

## EXTORTION AND BLACKMAIL ON THE BASIS OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION IN AFRICA: A CASE STUDY FROM CAMEROON

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### INTRODUCTION

Evidence of blackmail or extortion on the basis of real or perceived sexual orientation in Africa can be found in colonial records dating back over a century. In the 1960s and 1970s, the police in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) actually recommended liberalizing that country's laws against homosexual acts because the problem of blackmail – of whites by blacks – had become so widespread and politically embarrassing.<sup>1</sup> Yet today, homosexual practices remain illegal in roughly thirty-eight countries throughout the continent. Laws that were mostly inherited from the colonial era provide the basis for a surge in acts of extortion and blackmail against people on the basis of their sexual orientation. For the most part, victims have no legal means to resist the threats posed against them – threats that often also imply job insecurity, family breakdown, physical danger and emotional upset or psychological troubles.

As suggested by police in Rhodesia fifty years ago, one of the main arguments in favour of the decriminalization of homosexual acts among consenting adults is still, therefore, that decriminalization would remove some of the tools and reduce the social stigma that enable extortion and blackmail on the basis of sexual orientation. This argument is in line with the general principles of the protection of human rights, as well as with the best practices for sexual health as advocated by the major international and African donors.<sup>2</sup>

As a contribution to those goals, and to put a human face on the victims of these under-investigated crimes, the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission commissioned the following case study from Cameroon. It asks: What meanings do individual victims give to the lived reality of extortion and blackmail? How do they cope with the situation? Do they call for help – if yes, to whom, and if no, why not? What strategies or networks do they have in place, and how do they operate? While we did not conduct

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1 Epprecht, Marc, *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004).

2 Jürgens, Ralf, Jonathan Cohen, Edwin Cameron, Scott Burris, Michaela Clayton, Richard Elliott, Richard Pearshouse, Anne Gathumbi, and Delme Cupido, *10 Reasons to Oppose Criminalization of HIV Exposure or Transmission* (New York: Open Society Institute, 2008); Johnson, C.A., *Off the Map. How HIV/AIDS Programming is Failing Same-Sex Practicing People In Africa* (New York: IGLHRC, 2007).

research among the perpetrators of extortion and blackmail, can we impute anything about their motives and attitudes from the victims' perspectives? Does the evidence from a specifically African context provide support for the arguments in favour of human rights for sexual minorities, and for best practices for sexual health that are grounded in experience gained elsewhere?

## METHODS

The homosexual population in Cameroon remains relatively understudied.<sup>3</sup> Stigmatized, marginalized, stereotyped, secretive, and justifiably suspicious of enquiry, the homosexual population presents formidable obstacles to the kind of research undertaken here. For this study, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was designed to address those obstacles. Quantitative data provided a demographic snapshot of the people affected, from which we could adduce factors that might be influencing their experience (age, religion, employment and such). This data allowed us as well to assess how strongly people felt about certain issues, how common or rare certain types of incidents were, and how lived experience measured against popularly-held stereotypes.

The quantitative data in turn raised questions that could then be substantively followed up through qualitative methods. These included in-depth key informant interviews, analysis of popular media, and participant observation. Where gaps still remained, we turned to secondary literature from elsewhere in the region for potential explanations. In short, the two approaches – quantitative and qualitative – complemented each other.<sup>4</sup>

- 3 Important pioneering works include Terroirs: Revue Africaine de Sciences Sociales et de Philosophie, "L'homosexualité est bonne à penser" *Dossier Special*, 1-2 (2007); Gueboguo, C., "Pour une lecture revue et corrigée de l'homosexualité dans la pensée doxique africaine: Impacts, dérapages et risques," *L'Arbre à Palabre. Culture et Développement* 20 (2007): 14-51; Gueboguo, C., "La problématique de l'homosexualité en Afrique: L'expérience Camerounaise," *L'Arbre à Palabre. Culture et développement* 19 (2006):18-59; Gueboguo, C., *La question homosexuelle en Afrique. Le cas du Cameroun* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 2006).
- 4 Methodology is discussed in similarly focused research projects, including Epprecht, Marc, "The Gay Oral History Project: Black Empowerment, Human Rights, and the Research Process," *History in Africa: A Journal of Method* 26 (1999): 25-41; Niang, Cheikh Ibrahim, Moustapha Diagne, Youssoupha Niang, Amadou Mody Moreau et al., "'It's Raining Stones': Stigma, Violence, and HIV Vulnerability Among Men Who Have Sex With Men in Dakar, Senegal," *Culture, Health, and Sexuality* 5/6 (2003): 499-512; Attipoe, Dela, "MSM and HIV in Ghana," *The Gully*, 2004, at [www.thegully.com/essays/gaymundo/0403\\_gay-men\\_hiv\\_ghana/msm\\_ghana\\_intro\\_summary.html](http://www.thegully.com/essays/gaymundo/0403_gay-men_hiv_ghana/msm_ghana_intro_summary.html), accessed 28 August 2006; Morgan, Ruth and Saskia Wieringa (eds.), *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives: Female Same-Sex Practices in Africa* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2005); Yeka, W., G. Maibani-Michie, D. Prybylski, and D. Colby, "Application of Respondent Driven Sampling to Collect Baseline Data on

The quantitative survey came first, and was conducted from February to May 2008 in the two principal cities of Cameroon, Douala and Yaoundé. Following a call for applications posted through the electronic network of the association Alternatives-Cameroon, four research assistants – three male and one female, two for each city – were hired. They received a day of training to familiarise them with the objectives of the study, a short course on human subject research ethics, and a brief overview of basic techniques of survey-based research. The criteria for eligibility for the research assistants was that they be at least twenty years old at the beginning of the enquiry and possess at least a secondary level of education. This implied fluency in French, the language in which the research was to be conducted. Because the context of political homophobia and evident widespread distrust or fear of the state in the homosexual community in Cameroon, the candidates also had to show proof of prior involvement and good standing in that community.

The criteria for eligibility for the respondents were that they self-identified as one or the other of the following categories: homosexual, bisexual or transsexual. We acknowledge that these terms are debated in the theoretical literature on sexuality in Africa. They have been imported from the West and may introduce deceptively neat lines delimiting human sexuality. In theory, they may also introduce assumptions about fixed identities that are insensitive to indigenous or traditional concepts and practices. In practice, however, the terms are widely understood and used within the homosexual community in contemporary Cameroon. For the purposes of argument in the present study, people who initially identified themselves by different terms – lesbian, gay and MSM (men who have sex with men), notably, but also nkouandengué, the local word to designate homosexuality – were invited to fit themselves into one of the three offered categories, which they did in every case without any controversy.

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FSWs and MSM for HIV Risk Reduction Intervention in Two Urban Centres in Papua New Guinea,” *Journal of Urban Health: Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 83.7 (2006): 60-72; Allman, Dan, Sylvia Adebajo, Ted Myers, Oludare Odumuye, and Sade Ogunisola, “Challenges for the Sexual Health and Social Acceptance of Men who Have Sex with Men in Nigeria,” *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 9.2 (2007): 153-168; Jewkes, Rachel, K. Dunkle, M. Nduna et al., “Factors Associated with HIV Seropositivity in Young, Rural South African Men,” *International Journal of Epidemiology* 35 (2006): 1455-1460; Broqua, Christophe, “Transactions sexuelles: sur les rétributions des pratiques homosexuelles à Bamako,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 43/1 (2009): 61-83. The terminology and theorization of key concepts used here draw upon Bozon, M., “Les cadres sociaux de la sexualité,” *Sociétés Contemporaines* 41-42 (2001): 5-9; Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ), *Unspoken Facts: A History of Homosexualities in Africa* (Harare: GALZ, 2008); Ann Arbor: African Books Collective; and *Outliers*, “Theorising (Homo) Eroticism in Africa” (2008): 1.

The respondents had to have resided in one of the two cities for at least six months. Most importantly, they had to have already been victims of blackmail or extortion on the basis of their sexual orientation at least one time in one of the cities under study. A respondent could only respond to a single questionnaire.

The recruitment of research subjects in Douala took place primarily in two meeting spots: at a “gay-friendly” nightclub, and at a lakeside socializing and cruising spot known as “grain,” identified by the association Alternatives-Cameroon. For Yaoundé, recruitment was done by telephone from among people taking part in a social network linked to the first respondents in Douala. They were then directed toward secure places to meet: either the house of one of the first gay respondents, or a “gay-friendly” café owned by a gay proprietor. The meeting in the latter took place at a slow time of business in a corner, sheltered from view from the public space.

Ultimately, the survey sample involved 214 respondents, of whom 171 were men and 43 were women. The total number of respondents from Douala was 113, while that of Yaoundé was 101. A slight disparity occurred among the group of women, who were more represented in Douala (25) than in Yaoundé (18).

The questionnaires were not administered until the research assistant had obtained clear verbal or written consent from the respondent after the research objectives and limitations had been clearly explained. The majority opted for verbal consent. For reasons of personal security, these respondents chose not to leave any written trace of their participation in the study. Indeed, Cameroon has been experiencing an increasingly tense and dangerous situation since the end of 2005, with recurrent arrests and harassment of people suspected of homosexuality. The identity of the research assistants has been concealed for the same reasons.

To further our understanding of the figures generated by the quantitative survey, we followed up with in-depth interviews of five randomly chosen homosexual men – three of whom resided in Douala, and two in Yaoundé. The interviews took place near the end of the quantitative survey in April and May 2008. Informants gave us permission to call them up at any time to request further information or clarification if necessary, provided that identities would be concealed on all documents and electronic correspondence. Empirical observation of day-to-day interactions among the research subjects, the wider community and the police, plus monitoring of local media coverage of the issue, further enriched the qualitative side of the study.

The initial results of the quantitative survey were presented to a general assembly at Alternatives-Cameroon in May 2008. Present in the room were people who had participated in the survey, either as research assistants or as subjects, as well as other interested members of the community. The findings were well-received, and the responses of the audience focused primarily on how the findings could be made to serve the community. The implicit question was how to develop strategies to prevent extortion and blackmail on the basis of sexual orientation, as well as how the community might develop effective means to fight against this kind of victimization. Participants hoped that the data could be used to renew and reinforce an existing initiative – a warning system via the Internet network of Alternatives-Cameroon. Participant observation of this feedback session rounded out the qualitative side of the research.

## WHO WERE THE PARTICIPANTS?

The figures gathered through the quantitative survey were analysed using the computer software program SPSS 13.0. This allowed us to illustrate the socio-demographic characteristics of the survey participants as follows. This data indicates who was included in our sample and where our findings might be most relevant, and is contextualized against statistics published about the whole population.<sup>5</sup>

### Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by Age

The sample group was young, with a median age of 25 years old. The youngest of the sample was 17 years old while the oldest was 40.<sup>6</sup> The cohort of 21-30 years was the largest, comprising 79% of all the respondents. There was no observed disparity between the two cities, but a slight disparity was seen between the women and men. Among the women, 88% fell into the age category of 21-30, with their median age at 26 years. The results of this survey thus apply, almost exclusively, to the category of “youth”:<sup>7</sup>

5 Central Intelligence Agency (U.S.A.) “Cameroon,” *The World Factbook*, at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cm.html>, accessed 14 September 2010.

6 The survey used a convenience sample, a technique which is optimal for reaching populations that are marginalized or difficult to access. While the sampling was oriented toward those who were over the age of 18, one respondent who described their experience being targeted by a blackmailer was 17 years old. The response was included to portray the results as accurately as possible. The numerous techniques employed to anonymize the findings of the survey ensure that the respondent is not identifiable and has not been put at risk by the inclusion of the response in the wider data.

7 All percentages in the charts in this chapter are rounded to the nearest tenth of a percentage point. Prior to rounding, all numbers add up to 100%.

AGE COHORT	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Less than 21 years	29	13.6
21-25 years	96	45.1
26-30 years	73	34.3
31-35 years	9	4.2
More than 35 years	6	2.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>213<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>100.00</b>

1 In each table where the respondents number fewer than 214, it is because there was no data available for the remainder of the respondents. The percentages are taken from the number of respondents who were able to answer each question.

**Table 2: Distribution of Respondents by Sexual Orientation**

Nearly two-thirds of the respondents self-identified as homosexuals, a category which included gay men and lesbians. Self-identified bisexuals made up about one-third (34%) of the sample, with “bisexuals” including those whose primary identification was “MSM.” One person identified as transsexual. People who identified as homosexual were slightly more numerous among the men (67%) than among the women (58%). Across the sample, the totals were:

ORIENTATION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Homosexual	140	65.4
Bisexual	73	34.1
Transsexual	1	0.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>214</b>	<b>100.00</b>

**Table 3: Distribution of Respondents by Level of Education**

Overall, respondents had a middling level of education. Only 4% had stopped their formal education at the primary level, while 65% had had their last classroom experience at the secondary (high school) level. Nearly a third (30%) had some level of post-secondary education, well above the national average. Of the latter group, 60% had at least two years of undergraduate university. 29% were still in school at the time of the survey.

COHORT	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Primary	9	4.2
Secondary	139	65.3
Post-Secondary	65	30.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>213</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Within the sample, the women were less educated than the men. Most of them (38 out of 43) had some secondary school as their highest level of achievement, but only eight of those had reached their final year of secondary school. Only five among them (roughly 12%) were at the post-secondary level. The vast majority of the women (88%) were no longer studying.

**Table 4: Distribution of Respondents by Occupation**

With regard to occupation, three categories made up nearly two-thirds of the sample: pupil/student (29%), employed as office staff or teachers (24%), and commerce, including informal sector trading (13%). None of these are particularly well-paid. Indeed, most of the students were economically dependent on their families, and in the context of a generalized economic crisis, formal employment itself is highly precarious. At roughly 10%, the level of unemployment (no profession) in the sample, however, is strikingly low in relation to estimates for the population as a whole (30%).

PROFESSION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
No profession, unemployed	21	9.9
Pupil/student	62	29.3
Labourer	5	2.4
Staff employee	50	23.6
Manager	13	6.1
Professional	20	9.4
Artist	6	2.8
Other	6	2.8
Commerce	27	12.7
Health care	2	0.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>212</b>	<b>100.00</b>

The women's unemployment rate was higher than that of the men, which likely reflects their lower level of education. Yet even at 16%, the women's unemployment rate was still lower than the general population.

While only a minority of the respondents were professionals with (presumably) good and stable incomes, it is well known that several young homosexuals in Cameroon are supported by correspondents in the West, met in the majority of cases through the Internet. With the money they receive, they appear to lead a life of relative opulence, which can engender envy or misunderstanding among those without the same support. Seen from outside, one could easily be convinced that simply being homosexual brings money. Even within the Cameroonian homosexual scene, many believe “nkouandengué

brings wealth,” an attitude that may have its roots both in traditional beliefs<sup>8</sup> and in activities today that border on prostitution. Some informants spoke of homosexuality quite overtly as a monetary or money-earning activity, for example, “the business of nkouandengué is tough,” “I earn my money by the sweat of my buttocks,” “the market [for cruising] was not good today.”

Indeed, there is a popularly-held perception of homosexuals as an economically privileged group in Cameroon, including a suspicion that homosexuality is a means to attain material wealth. Whether or not this is true, the low unemployment and appearance of financial stability of the sample may be one reason why they had been targeted by blackmailers and extortionists. Alternately, from a sociological perspective, the data might suggest that respondents who had employment were simply more inclined to self-identify as homosexuals than those with no employment. Although none of the respondents described themselves as out in a public manner, their financial autonomy may have given them some confidence to associate with other homosexual people and organizations and come out in a confidential survey.

**Table 5: Distribution of Respondents by Relationship Status**

None of the respondents were married to a partner of the opposite sex – and this is unusual in Cameroon, where maintaining the public appearance of heterosexuality is so important. Yet, while none of the respondents were in a heterosexual marriage, many of the men had girlfriends, and many of the women had boyfriends with whom they went out in public. This conforms to the hypothesis that homosexuality is commonly “bisexualised” in Cameroon – that is, homosexuals hide their sexual orientation behind a mask of performed or assumed heterosexuality.

RELATIONSHIP STATUS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
In a couple (living together)	46	21.7
Unattached, but with a regular partner	80	37.7
Unattached	86	40.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>212</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Homosexual relationships broke down as follows: In both cities, 41% overall lived alone without a regular partner. Among women, a clear majority lived this way (59%). At 22%, the percentage of couples living together as

8 For example, “wealth medicine.” See Tessmann, G., “Homosexuality Among the Negroes of Cameroon and a Pangwe Tale,” trans. B. Rose, in *Boy Wives and Female Husbands*, ed. S.O. Murray and W. Roscoe (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998 [1921]).



homosexual lovers may seem high given the context of widespread hostility to homosexuality. But almost all of these couples were men who “passed” in the public eye as just friends, family or as sharing accommodation for purely economic reasons. Co-habitation for economic reasons is so common that it did not in itself raise suspicions that a sexual relationship was involved.

Another important relationship that came out of the survey was between the respondents and dependent children: 21% of the respondents had children with whom they lived, presumably (as is the norm in Cameroon) as the biological parent. Among those who responded to the question about their parental status, 67% were bisexual, but a minority of self-identified homosexuals also had children living with them as dependents (27%).

### Religion of Respondents

The survey asked about religious affiliation. Throughout Africa, religious leaders are among the most vocal and incendiary homophobes and, as a result, it is commonly assumed that homosexuals are therefore alienated from faith communities. In fact, religion remained a strong presence in the life of a large majority (89%) of the respondents. The faith communities to which they did belong – which were disproportionately Christian in relation to the general population – do indeed tend to explicitly denounce or prohibit homosexuality, and Cameroonian religious leaders have strongly supported the homophobic rhetoric of the state since 2005. Affiliation with these faiths played a contradictory role in respondents’ lives; on the one hand, they often provided a sense of community and spiritual comfort, while on the other, they reinforced a profound sense of shame or vulnerability.

In sum, respondents to the survey tended to be young; somewhat but not significantly better off financially and better educated than the majority of the urban population; passing as heterosexuals either through their roles as parents or by maintaining opposite sex partners (with or without a sexual relationship); and maintaining public attachments with institutions that were often explicitly homophobic, such as Christian churches. While respondents had sufficient self-confidence to come out to trusted researchers, as a group they were clearly committed to keeping their sexuality a secret from a wider public.

### WHAT TYPES OF INCIDENTS DO VICTIMS EXPERIENCE?

Respondents in Cameroon experienced diverse forms of blackmail and extortion as a result of their sexual orientation.<sup>9</sup> The most common (44%)

9 From the legal point of view, extortion is distinct from blackmail. Extortion typically

was the threat of being outed or exposed to their families. This type of situation is extremely delicate, as individuals face the risk of being rejected or expelled from the family unit – something that reportedly happened to a fifth of respondents (21%). In the Cameroonian context, where there is minimal social welfare and a heavy reliance on extended families and kin networks, this kind of family ostracism can be a devastating blow.

One example of such a case comes from Raoul, an informant living in Douala.<sup>10</sup> Raoul is 21 years old and lives at his uncle's house with his cousins. His mother lives in France. On multiple occasions, his cousins overheard Raoul's telephone conversations with his boyfriend. After they made several demands for money to buy their silence and Raoul repeatedly refused to yield to their threats, one of them took the initiative to reveal his suspected homosexual orientation to his mother. As Raoul recalls:

My mother told me that she had heard that I was hanging around gay-friendly places in Cameroon. She told me that she would never have imagined that she could have given birth to a boy who would let himself be fucked by another man. And that if that was so, then I better start to forget her or that I stop... that I take my life in my own hands since she is already prepared to forget me... She told me I was going to leave my uncle's, that I was not going to remain in their family, she does not want the shame... I denied everything. She asked me if women didn't interest me, I was obliged to tell her, "yes, they do..." (Raoul, Douala, 21 years old)

The threat of disclosure to family is only effective among those who have not yet come out (or, more commonly, been outed) to those the blackmailer threatens to tell. Similarly, the threat of disclosure to the police (38%) is most powerful when the need to keep homosexuality a secret is strong:

I met a guy through the Internet site "123 Love." We went to his room. He told me that it was his room and we only flirted. As it was getting late, I stayed to sleep at his place. To my great surprise,

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involves the threat of physical harm, whereas blackmail entails the threat of exposure of a presumably damaging secret, which may be legal if unaccompanied by a threat. The study did not ask whether this distinction was significant to the victims, and informants said nothing to suggest that one type of threat was more or less feared or effective than the other. Indeed, as discussed below, extortion and blackmail seemed to occur together in most cases.

10 All names are pseudonyms, chosen by the informants themselves.

at around five or six in the morning, two people abruptly entered the room asking what two boys were doing naked on the bed, although we were covered and dressed. I got up and it was at that moment that I noticed that Patrice had placed unrolled condoms at the side of the bed. They asked me to give them something, if not they would take me to the police... (Black, Douala, 24 years old)

Disclosure to the police, however, does not simply mean a risk of public humiliation – it could also lead to immediate arrest:

I was questioned by cops in civilian dress in front of my bar while a friend was organizing his birthday ... I noticed that it was my own boyfriend who went to see these police, telling them that I organized a gay marriage and that I had a White who gave me lots of money... I was held in a cell for three days... My boyfriend gave witness against me by saying that he was my wife and that it was me who fucked him... (Michael, Yaoundé, 28 years old)

The threats of disclosure are almost always accompanied by verbal aggression (69%), the systematic confiscation of material goods of the victim (12%), or the demand to submit to non-consensual sex (12%).<sup>11</sup> The law is commonly invoked as a pressure tactic:

They say: “the faggots of Cameroon, they are going to catch them, so then, is what they say true? You know that it’s forbidden by the new Code, no?”<sup>12</sup> That was a way to provoke me to negotiate. (Black)

A friend owed me 5,000 FCfa<sup>13</sup> that he didn’t want to give back. I went to his house and I took his shoes as a collateral. He threatened [to] give me a thrashing and told the guys of the neighbourhood that I was a faggot. He turned them against me. One evening, they came into my room. They broke the door and started hitting me saying I was a faggot and that they were going to tell the police. They claimed

11 Where money was demanded, the demands were often extreme. In a case discussed below, the demand amounted to roughly five times the yearly income for someone earning the national minimum wage.

12 The “new Code” is a reference to the revised Constitution of 1996.

13 In November 2008, 540 FCfa was approximately \$1 US. In Cameroon, 5,000 FCfa would be equivalent to a bit more than a week’s pay at the national minimum wage.

that they saw me kissing someone. After, it was no longer the police they wanted to call; they started to beat me up and began taking everything that interested them in my room... Another time, we had gone out with a bunch of friends. When we came back later, the same guys from the neighbourhood threatened us. They said, “it’s you faggots who are spoiling Cameroon, we are going to kill you...” They took our money, our cell phones. They brutalised us and said that they were going to rape us, saying since it’s the penis we were looking for, they were going to give it to us in spades... There were three of us...” (Alex, Yaoundé, 20 years old)

From the informants’ descriptions, we found that blackmail or extortion attempts tend to follow a quite predictable script – above all when they result from encounters on dating sites on the Internet:

Firstly, homosexual encounters through the Internet are often initiated on a dating site for heterosexuals called [www.123.love](http://www.123.love). This is a free site, as opposed to the majority of gay sites that must be paid for. But homosexuals go to a service directed at heterosexuals not only to save money. It is also because of their widespread belief that the majority of people who pass as heterosexual are not so in reality – they simply have not yet experienced homosexual love. With [www.123.love](http://www.123.love), one can expand the network of potential lovers. Heterosexuals allow themselves to be seduced on the site because they are convinced that homosexuals (or *pédés*, to use their derogatory terminology) have a lot of money. From homosexuals, therefore, we see tactics of recruitment and the appropriation of heterosexual space, while from non-homosexuals, we see the anticipated exploitation of those with (imagined) greater material resources. Both approaches are based on myths and stereotypes that are at least partially grounded in reality.

After the first few exchanges on the Internet, a rendezvous is set up for late in the night. In all the cases that we recorded, the future victim traveled to meet the perpetrator, and not the other way around.

After our chat on the net, he gave me a meeting place at his place beside a drugstore. He told me that he would take me in... That was good for me because I was still living at my parents’ and I was still in the closet and discreet... (Raphaël, Douala, 28 years old)

The first sexual contacts take place in the bedroom of the perpetrator,

who takes care not to lock the door. After a certain amount of time passes with the two of them together – typically more than an hour – the victim becomes trusting, and he or she decides to spend the whole night. At an agreed moment, accomplices then noisily burst into the room of the lovers. There are typically more than two accomplices, leaving the victim outnumbered.

After numerous threats – of denunciation to the police or neighbours, or to be beaten or raped – the victim is ordered to write down a version of facts that emphasizes (or falsely admits to) a situation which incriminates them. This is then followed by confiscation of the victim's material goods – for example, a mobile phone, jewelry, or money:

They told me to write a letter that they found me on the bed naked with a young boy... Patrice left with my bag after rifling through it... They took my cell phone..." (Black)

Once written, the letter serves as a tool to extract money from the victim on an ongoing basis. The attackers asked for sums ranging as high as 1,500,000 FCfa. If the victim cannot produce the requested amount, he or she is threatened with disclosure to the police:

I told them that I only had 2,000 F on me, which they took but they said it was too little. They said that if I didn't give them at least 40,000 F, they were going to give the letter to the police... (Black)

They entered roughly into the bedroom and threatened me... they told me that if I didn't give them between 40,000 and 70,000 F they were going to tell the police... (Raphaël)

The table below summarizes the types of incidents experienced by respondents (represented by N). Since many respondents had multiple responses (indeed, respondents reported an average of two and a half incidents each), we distinguish between each type of incident in relation to the total reported incidents (percentage of the sample), and each type of incident in relation to the number of people interviewed (percentage of observations). Hence, roughly 38% of respondents experienced being reported to the police, which amounted to 15% of the total number of incidents. Roughly 12% of victims reported being asked for sex in exchange for silence, which amounted to just 5% of all reported incidents.

**Table 7: Types of Incident Experienced by the Respondents**

TYPE OF INCIDENT	RESPONSES		
	N	% of sample	% of observation
Disclosure to the police	78	15.2	37.9
Disclosure to family	90	17.6	43.7
Disclosure to landlord	28	5.5	13.6
Disclosure at workplace	18	3.5	8.7
To be fired from work	13	2.5	6.3
To be turned out from the family	44	8.6	21.4
Disclosure to school authorities	19	3.7	9.2
To be beaten for not surrendering money	30	5.9	14.6
Theft of material goods	24	4.7	11.7
Insult	143	27.9	69.4
Demand for sex in exchange for silence	25	4.9	12.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>512</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>248.5</b>

**WHO PERPETRATES BLACKMAIL AND EXTORTION?**

The majority of the perpetrators of extortion or blackmail are neighbours of the victims (56%), who for the most part operate on their own initiative or in collaboration with other homosexuals. Indeed, homosexual friends or partners were involved in extortion or blackmail in nearly a quarter of the incidents (23%). Michael, for example, was the victim of his partner, and Black was victimized by a homosexual partner whom he met on an Internet cruising site. The fact that homosexuals’ own friends and sexual partners were responsible for blackmail in nearly a quarter of the cases shows that heterosexuals are not the only ones who believe the myth that gays as a group have a lot of money.

**Table 8: Sociological Profile of the Blackmailers and Extortionists**

BLACKMAILERS OR EXTORTIONISTS	RESPONSES		
	N	% of sample	% of observation
Homosexual friend	49	14.1	23.4
Neighbour	118	33.9	56.5
Classmate	40	11.5	19.1
Police	40	11.5	19.1
Sexual partner	11	3.2	5.3
Former sexual partner	33	9.5	15.8
Work colleague	16	4.6	7.7
Family	41	11.8	19.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>348</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>166.5</b>

According to informants, perpetrators mostly fall into the same age group as the victims – that is, 20 to 34 years old. They often operate

together, and in certain cases the police are directly complicit in their crime:

I finally understood that it was my boyfriend who went to see the police and who told them that I had a White who gave me lots of money. It was because of that that they told me to watch my words... The police demanded that I give them 1,500,000 for them to let me go... (Michael)

The vulnerability of homosexual, bisexual, and transsexual people in Cameroon is also evident in the frequency with which they are victimized. Experiences of blackmail and extortion are commonplace: 30% of respondents had already been victims of threats or of extortion more than one time. Michael, for example, had had two experiences of an extortion attempt. Each time he spent more than a night in jail. He owes his survival to the support of a sister whose husband is a colonel in the Cameroonian army. Alex as well has been the victim of “regular” blackmail and extortion from his neighbours.

## WHAT MOTIVATES BLACKMAIL AND EXTORTION?

Greed provides the most obvious motivation to blackmailers and extortionists, and the illegality of same-sex activity supplies them with the principal means to seize their payoff. According to respondents, however, greed was not the only factor. Extortion and blackmail were also thought to be motivated by the feeling of envy from other homosexuals (64%), meaning a desire to bring down or humiliate rivals. Ignorance (61%) and incomprehension (67%) from the neighbourhood community were also mentioned, as was unwillingness to comply with demands, notably in cases where the victim refused to have sexual relations with the perpetrator (61%). Indeed, participants discussed cases of former sexual partners who adopted the role of extortionists or blackmailers because of the victims’ refusal to continue or renew sexual relations (46%). As for the police, 37% of informants believed that they react the way they do when suspected homosexuals refused to give them bribes – particularly for unrelated issues such as traffic violations, a common form of corruption.

From all of the above, it is clear that homosexuals in Cameroon are often victims of the myths that surround what they do and who they are, myths sometimes shared by homosexuals themselves. In the newspaper and on the streets, it is common to hear homosexuality associated with witchcraft or pedophilia. People attribute homosexuals’ possession of money to their mysterious practices. Another common belief is that they are agents of

Western cultural imperialism. This in turn would be linked to other evils widely blamed on structural adjustment policies and Western support for neo-colonial elites: impoverishment, underdevelopment, embezzlement of public funds, and clientelism.

Stemming from these notions, homosexuals become scapegoats, and the battle against homosexuality becomes a way to expunge all other social evils. To go to war against “pédés” and lesbians – and to confiscate all their goods – thereby becomes an excusable (and even laudable) act of patriotism. Alex’s blackmailers told him as much when they said: “it’s you pédés, it’s you who are spoiling Cameroon, we are going to kill you.” To denounce, beat up, deny, chase away, or rape may be bad things in and of themselves, but as they say in Cameroon, you heal a pain with a pain. From this perspective, if the pédés who spoil the country could be wiped out of public spaces entirely, wouldn’t the country as a whole get better?

Such anxieties and phobias are rooted in and are exacerbated by the wider crises of society. As the old patriarchal order breaks down amid generational strains, disarray in heterosexual relationships, and loss of faith in political leadership, people turn to illusions of a lost moral order. In this context, it becomes legitimate to target those who visibly or symbolically flaunt that imagined moral order. An upsurge in homophobic articles in the media since 2005 both reflects and exacerbates these broader anxieties. It suggests that the problem of extortion and blackmail on the basis of sexual orientation may worsen if those broader anxieties about a society in crisis are not also addressed.

## HOW DO VICTIMS RESPOND?

When asked how they respond to being victimized and what impressions they had of the experience, many respondents admitted to being deeply discouraged and facing serious emotional and psychological consequences. Yet not a single respondent responded that they had reacted to their experience of victimization by going to the police. Some informants sought help from Alternatives-Cameroon or other sexual rights association, but none of the survey respondents thought to become more active in supporting those associations or their efforts as a result. Close to half admitted to giving in to their extortionists’ demands for money or sex (48%), but this is likely underreported. Indeed, with only 28% saying they refused to give in (and hence took the risk of exposure or violence), the claim of “no reaction” probably disguises the meaning “no resistance,” that is, keep a low profile and comply with demands if necessary, but ultimately hope the blackmailers go away.



**Table 9: Responses of Victims**

HOW DID YOU REACT?	RESPONSES		
	N	% of sample	% of observation
I gave money to buy silence	60	22.0	29.0
I agreed to have sex	39	14.3	18.8
I refused to give in to blackmail	58	21.2	28.0
No reaction	116	42.5	56.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>273</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>131.9</b>

The reticence is not hard to understand. Section 347 of Cameroon’s Penal Code states that “Any person who has sexual relations with a person of the same sex shall be punished with a term of imprisonment of five years and a fine of between 20,000 and 200,000 francs.” In Cameroon, individuals are often incarcerated on the mere presumption of homosexuality, particularly when they do not obviously belong to the elite class. The poor, working class and young people – that is, the majority of our sample – are especially vulnerable to harassment and imprisonment. Respondents know, even vaguely, that they stand little chance to get a fair hearing for any complaints:

I didn’t dare to lodge a complaint. I was afraid they were going to question me and that it would come out that I was gay. And that is not approved by the law, I would say that I would have risked being locked up in prison... (Alex)

Faced with the accusation of homosexuality, it is generally the accused who must supply proof of his or her innocence rather than the accuser having to furnish proof of his or her allegations. Cases were described where the victims of blackmail attempts were required to submit to anal examinations in order to establish whether they were homosexuals (and thus guilty of a crime worse than blackmail) or not. Confusion at this level between the act of sodomy – a practice that not all male homosexuals engage in and which is also practiced by some heterosexuals – and homosexuality as an identity or orientation is striking. It underscores the vulnerability of homosexuals to uninformed, prejudiced, or callous state officials and their interpretations of the law.

In the context, respondents felt it was better to remain quiet and suffer the consequences than to lodge a complaint to the police – that is, to risk almost certain disappointment, public humiliation, and possible further blackmail or extortion. Indeed, among those who had given money or conceded to having sexual relations to ensure silence, the threat of denunciation to the police was

the main motivation (58% and 54%, respectively).

But respondents did not only feel they could do nothing. They also felt they could tell no one. Since there are so few means of legal recourse against extortion and blackmail, respondents were asked to whom they first turned for help or to protest. Nearly half (49%) said “no one,” while about a quarter (26%) called their homosexual friends and only 11% their partner. The latter figure is probably so low out of concern not to incriminate a loved one. The apparent unwillingness of victims to seek assistance or redress from outside the homosexual community – through other friends, family, or the police – undoubtedly contributes to the invisibility of the issue in public discourse.

A final observation comes from a comparison of responses to blackmail and extortion by sex: the men admitted to giving into the pressures of fear more readily (40%) than the women (20%). The women are a bit more prone to claim resistance (44%) than the men (36%). There is also a significant difference between men who say they want to hide (22%) versus women who say the same (8%). Further research is needed to explain these differences, but it may reflect women’s intuition that society has a greater *de facto* tolerance – and the law has a greater *de jure* tolerance – of female homosexuality than of male homosexuality.

**WHAT WERE THE EMOTIONAL CONSEQUENCES OF BLACKMAIL AND EXTORTION?**

Blackmail and extortion had a number of emotional or psychological consequences for respondents, including strong feelings of fear, trauma, and a desire to either hide or fight back. Given that a significant number of perpetrators were themselves homosexual, however, one unexpected finding from the chart below is the very low desire expressed by victims to denounce other homosexuals or otherwise exact revenge. One might explain this as coming out of a desire not to air dirty laundry or to keep such unpleasant facts quiet within the community.

**Table 10: Emotional Effects of Blackmail and Extortion for Victims**

REACTIONS	RESPONSES		
	N	% of sample	% of observation
Fear	81	20.4	40.7
Revolt	88	22.1	44.2
Trauma	49	12.3	24.6
Desire to flee to the West	92	23.1	46.2
Desire to denounce others	1	0.3	0.5
Desire to fight back	58	14.6	29.1
Desire to hide	29	7.3	14.6
Total	398	100.0	200.0

The most common response requires explanation. Nearly half of respondents reported that they wanted to flee to the West. Their thinking was that they would find more tolerance there, a belief widely shared in the homosexual scene in Cameroon:

I became mistrustful... truly, you can no longer meet people in your own country. It's frustrating since it was a gay who did this to me... [I]t made me want to go away... I tell myself I would live a lot better outside of Cameroon, in a country where there isn't all this [rubbish]... I don't have an exact country in mind, but I'm thinking of the West. You can make a hook-up at 3:00 in the morning, meet to fuck, and no one robs you or threatens you... My situation now inspires me a lot to leave, in the sense that I want to go somewhere to live my life fully... (Black)

What acts as a brake on immediate departure is the lack of financial means:

I wanted to quit the gay life in order to remain here... to start another life [in Cameroon], perhaps try to be hetero... I did not think about going to Europe because I don't have the means. If I did have the money, I would have thought about it because up there it's much better and there is freedom... (Alex)

A concern arose for us: does this idealization of the West among homosexual youth precede the desire to emigrate – that is, did the experience of blackmail simply reinforce or justify a pre-existing desire? Evidence supports this to some extent. Indeed, as among youth in general in Cameroon and many other African countries, political and economic uncertainties have given rise to new forms of resistance to “the system.” Emigration (or talk of emigration) to the West is a prominent way to express such resistance. Complaints about extortion or blackmail on the basis of sexual orientation may often be a specific pretext for a general, profound sense of the inhospitality of life in Cameroon today.

I have friends in Europe, they have often me invited to go there... I truly want to go there to finish my studies, to find work since here it's hard, and following that to return to the country... (Black)

The ostensible reason to emigrate is the wish to grow as individuals and

to freely develop one's sexuality, but an important and unspoken reason appears to be the mirage that Cameroonians often have of elsewhere. This mirage is sustained by the prestige and the anecdotes, whether true or false, surrounding those who have had the chance to go and return from the West. In Cameroon such people are given a nickname that shows respect and admiration – *mbenguistes*. In one of the local languages, *mbengue* indicates the country of one of the former colonisers – France, but by extension, all the countries of the Whites. Upon their return to Cameroon, *mbenguistes* often splash their euros around, bring gifts, and tell tall tales about the West to enchant their audiences. Even if they are often cheap, the flashy goods serve to confirm fabulous stories about the West. It is difficult to discern how much of the idealization of the West among so many homosexuals is based on their knowledge about sexual rights and freedoms there versus dreams of a materially easier life, naively shared with the population in general.

One interesting observation on this point is that a strong disparity exists among the research subjects in Douala (27%) and Yaoundé (60%) with regard to their stated desire to emigrate. An explanation may be found in the fact that in Douala, young people can more quickly find help in a local association that specializes in the defence of sexual minorities: Alternatives-Cameroon. This association works with a lawyer, Madame Alice Nkom, who is known to have more than once successfully defended homosexuals on a pro bono basis. When Raphaël was attacked and threatened, for example, he made a call to Alternatives-Cameroon, and influential members were able to intervene to reach an amicable deal with the extortionists. Douala is also the economic capital, and is a more favourable climate for sexual minorities than Yaoundé. It boasts the presence of a gay nightclub, of gay-friendly bars, and of several safe meeting places known by a large number of people in the homosexual community. There are also more opportunities for employment, which may offset the threat of losing one's job through scandal.

By comparison, Yaoundé is the political capital of Cameroon and the seat of its governing institutions. Corruption with a strong whiff of tribalism is the rule. Policemen are more vigilant and aggressive in prosecution when it is alleged homosexuality. Consequently, individuals there have a greater need to keep a low profile out of concern for appearances. Meanwhile, all of the consular representatives of the Western countries are nearby, lending support to the view – correctly or incorrectly – that in case of necessity, individuals could quickly escape there to request asylum.

A final notable fact that should be underlined is that there was not a single case of a respondent expressing the desire to commit suicide. This absence of a suicidal mentality is strikingly different from reports of growing up in homophobic environments in the West and Japan.<sup>14</sup> But it is similar to the low rate of suicide in Cameroon in general, and it allows us to underline the point that young homosexuals in Cameroon are part and parcel of the local cultural context.<sup>15</sup>

### HOW WOULD VICTIMS RESPOND TO FUTURE CASES OF BLACKMAIL?

The last question posed on the survey was how people who had been victims of blackmail or extortion would react to another attempt in the future. A very small number (6%) thought they would avoid attracting blackmailers' attention by being more discreet. A small minority confessed that they would likely meet their blackmailers' demands again (19%), while nearly half (48%) declared that they would refuse. It was not clear where the latter had gained their confidence in being able to stand up to any attackers in the future. Indeed, based on our observations of the police and media, this confidence may be misplaced.

**Table 11: Planned Responses to Future Incidents**

PLANNED RESPONSES	RESPONSES		
	N	% of sample	% of observation
Yes (will pay up)	38	17.0	19.1
No (won't pay)	95	42.4	47.7
I don't know	7	3.1	3.5
It depends	25	11.2	12.6
I don't see the importance of planning a response	47	21.0	23.6
I will be more discreet in the future	12	5.4	6.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>224</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>112.6</b>

However, the summary of survey results presented to members of Alternatives-Cameroon did seem to strengthen awareness of the need to

- 14 See, for example, Cochran, S.D. and V.M. Mays, "Lifetime Prevalence of Suicide Symptoms and Affective Disorders Among Men Reporting Same-Sex Sexual Partners: Results from NHANES III," *American Journal of Public Health* 90.4 (2000): 573-578; Hidaka, Y. and D. Operario, "Attempted Suicide, Psychological Health and Exposure to Harassment Among Japanese Homosexual, Bisexual or Other Men Questioning their Sexual Orientation Recruited via the Internet," *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 60 (2006): 962-967.
- 15 Nantang, T., "Differential Responses to Disappearing Transitional Pathways: Redefining Possibility among Cameroonian Youths," *African Studies Review* 46.2 (2003): 13-36.

take preventative actions against extortion and blackmail in the future. Through electronic messaging, including texting via mobile telephones, members started to alert each other when extortionists were identified. The perpetrators' names and telephone numbers were sent out in the form of an alert to Internet meeting places, raising awareness that they posed a threat.

## CONCLUSION

A generalized crisis in Cameroonian society enables all sorts of abuses of human rights, including the mistreatment of sex workers, the old, the poor and the homeless, and other marginalized groups. In this context, extortion and blackmail of people on the basis of their sexual orientation may seem like a very small part of a much larger problem of widespread discrimination and social violence. Indeed, our study revealed the widespread belief that homosexuals were a privileged group, and on the elite side of society that is responsible for the wider malaise – a view that was even held by some of the homosexual informants themselves. Our research does not support that myth. On the contrary, most respondents had modest means and were highly vulnerable to threats to their dignity and economic well-being. Homosexual youth in Cameroon also seem to have found means of containing the frustrations arising from their sexual orientation that are not radically different from frustrations affecting youth generally. This includes living in a state of “zombification” as they wait for salvation from a Western benefactor or through an opportunity to escape to the West.

The targeting of homosexuals, bisexuals, and transsexuals is thus clearly a serious problem that feeds into a host of other social ills: police corruption, mistrust of neighbours, friends, and family, and a general sense of disillusionment that undermines the development of a vibrant civil society. Policies that reduce or remove the incentives for blackmail or extortion on the basis of sexual orientation – notably education about and decriminalization of same-sex sexuality – would therefore be of benefit not just to the people directly affected by those crimes. They would also likely have multiple positive effects for the whole of society.