with the children". In the Democratic Republic of Congo, "women cannot inherit when their husbands die either." Likewise in Madagascar, where, the experts told us, "women do not have the right to inherit." In Ghana, "the problems increase when the husband dies because the woman has no right to inherit; in fact, it is the family of the deceased who decides whether to give something to the widow or not".

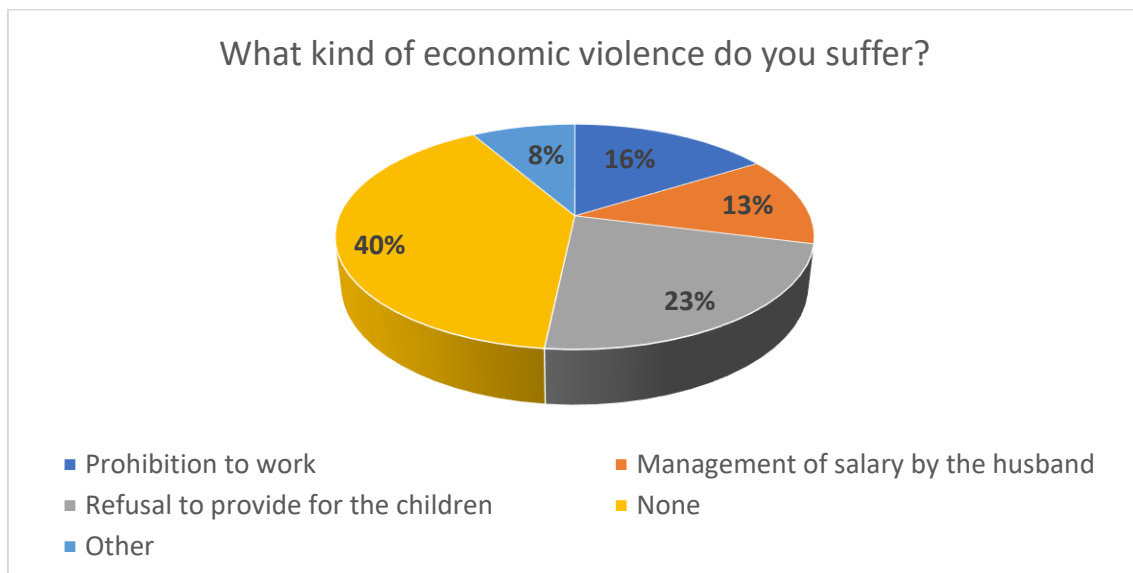
On the other hand, regarding paternal inheritance, in Tanzania "it is divided among sons and the daughters are ignored". In Nigeria, women are also unable to share their parents' inheritance when they die. Burundian law also "penalises women by depriving them of the inheritance of their parents' property, which can only be inherited by men".

Advocacy seems to be the key word to which the suggestions of women experts refer. A change in the mentality of women, who are submissive, do not speak up and do not inform, is needed. According to the women experts consulted, this can only be done through education and empowerment. There is a need to raise awareness of the dignity of women and the need for them to know their rights as persons created by God on equal terms with men.

3) Economic violence

"If our voices are not heard, issues of concern to women are likely to remain hidden".
 (NIGERIA).

Economic discrimination is a very strong form of discrimination. In the case of the women surveyed, 60% stated that they suffered this type of violence, typified in different ways, as we can see in the following graph:



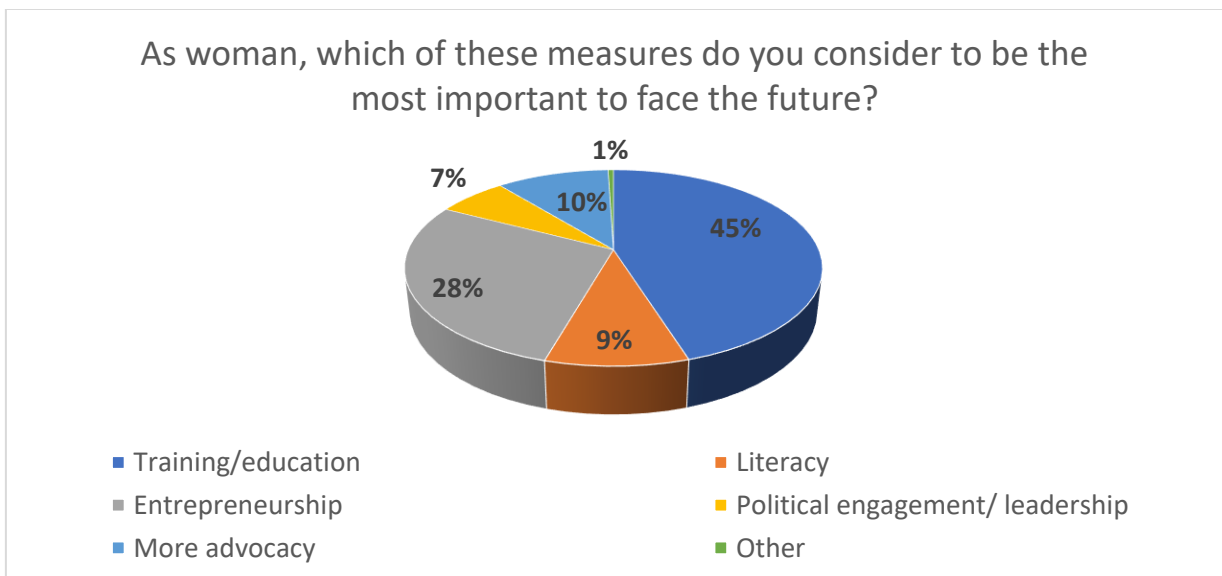
The husband controls all economic means. Most women are economically dependent on their husbands or male partners. There is economic violence because women do not own anything and do not own property. Even though women are very capable and have a high chance of finding work, their husbands often prevent them from doing so.

In Seychelles, women experts tell us that "men are the breadwinners, while women have to take care of their home and children". From Morocco, women experts tell us that "the causes of economic violence are mainly poverty and crises and reaches 16.7% of women in that country". In Madagascar, "women have little or no right to work and cannot go to work even if they have been educated." In Côte d'Ivoire, "psychological and economic violence are the most important problems faced by women in the country". In Angola: "it is difficult for women to be the economic engine; it is always a supporting role, but not a decision-making role. This is an underlying element of violence. From Burundi, women experts say that the culture believes that *"the hand that gives is the one that rules"*.

At best, if women get to work, "they are obliged to show what they end up earning to their husbands so that they are the ones who finally tell them how and when to spend it", as they tell us from Senegal. They are even asked to pay for their children's school fees. In Ghana, "even when the woman earns money, it can be a problem because when things in the family are not going well, it is blamed on the fact that the woman works outside".

Some men do not allow their wives to work, even if they have studied and obtained employment. In many cases, men exercise their superiority by subjecting women as dependents. Women experts from Kenya told us that, in that country, "women do not own anything in the house, everything is registered under the man's name. In times of separation or divorce, women start life as if they never had anything and go back to face the family where they tend to send them back to their husbands, thinking that they are the ones to blame".

The recommendation given here by the women experts consulted has to do above all with the imperative need to empower women. To train them and enable them to support themselves economically. This is also expressed by the women surveyed, 45% of whom consider training/education to be a very important measure to face the future and 28% of whom consider entrepreneurship.



We should focus on education to give them more skills. Efforts should be directed towards the financial empowerment of women by fighting poverty, which has become a fatality, by supporting them through development projects. To reverse the violence and discrimination that women suffer, it is necessary to make them grab the reins of their destiny. Let us remember the words of the wise: "autonomy makes us masters of our destiny".

4) Human Trafficking

"They promise them that they will send them to school, but it's the opposite" (ZAMBIA).

Violence is generated in cycles or spirals: some violence can trigger other violence. Fighting violence against women means fighting violence in society as a whole. It means disarming the structural and cultural mechanisms that legitimise violence in its most diverse forms. Women trafficking, in this sense, is a major problem afflicting many African countries.

According to women experts from Ghana, "when there are economic problems in the family, children turn to prostitution and fathers also often abuse their children". From Lesotho, they told us that "many teenage mothers are teenage mothers as a result of sexual abuse or incest, trafficking and child abuse in all its forms". In Kenya, "there is women trafficking; some go to Arab countries, but it also exists within Kenya". Kenyan women experts tell us that: "forced marriages, domestic violence and denial of the right to study expose women and girls to exploitation, trafficking, forced labour and prostitution". In South Sudan, the women experts explain that "women trafficking is a big problem". Similarly, in Nigeria "sexual exploitation of girls is also widespread and often takes place in the home".

Women experts from Lesotho state that "the problems faced by young women as a result of high rates of youth unemployment have led them to engage in commercial sex as a mean of survival, with serious consequences such as unwanted pregnancies, rejection by perpetrators, families and society at large, leading to clandestine abortions or abandonment of babies, high drop-out rates at different levels of learning among adolescent girls and high rates of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV infection".

Even in some countries, such as Zambia, "young women fall into the trap, leave home to seek comfort elsewhere and, in return, do not know that they are being trafficked". Often, the families themselves hide the abuses because of their culture and even give up their children to trafficking. From Mauritania, women experts tell us that "every day, all over the country, girls and young women are raped and murdered, and many disappear without anyone demanding justice". In Eswatini, they clarify that, "unfortunately, in order to work, one has to "sell oneself" into prostitution, and even in the workplace, there is abuse and harassment of women by men."

Added to all this is the problem of increased drug use, which is a cause of concern in most countries of origin of many of the women experts we heard. From Cameroon, they told us that "the problem of violence is widespread and does not only affect women and girls, but is really general. Adults are becoming more and more violent, with an increased drug abuse among men and boys.

On this complex issue, women experts do not hesitate to refer to the need for governments to include human rights in their agenda. Otherwise, everything would seem to be futile. They insist that the male agenda is more important now and must be urgently incorporated into public policy. Achieving women's political representation at all levels is the other major challenge. In any case, there is a strong belief that, even if the state is present, women are the ones who must continue these struggles.

5) Domestic violence

"I don't want this to happen to my daughter any more." (Democratic Republic of Congo)

Most of the identified practices related to physical, psychological, sexual and economic violence against women originate mainly in the family, both in the family of origin and in the foster family/marriage. Among the women surveyed, more than half of them, 54%, suffer violence in family relationships.

From Uganda, the women experts argue: "We have to understand that violence starts at home. Violence passes down from one generation to another!". "Violence has become an epidemic and not a day goes by without cases of violence against women and children being reported," experts from Guinea tell us. Similar comments arrive from South Africa: "This is one of the most violent countries in the world. From young girls to elderly women living in rural areas are victims of physical abuse, rape and murder. From Botswana, we are told that "Botswana has the second highest number of rapes. Most of the abuse in Botswana affects the youngest girls inside the home."

In Senegal, "physical violence at home is increasing every day". In Guinea Bissau, "in recent times, domestic violence has increased, women are killed by their own husbands". In Tanzania: "40% of women suffer sexual violence before the age of 15 and 50% of the violence comes from their partners." In Mozambique, "cases of domestic violence and disappearances of women are occurring frequently". In Togo, "we also have violence often in couples, expressed in marital rape".

In Malawi, "60% of women suffer sexual violence". In Benin, according to a recent study by the *Observatoire de la Famille, de la Femme et de l'Enfant (OFFE)*, "the prevalence of gender-based violence against girls and women is 59.9% in the age group of 15 years and older". In Zambia, certain tribes "teach women that a husband who loves a wife can beat her freely as a form of correction. This is considered a sign of love in a marriage or in a loving relationship". In Ghana, "the man can beat the woman whenever he wants and by any means and the woman cannot react, even if she has the strength, because the man is the one who commands". In Rwanda, despite awareness-raising efforts in schools and on television, "even today 37% of women still suffer violence and discrimination".

Domestic violence is a social problem and corruption is high. There are programmes to combat it, but they are still insufficient. The recommendations of the women experts in this regard are aimed at raising awareness through communication; putting the family at the centre of priority and attention as well as increasing training programmes for couples.

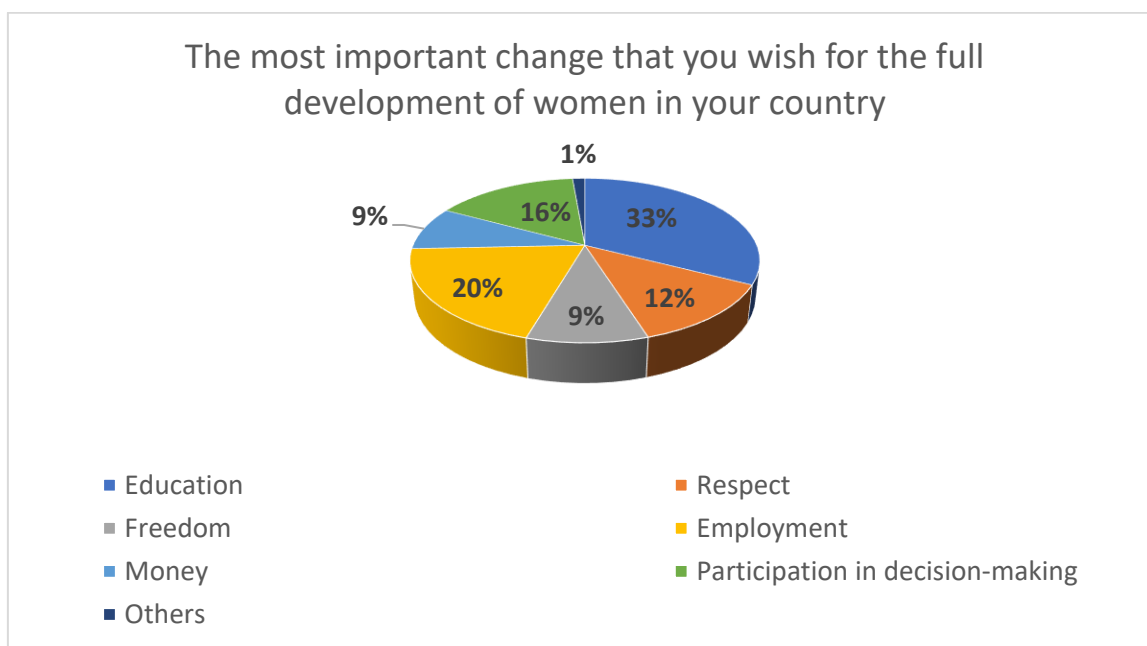
We must continue to give women a voice. They are all silent settlements and, as if nothing had happened, life goes on. The first thing is to train them and give them the opportunity to speak up and become aware that women are subjects of rights. We have to organise conferences to inform, so that people know that abuse is no longer acceptable.

6) Lack of access to quality education and job training

"Sending girls to school is a waste of time." (GHANA)

Numerous imbalances that are naturally unfavourable to women persist in many African countries. For example, the fact that priority for schooling is given to boys over girls. Gender inequality, once again, is seen as one of the main factors contributing to violence against

women. 33% of the 10,680 women surveyed said that education and training for work is the most important tool for coping with the future and the most important change they want to see for the full development of women in their country.



In Ethiopia, "brothers have priority to go to school and girls can stay at home to work. Moreover, in Tanzania, "girls do not have the same educational opportunities as boys. They often drop out of school because of early pregnancies, early marriages and cheap child labour". In Cameroon, "there is also violence against female students who have to marry very young". In Burundi, it should be noted that "the girl child has no right to education, which is reserved for boys". In Chad, girls are also marginalised from school as "girls are needed for early marriages, because the girl child is considered an asset."

From the Central African Republic, we are told that "you see more girls in primary schools, because when they get to secondary schools and universities, many drop led to forced marriages". In South Africa, women do not have to study because their place is at home doing the hardest jobs and taking care of their younger siblings". In Kenya, "families often refuse to educate girls when the father of the family cannot afford to educate them, causing girls to suffer more than boys. They can only educate the boys and leave out the girls, which leads to discrimination and to girls ending up dropping out of school".

All this brings out other problems in society. For example, in Guinea Bissau, "the illiteracy rate among girls is 76% and among boys 48%". In the Democratic Republic of Congo, "at university there are sexual points, which are extra points you get for having sex. Students talk very normally about this issue." "Rape and abuse against female students are still constant and serious in the Senegalese education system," experts from that country tell us. From Mali, they remind us that "women should be able to educate their children, but often the little knowledge they have makes the same mistakes happen". In Eritrea, "in some universities women are not allowed to get pregnant during their education, which is also a form of discrimination".

While some progress is being made in some countries, there is still a long way to go. The recommendations of the women experts concern the creation of training centres to help girls

who have dropped out of education. Women who do not know how to read and write should also be taught to read and write, so that they can defend themselves and have the opportunity to work. Influencing public education policies is also important, in order to make possible that all girls can go to school, and that there could be equal access to school education. Because if they remain uneducated, they are more likely to suffer more violence and abuse.

CONCLUSION and NEXT STEPS

In Africa all countries are different, but the problems of women are very similar. We know that gender inequality is one of the major contributors to violence against women. We can also say that women are an essential part of the family and of society. This is certainly one of the main reasons why women must be taken into consideration for who they are and what they do for the household, which is the basis of any society. Their empowerment is useful both for her and for society as a factor of peace and social progress.

After listening attentively to more than 10,000 women in this first stage, there is no doubt that the priorities now are as follows. Firstly, to provide greater psychological and legal assistance to women victims of domestic violence by setting up centres for listening, accompaniment, support and training. Also, financially enabling women victims of economic violence, empowering them, giving them skills and greater security. This will lead to supporting the family environment, making it stronger and eager to learn new skills. Finally, the need to sensitise younger people and to continue training leaders who are already working in the territory are points frequently mentioned in meetings with women experts.

Although there are already human rights protection structures, many women prefer to seek help from civil organisations and congregations because, they say, they are available to listen to them without judgement and are discreet in resolving their situation. Laws for the defence and protection of human rights have even been passed in many countries, but access to justice, implementation and enforcement remain a major challenge. In many cases there is impunity, fragility and vulnerability.

A process of cultural change is urgently needed, which we know is neither quick nor definitive. More coordination is needed to find solutions to the problems raised. It is also important to discover opinion leaders who will continue to bring about changes. Likewise, social networks allow us to become more aware on a massive scale. It is important that the public and private sectors, national and international organisations, the Church, the family and society work together.

We therefore believe that networking is fundamental. It is our aim to create a network between congregations and secular institutions that are already working in the territory with women victims, to value the actions and to continue training those who lead these spaces. We believe in the power of this network, which is in line with the Sustainable Development Goals, which include a specific goal to end violence against women and girls. Listening is the first step. That is why we consider this first stage of our project in Africa so valuable, project that will continue now with the challenge of transforming lives.