

Survival Sex as a Coping Mechanism: Prevalence and Socio-Emotional Effects among Anglophone Internally Displaced Youths (IDYs) in Bonaberi, Douala IV, Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

The protracted Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon has profoundly disrupted the lives of internally displaced populations, with young women disproportionately affected. This study investigates the prevalence and socio-emotional consequences of survival sex among female Anglophone internally displaced youths (IDYs) in the Bonaberi district of Douala IV. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 60 purposively and conveniently sampled participants from four neighborhoods: Grand Hanger, Mabanda, Ndobu, and Rail. Data were collected through a semi-structured questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics, multiple regression, and thematic analysis. Findings revealed a strong model fit ($R = 0.889$, $R^2 = 0.790$; $F = 20.896$, $p < .001$), with 79% of variance in survival sex explained by socio-economic and structural factors. Significant positive predictors included economic hardship, social disruption, limited educational opportunities, and lack of support services, while unemployment, gender inequality, and power dynamics showed significant negative associations. Albeit survival sex emerged as a coping mechanism in contexts of deprivation, it was associated with adverse socio-emotional effects including shame, guilt, anxiety, stigma, heightened risks of sexually transmitted infections, unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, substance abuse, and fractured family relationships. The study underscores survival sex as a multidimensional issue that extends beyond sexual health to psychosocial well-being. Addressing it requires holistic, culturally sensitive, and multi-sectoral interventions that foster resilience and dignity among displaced young women.

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KEYWORDS: *Survival sex, Coping mechanism, Internally displaced youths, Anglophone crisis, Socio-emotional effects, Douala Cameroon.*

INTRODUCTION

The protracted Anglophone crisis in Cameroon has triggered large-scale socio-political upheaval, displacing more than half a million individuals, primarily from the two English-speaking regions into safer areas in search of stability and better living conditions. Douala, the country's economic capital, has absorbed a substantial proportion of these internally displaced persons (IDPs), particularly in Anglophone-dominated neighborhoods of Bonaberi such as Grand Hanger, Mabanda, Ndobu, and Rail. The massive influx of IDPs into these already vulnerable communities has produced overcrowding, housing insecurity, and limited access to essential services, thereby straining local resources and fueling tensions with host populations. These dynamics have

fostered social fragmentation and weakened community cohesion, forcing many IDPs into precarious living arrangements, including makeshift shelters and street dwellings, which expose them to heightened vulnerability.

Within this context, survival sex has emerged as a prevalent coping strategy among female internally displaced youths (IDYs) struggling to secure basic needs such as food and shelter. McMillan et al. (2018) conceptualize transactional sex broadly to encompass diverse motivations, whereas survival sex is uniquely situated within conditions of deprivation. It is commonly understood as the exchange of sex for material necessities such as accommodation, food, or

financial support (Watson, 2011; Czechowski et al., 2022). This practice is disproportionately observed among populations facing material deprivation, including housing instability and food insecurity, often under circumstances of acute power asymmetry that constrain sexual autonomy (Heerde et al., 2015).

Engagement in survival sex, however, extends beyond immediate physical risks to encompass profound socio-emotional consequences. Female IDYs frequently experience shame, stigma, isolation, low self-esteem, depression, and trauma-related symptoms such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); thereby exacerbating their ability to rebuild their lives and contribute positively to their communities. These outcomes impede psychosocial recovery, perpetuate substance abuse and risky behaviors, and undermine long-term resilience. Moreover, the normalization of survival sex in displacement settings reinforces cycles of gender-based violence and exploitation, while social stigma and the absence of supportive structures further hinder reintegration into communities and access to essential services.

This study investigates the prevalence of survival sex among female Anglophone IDYs in Bonaberi and examines its impact on their socio-emotional development. By situating survival sex within the intersections of displacement, gender, and economic precarity, the research underscores the urgent need for context-sensitive interventions. Such efforts are essential not only to mitigate harm but also to promote resilience, dignity, and psychosocial well-being among displaced young women in Cameroon's ongoing conflict.

Literature Review

Review of related literature here focused basically on the profound impact of the Anglophone crisis on the vulnerability of internally displaced persons (IDPs), particularly female internally displaced youths (IDYs), who face heightened risks of engaging in survival sex. The literature broadly addresses three dimensions: the impact of the crisis in exacerbating vulnerability, the factors contributing to the prevalence of survival sex, and the socio-emotional consequences of such practices.

Fonkwo et al. (2023) note that the conflict has resulted in extensive loss of life and property, mass displacement from rural areas to major cities, and significant disruptions in healthcare, education, and livelihoods, thereby deteriorating the overall well-being of affected populations. According to OCHA (2021, as cited in Fonkwo et al., 2023), the crisis has displaced approximately one million people, with 74,000 seeking refuge in Nigeria. Crisis Group (2020-

2021) similarly reports that of the estimated 573,900 Cameroonians displaced by the conflict, women and children represent 60 percent. Many of these women, separated from their families, face heightened risks of abuse and exploitation as they depend on male-dominated networks for housing, transport, or access to informal settlements. Those lacking identification documents are particularly vulnerable to harassment at security checkpoints, sometimes resorting to sexual exchange to secure passage. Limited livelihood opportunities, restricted access to financial systems, and social disintegration further entrench their dependence and exposure to sexual exploitation.

The Denis & Lenora Foretia Foundation (2021) reported that Bonaberi, as a major entry point into Douala, has become a primary settlement area for internally displaced persons (IDPs). The influx of displaced populations has intensified cultural contact with host communities, generating tensions that undermine social cohesion. High unemployment and limited livelihood opportunities have further exacerbated the situation, pushing many IDPs, particularly youths, toward criminal activities and transactional sex as coping strategies. More recently, Crisis Group (2022) documented rising incidents of sexual exploitation, abuse, and trafficking of girls in urban centers such as Douala and Yaoundé. Health professionals similarly observed that sex work increasingly serves as a survival strategy for women unable to meet basic household needs, a practice often associated with unintended pregnancies and heightened risks of sexually transmitted infections (Crisis Group, 2022).

Fonkwo et al. (2023) further argue that displacement, idleness, and systemic disruptions create conditions conducive to sexual violence, transactional sex, and associated psychosocial consequences. In many cases, engagement in transactional sex is economically driven, with some youths coerced by peers or family members into the practice as a means of financial support. Beyond Cameroon, evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa similarly links poverty and displacement to survival sex. Pettifor et al. (2019) explain that survival sex, often framed as transactional sex, differs from consensual sex work in its lack of structured terms or fixed pricing. This fluidity in negotiation, combined with deprivation, places vulnerable individuals at a distinct disadvantage, severely constraining agency and consent (McMillan et al., 2018).

Casey et al. (2021), examining contexts such as Malawi and South Sudan, found that adolescents frequently engaged in transactional sex to meet basic needs, often at the encouragement of parents. These

adolescents faced additional pressures, including coerced abortions or unsafe termination of pregnancies, with severe health and psychosocial consequences. In Cameroon, where abortion is illegal, young women risk unsafe procedures leading to infection, trauma, or death (Fonkwo et al., 2023). Those who continue pregnancies often face the compounded psychological and social challenges of childrearing without adequate support.

Overall, while existing literature sheds light on the prevalence and implications of survival sex in conflict and displacement contexts, substantial gaps remain. Notably, there is a shortage of quantitative data measuring the extent of survival sex among female IDYs across host communities, as well as qualitative studies capturing the lived experiences and socio-emotional consequences of these practices. This study therefore seeks to address these gaps by examining both the prevalence of survival sex and its impact on the socio-emotional development of female Anglophone IDYs in Bonaberi, Douala IV Municipality.

Research question

1. What factors contribute to the prevalence of survival sex among female Anglophone IDYs in Bonaberi, Douala IV?
2. What are the socio-emotional effects of engaging in survival sex on female Anglophone IDYs in Bonaberi, Douala IV?

Methods and Procedures

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey design targeting female Anglophone internally displaced youths (IDYs) aged 18-35 years residing in the Grand Hanger, Mabanda, Ndobbo, and Rail neighborhoods of Bonaberi, Douala IV, in Cameroon's Littoral Region. These sites were purposively selected owing to their significant Anglophone populations and high concentrations of IDPs resulting from the ongoing Anglophone crisis. A convenience sampling strategy was employed to recruit 60 participants, with 15 drawn from each neighborhood.

Data were collected using a semi-structured questionnaire comprising both closed-and open-ended items. The instrument was organized into three

sections: (a) demographic characteristics, including age, region of residence prior to displacement, educational attainment, employment status, neighborhood of residence, and duration of displacement; (b) factors influencing the prevalence and practice of survival sex among female IDYs; and (c) the perceived socio-emotional effects of survival sex. Section C employed Likert-scale items ranging from *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree* to capture participants' attitudes and experiences.

Instrument validity was established through expert review for both face and content validity by specialists in global health and social sciences. Reliability was assessed via internal consistency analysis, with a minimum acceptable coefficient of 0.760, consistent with standards in social science research. Quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 20.0. Multiple regression modeling was applied to examine relationships between structural and socio-economic predictors and engagement in survival sex. Qualitative responses to open-ended questions were analyzed thematically to identify recurrent patterns and contextual insights into the lived experiences of participants.

Ethical consideration:

Ethical considerations were rigorously applied throughout this study to ensure the integrity of the research process. The researcher obtained informed consent from the female Anglophone IDYs by providing comprehensive information regarding the study's purpose, objectives, and the rationale for selecting their specific quarters, district and Municipality. This approach facilitated voluntary participation among the respondents. Confidentiality was equally a paramount concern; as participants were assured that their identities would remain anonymous, and no disclosure of any personal information that could potentially reveal their identities. Furthermore, the principles of openness, honesty, beneficence, and non-maleficence were upheld throughout the research, ensuring that the welfare of the participants was prioritized and that the research was conducted ethically and responsibly.

Findings

Question 1. What factors contribute to the prevalence of survival sex among Anglophone IDYs in Bonaberi, Douala IV Municipality?

Respondents were asked to list some factors that contribute to the prevalence of survival sex among female Anglophone IDYs. Their responses were grouped in themes as represented on table 1 below.

Table 1: Contributing Factors to the Prevalence of Survival Sex among Anglophone Internally Displaced Youths in Bonaberi, Douala IV (N = 60)

Contributing factor	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Economic hardship	60	100.0
Lack of support services	58	96.6
Insufficient skills training & unemployment	57	95.0
Power dynamics	56	93.3
Social insecurity	55	91.6
Social disruption	53	88.3
Gender inequality	47	78.3
Cultural norms	45	75.0
Limited educational opportunities	46	76.7

N/B: Table 1 summarizes the primary factors contributing to the prevalence of survival sex among Anglophone internally displaced youths (IDYs) in Bonaberi, Douala IV. Economic hardship was reported by all respondents (100%), indicating that poverty and material deprivation are the most significant drivers of survival sex. Other frequently cited factors included lack of support services (96.6%) and insufficient skills training combined with unemployment (95.0%), which collectively reflect the limited availability of social safety nets and employable opportunities. Structural vulnerabilities such as power dynamics (93.3%), social insecurity (91.6%), and social disruption (88.3%) further highlight the precarious and often coercive environments in which IDYs live. Cultural influences and gendered inequalities also played a substantial role, with 78.3% identifying gender inequality and 75.0% citing cultural norms as contributing factors. Finally, limited educational opportunities (76.7%) emerged as an additional constraint, restricting long-term resilience and reinforcing dependence on survival sex as a coping mechanism.

Question 2. What are the effects of survival sex on the socio-emotional development of Anglophone IDYs in Bonaberi, Douala IV Municipality?

Table 3: Descriptive statistics on survival sex as a predictor of socio-emotional development of Anglophone IDYs

Items	Strongly Agree (SA)	Agree (A)	Total SA & A	Disagree (D)	Strongly Disagree	Total D & SD	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Circumstances and stigma associated with survival sex make me feel anxious and depressed.	28 (46.7%)	22 (36.6%)	50 (83.3%)	7 (11.7%)	3 (5%)	10 (16.7%)	1.7500	0.85618	60
Engaging in survival sex often leads to feelings of guilt and shame, especially when it conflicts with personal or cultural values	43 (71.7%)	11 (18.3%)	54 (90%)	4 (6.7%)	2 (3.3%)	6 (10%)	1.3500	0.60576	60
I have faced social stigma due to my involvement in survival sex, which has led to isolation from my community and family members.	19 (31.7%)	21 (35%)	40 (66.7%)	11 (18.3%)	9 (15%)	20 (33.3%)	2.1667	1.04422	60
Fear of being judged prevents me from seeking help or forming supportive relationships	23 (38.3%)	29 (48.3%)	52 (86.7%)	6 (10%)	2 (3.3%)	8 (13.3%)	1.7833	0.76117	60

Engaging in survival sex has caused ruptures in my family relationships or led to feelings of rejection.	31 (51.7%)	24 (40%)	55 (91.7%)	4 (6.7%)	1 (1.7%)	5 (8.3%)	1.5833	0.69603	60
My experiences with survival sex have led to relational mistrust and emotional numbness, making it difficult to form healthy connections.	39 (65%)	13 (21.7%)	52 (86.7%)	5 (8.3%)	3 (5%)	8 (13.3%)	1.5333	0.85304	60
Practicing survival sex has contributed to my low self-esteem and negative self-image.	21 (35%)	27 (45%)	48 (80%)	7 (11.7%)	5 (8.3%)	12 (20%)	1.9333	0.89947	60
I experience a conflicting identity as I navigate between my past experiences and aspirations for a better future.	18 (30%)	23 (38.3%)	41 (68.3%)	11 (18.3%)	8 (13.3%)	19 (31.7%)	2.6833	2.21315	60
To cope with the emotional pain associated with engaging in survival sex, I have resorted to substance abuse.	32 (53.3%)	17 (28.3%)	49 (81.7%)	7 (11.7%)	4 (6.7%)	11 (18.3%)	1.7167	0.92226	60
Regular practice of survival sex has led me into further risky behaviors such as additional sexual encounters and unprotected sex.	33 (55%)	23 (38.3%)	56 (93.3%)	3 (5%)	1 (1.7%)	4 (6.7%)	1.5333	0.67565	60

N/B: Table 2 presents findings on the socio-emotional consequences of survival sex among respondents. A substantial majority (83.3%) reported experiencing anxiety and depression linked to the stigma and circumstances surrounding survival sex, while 16.7% did not share this view. Similarly, 90% acknowledged feelings of guilt and shame, particularly when their actions conflicted with personal or cultural values, compared to 10% who disagreed.

Social stigma emerged as a central theme: 66.7% of participants reported community and family isolation due to their involvement in survival sex, while 86.7% indicated that fear of judgment inhibited their willingness to seek help or establish supportive relationships. Family relationships were also adversely affected, with 91.7% noting ruptures or rejection. Additionally, 86.7% described relational mistrust and emotional numbness, making it difficult to sustain healthy connections.

Survival sex was also linked to diminished self-perception. Most participants (80%) reported low self-esteem and negative self-image, while 68.3% experienced conflicted identities as they navigated between past experiences and aspirations for a better future. Coping behaviors further reflected psychological distress: 81.7% admitted resorting to substance use, and 93.3% acknowledged engaging in risky sexual practices, including unprotected sex.

To complement quantitative results, qualitative data were collected through open-ended questions. Thematic analysis revealed recurring experiences of fear, anxiety, isolation, regret, guilt, low self-esteem, and challenges in emotional regulation. Respondents frequently described heightened anxiety associated with insecurity in

Douala. One participant noted: *“I sometimes ask myself for how long I am going to continue doing this. This makes me very anxious. With the recent increase in killings and disappearances within the city of Douala, I live in fear of becoming the next victim since I don’t often know whom I am to meet with.”* Another highlighted coercive circumstances: *“When I came to town, a man from my village hosted me but later demanded sex. Fearing rejection and homelessness, I gave in.”*

Emotional numbness and relational detachment were common. As one participant expressed: *“At this point, I no longer feel for a man, and I do not need any serious relationship. True love does not exist. Anyone who gives me daily bread, I give him my body in return.”* Respondents also reported mood swings and poor emotional regulation, often alternating between temporary relief when basic needs were met and sadness in the face of uncertainty.

Guilt and regret were pervasive, with one respondent reflecting: *“When I look back at my life, I feel ashamed of myself and my family, especially during our village community gatherings. But since no one is feeding or housing me, I have no choice but to survive this way.”* Substance use was described as both a coping mechanism and a consequence of peer influence: *“I was neither taking alcohol nor smoking, but being with those who do, I started. Now I cannot meet anyone in bed without it.”* Risky sexual behaviors were also reported, including abandonment of condom use due to pressure from clients: *“Initially, I insisted on condoms, but men questioned my trust, so I stopped so they don’t leave me.”*

Overall, both quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrate that survival sex profoundly undermines the socio-emotional development of female Anglophone IDYs. It fosters anxiety, guilt, shame, and relational disconnection while increasing susceptibility to substance abuse and risky behaviors. These findings underscore the urgent need for targeted psychosocial interventions, reproductive health services, and protective mechanisms to address the vulnerabilities of displaced young women in conflict-affected contexts.

Hypothesis testing

H₀: Survival sex has no significant effect on the socio-emotional development of Anglophone IDYs in Bonaberi, Douala IV Municipality.

H_a: Survival sex has a significant effect on the socio-emotional development of Anglophone IDYs in Bonaberi, Douala IV Municipality.

Table 3: Multiple regression model for predictors of survival sex among IDYs in Douala IV
Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
	(Constant)	.974	.104		9.371	.000	.765	1.183
	Social disruption	.464	.130	1.010	3.566	.001	.203	.726
	Economic hardship	1.412	.263	1.939	5.364	.000	.884	1.941
	Limited educational opportunities	.417	.178	.895	2.348	.023	.060	.774
	Insufficient skills training and unemployment	-1.262	.313	-1.431	-4.035	.000	-1.890	-.634
	Cultural norms	-.150	.109	-.310	-1.378	.174	-.368	.068
	Gender inequality	-.669	.160	-1.323	-4.182	.000	-.991	-.348
	Power dynamics	-.313	.114	-.451	-2.753	.008	-.541	-.085
	Social insecurity	-.143	.146	-.299	-.974	.335	-.437	.152
	Lack of support services	.379	.102	.619	3.716	.001	.174	.584
a. Dependent Variable: Survival sex								

N/B: A multiple regression analysis was conducted to explore the structural and socio-economic factors influencing the likelihood of engaging into survival sex among Internally Displaced Youths (IDYs) in Bonaberi neighborhood in Douala IV. The results indicate a strong model fit, with an R value of .889 and an R² of .790, suggesting that approximately 79% of the variance in survival sex is explained by the combined predictors. The adjusted R² (.752) further supports the robustness of the model. The standard error of the estimate (.253) indicates relatively good precision of prediction. The ANOVA results (F = 20.896, p < .001) confirm that the

overall model is statistically significant, meaning that the set of predictors reliably explains variations in survival sex.

At the level of individual predictors, several factors emerged as significant: Economic hardship ($B = 1.412$, $p < .001$) exerted the strongest positive influence, suggesting that higher economic deprivation significantly increases the likelihood of engaging in survival sex. Social disruption ($B = .464$, $p = .001$), limited educational opportunities ($B = .417$, $p = .023$), and lack of support services ($B = .379$, $p = .001$) also showed positive and significant associations, highlighting their critical role in driving survival sex. Conversely, insufficient skills training and unemployment ($B = -1.262$, $p < .001$), gender inequality ($B = -0.669$, $p < .001$), and power dynamics ($B = -0.313$, $p = .008$) demonstrated significant negative effects. These results suggest complex or possibly suppressor relationships, where these factors may reduce the predictive effect once other variables are controlled for. Meanwhile, cultural norms ($p = .174$) and social insecurity ($p = .335$) were not statistically significant predictors in this model.

In all, the findings highlight that economic hardship, social disruption, limited education, and lack of support services are the most critical drivers of survival sex. The negative coefficients for gender inequality, unemployment/skills, and power dynamics suggest overlapping influences with other variables, potentially reflecting the intertwined nature of structural vulnerabilities. The high explanatory power (79%) underscores the central role of these socio-economic and structural factors in shaping survival sex among female Anglophone internally displaced youths in Douala IV.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore economic hardship, particularly poverty, food insecurity, and homelessness as the primary drivers of survival sex among internally displaced youths (IDYs) in Douala IV. These results align with global evidence indicating that displacement-related structural vulnerabilities significantly increase the risk of sexual exploitation. Displacement, whether triggered by armed conflict or natural disasters, typically leads to the loss of stable housing, livelihoods, and social support systems, thereby constraining survivors' options for meeting basic needs. Within such precarious contexts, survival sex emerges as a coping mechanism through which individuals attempt to mitigate acute material deprivation.

The case of Douala IV illustrates how displacement intersects with systemic barriers to employment and livelihood opportunities. Many IDYs arriving from Anglophone regions lack financial and social capital, restricting access to the formal labor market and deepening economic marginalization. This dynamic fosters conditions in which survival sex becomes a rationalized, albeit precarious strategy for subsistence. Beyond material deprivation, psychological distress and substance use linked to economic insecurity further compound vulnerability, reinforcing reliance on transactional sexual relationships.

These findings are consistent with Greene et al. (1999), who demonstrated that survival sex is embedded within broader structural inequities, including poverty, unemployment, and conflict. Their research revealed that 28% of street-involved youth and 10% of shelter-based youth engaged in survival

sex, largely due to food insecurity and unstable housing. More recently, Curtis et al. (2023) observed similar dynamics among street-based female sex workers and homeless youth, showing that severe food insecurity and housing instability were independently associated with higher odds of engaging in survival sex. Taken together, these studies reinforce the argument that survival sex is not simply an individual choice, but a structural phenomenon rooted in systemic deprivation and exclusion.

The erosion of traditional social structures caused by conflict and displacement has further weakened the protective safety nets that would otherwise mitigate exploitation among IDYs in Bonaberi, Douala IV. School disruptions and low educational attainment limit access to stable employment and upward mobility, perpetuating reliance on precarious coping mechanisms such as survival sex. These observations parallel Wilson et al. (2011), who emphasized that displacement-induced social disintegration undermines livelihoods, familial support, and community cohesion, leaving youth isolated and vulnerable to high-risk behaviors.

A significant dimension of this vulnerability lies in power asymmetries between host community members and displaced persons, which often exacerbate exposure to gender-based violence (GBV) and risky behaviors. As Fonkwo et al. (2023) note, IDYs' dependence on hosts for shelter, food, and survival creates conditions conducive to coercion, ranging from sexual abuse within households to pressures to engage in transactional sex. Qualitative accounts from this study confirm these dynamics, with participants reporting resorting to substance use

and unprotected sex as mechanisms of conformity and survival.

These findings resonate with earlier research by Johnson and Chamberlain (2008), who found that homelessness and survival sex often co-occur with substance use as a means of coping with the stress and oppression associated with trading sex for resources. Similarly, Qureshi (2020) reported that homeless young people in Pakistan, despite awareness of condomless sex risks, often engaged in it due to financial pressures, social obligations in intimate partnerships, and attempts to avoid violence. Such patterns are consistent with Watson's (1913) behavioral theory, which posits that behaviors are conditioned through environmental interactions, and Jenness' (1932) conformist theory, which suggests that group pressure shapes individual decision-making.

The psychological toll of survival sex was also evident in this study. Female Anglophone IDYs frequently reported feelings of shame, guilt, and diminished self-worth, which not only erode personal identity but exacerbate broader mental health challenges. These emotions, compounded by stigma, fear of disclosure, and social isolation, leave many without access to adequate psychosocial support. Such accounts align with Marshall et al. (2010), who highlight the heightened vulnerability of individuals engaged in survival sex to depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. The findings here reinforce the view that survival sex functions both as a coping mechanism and as a source of vulnerability, producing a cycle in which economic necessity drives engagement while the associated psychological consequences deepen marginalization (Fonkwo et al., 2023).

Notably, this study uncovered a paradoxical relationship in which higher levels of insufficient skills training, unemployment, and gender inequality were associated with lower reported rates of survival sex. This outcome appears shaped by contextual factors. While skills training is intended to enhance employability, much of the training received by IDYs has been concentrated in sectors with weak labor market demand, thereby sustaining unemployment and underemployment. Paradoxically, unemployment may coincide with stronger community support networks or restrictive social controls that mitigate engagement in survival sex.

Similarly, entrenched patriarchal norms, particularly among IDYs from the North West region—may simultaneously restrict women's economic participation and discourage engagement in transactional sex. This reflects Breda et al.'s (2020)

discussion of the “gender-equality paradox,” wherein gender norms and occupational segregation influence behavior in ways that defy straightforward assumptions. These findings suggest that skills training and gender-sensitive programming, when misaligned with labor market realities and sociocultural contexts, are insufficient to mitigate the vulnerabilities of displaced youth.

Finally, while cultural norms and social insecurity were found to influence sexual behaviors, their predictive power was limited in contexts of acute economic hardship. For IDYs in Douala IV, the urgency of securing food, shelter, and other necessities often outweighed cultural or religious prohibitions surrounding survival sex. This corroborates Rao et al. (2012), who demonstrate that in contexts of extreme poverty and displacement, economic necessity becomes the overriding determinant of sexual decision-making, frequently eclipsing sociocultural or religious constraints. Collectively, these findings underscore the primacy of economic drivers in shaping high-risk coping strategies among displaced populations, while also revealing the multifaceted interplay of structural, cultural, and psychological factors.

Conclusion

This study underscores the alarming prevalence of survival sex among female Anglophone internally displaced youths (IDYs) in Douala IV Municipality, situating it as both a coping mechanism for acute socio-economic deprivation and a profound source of psychosocial and developmental vulnerability. Survival sex is not merely a transactional exchange; it is a complex survival strategy shaped by poverty, displacement-induced disruption, limited educational and livelihood opportunities, and entrenched cultural norms that reinforce gender inequality.

The findings reveal that engagement in survival sex carries significant socio-emotional consequences, including persistent feelings of shame, guilt, anxiety, and social stigma, which collectively erode self-esteem, reinforce isolation, and hinder psychosocial recovery. Developmentally, survival sex exposes young women to heightened risks of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, substance abuse, and fractured family relationships. These outcomes perpetuate cycles of poverty and vulnerability, extending their impact to future generations and undermining social cohesion within host communities.

Importantly, the study highlights that survival sex must not be viewed solely as a sexual and reproductive health issue but as a broader determinant of psychosocial well-being and human development

in displacement contexts. Its persistence reflects structural inequalities and power asymmetries that heighten women's susceptibility to exploitation and gender-based violence (GBV), while simultaneously constraining their capacity to rebuild their lives.

In light of these findings, there is a pressing need for holistic, culturally sensitive, and context-specific interventions. Such efforts must integrate psychosocial support, youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services, economic empowerment, GBV prevention and response mechanisms, and strategies for family and community reintegration. Equally, coordinated policy action is required to prioritize the safety, dignity, and socio-emotional development of displaced young women.

Ultimately, survival sex among female Anglophone IDYs is symptomatic of broader structural and displacement-induced vulnerabilities. Addressing it effectively demands a shift from individual risk-based framings toward multi-sectoral approaches that tackle the underlying socio-economic and cultural drivers. Only through integrated health, protection, and livelihood strategies can displaced young women be supported not merely to survive, but to rebuild their lives with resilience, dignity, and hope.

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