

# GIRLHOOD INTERRUPTED

*Every three seconds around the world, another young girl is forced to give up school and get married. MiNDFOOD travelled to Cameroon to witness first-hand how child marriage is perpetuating the cycle of poverty and destroying lives.*

Words by **Joanna Tovia** Photography by **Igor Sapina**

**W**earing designer clothes, seeing movies with friends, and checking Facebook on the latest smartphone are foreign concepts to teenager Lamana\*. Lamana was born into poverty and lives in Cameroon in west Central Africa with her parents, sister, and family friend in a one-room house with a curtained window, single mattress, and some threadbare rugs on the floor. The home has no electricity.

Lamana's childhood was cut short when her father pulled her out of primary school and forced her to get married. Instead of pursuing her dreams of becoming a doctor, Lamana faced having to live in servitude to a man on whom she had never laid eyes.

Lamana is the second youngest of six sisters and a brother; she lives in Briqueterie, a poor area of Yaounde, Cameroon's French-speaking capital city and home to 2.5 million people. Although there are a few signs of abundance – government buildings, a Hilton hotel, and a Chinese-funded stadium (built in exchange for access to Cameroon's natural resources) – life is difficult here. Girls and women dressed in brightly patterned fabrics and headscarves add welcome colour to the otherwise dusty streets. Old tyres hold down rusty tin roofs perched on crumbling concrete walls, battered yellow taxis belch black smoke and jockey for position on unmarked roads, and scrawny chickens peck around for scraps. The quest to earn continues into the night for many, the hubbub punctuated by mournful calls to prayer, honking car horns, and the odd donkey Bray.

Her imagined future in tatters, Lamana found

the idea of having to marry a cousin she hadn't met almost too much to bear. "When I met him for the first time, I felt like committing suicide," she says. She thought about running away but had nowhere to go and didn't want her mother to suffer. She refused to take part in any marriage rituals – typically a three-day celebration of singing, dancing, and feasting, but on the day of her marriage, Lamana had no choice but to leave the only home she had ever known to go and live with her new husband, a 30-year-old trader from the country. This was a frightening prospect for a girl who had just turned 14 and who was used to spending her days chatting and cooking with her mother, sister, and cousins and sleeping within arm's-length of her loved ones on the floor of their family home.

## FROM CHILD TO WIFE

Despite her tears and refusals, her husband forced Lamana to have sex with him on their wedding night and, for two months, did not allow her to leave the house. There was no talk of her going to school; her only role was to cook, clean, and please him sexually.

"He beat me up and threatened me with a knife, especially when I denied him sex. Every time he wanted to have sex, he beat me. He was violent and forced me to live like I was in a prison," Lamana tells MiNDFOOD in the room of a run-down building where a local community organisation, Afhadev, is working to better the lives of girls here.

Lamana speaks quietly, pausing after each question to gather the courage to share more of her story. Her vulnerability is heartbreaking, and, as she talks, her dark eyes reveal both deep suffering and



**INNOCENCE ROBBED**

Lamana was forced to give up school at 14 to marry a stranger more than twice her age.



### FINDING HOPE

*This page, clockwise from top left: Girls in Cameroon face an uncertain future; Hadiza was married at 16 and abused; Afhadev's Hawaou Adamou with her mother and daughter. Opposite: Adamou is an inspiration to local girls.*

pride – without it, she may never have survived.

She endured her husband's abuse for a year. "One day, after he beat me very, very badly, there were many wounds on my body," Lamana says. "He used a knife to threaten and menace me, and I felt very scared. So the next day, I packed up all my things and went back to my parents' house."

Her parents were aware of the violence Lamana was being subjected to, but in local culture, it is shameful when a daughter leaves a marriage and returns home. And, if a child is born from that marriage, the daughter's family usually turns that child away. Lamana's mother tried to convince her father to allow her to come home, but he initially tried to get her to return to her husband. As in many cultures, girls are seen as an economic burden to their families, and marriage is considered the only solution.

Fearing for her life, Lamana refused to go back. Her husband demanded the dowry be refunded and, for some months, continued to harass her. "He followed me everywhere I went and threatened to kill any man that came near me," she says.

Lamana will marry again one day, but not before she gets the education she was striving for before being forced into marriage. Lamana is one of many girls benefiting from the work of Afhadev. One of the organisation's aims is to change the mindsets of parents and improve girls' access to education.

### EDUCATION IN CAMEROON

In Cameroon, 70 per cent of children do not continue on to secondary school, and, of those who do, very few are girls. Without an adequate education, the future is grim. The average Cameroonian lives to just 45, and one in six children die before reaching age five. A child born to a literate woman is twice as likely to live past age five, however, and every extra year of secondary school a girl receives boosts her income on leaving by approximately 25 per cent.

Child-rights charity Plan International Australia has partnered with Afhadev not only to provide funding for the group's awareness-raising activities, school improvements, and scholarships, but also to support its members in setting up savings programs to empower mothers to keep sending their daughters to school.

Traditionally, families send daughters out on the streets to sell goods to help pay for household provisions and the school fees for her brothers. On the streets, these young girls are often lured into the more lucrative business of prostitution. Prostitution is also seen as the only option for women whose husbands reject and cast them out of the home. When a woman's family rejects her children, she is often forced to sell herself to provide for them.

For parents, seeing their daughters married off provides peace of mind that they will have financial





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support, and the groom's family gives the bride's family a dowry. In Lamana's case, her husband demanded the dowry be repaid when she left. With an ailing husband, her mother had to work hard to repay the money from her modest earnings selling jewellery on the street.

#### **CHANGING MINDS, CHANGING LIVES**

Lamana is taking lessons through Afhadev, and she's determined to do well in her computer-science studies at an independent college.

Charismatic 38-year-old Hawaou Adamou formed Afhadev in 2008. She is not ashamed to admit it is only now that she is mastering how to read and write. Hawaou was married off to a cousin at age 16. On moving in with her husband's mother, grandmother, and nephew, Hawaou was expected to do all the cooking, cleaning, and washing for the household, and, when her husband died, she was kicked out. She

had four surviving children from 12 pregnancies to care for, so she was lucky that her mother allowed her to come home.

“We educate parents because today we are the consequence of what our parents did to us,” Hawaou explains. “My hope for young girls in Briqueterie is that they should be educated. I don't want them to go through what I went through.”

Now, Afhadev is well-known in Briqueterie, and, when Hawaou walks through the dirt laneways between the ramshackle homes, children gather around her. She is an inspiration to many of them, and many face brighter futures thanks to her efforts.

“When you are uneducated, you have a very deep wound that is hidden in your heart. Even if you put on a lot of expensive clothes, that wound cannot disappear,” Hawaou says.

Working to convince community leaders on the importance of gender equality is just one of her

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## How You Can Help

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Plan is working to tackle the root causes of child poverty. Plan's “Because I am a Girl!” campaign, launching this month, aims to promote gender equality and create sustainable change in the lives of disadvantaged girls around the world. Removing barriers to girls' education by eliminating child marriage is one of the ways Plan aims to empower girls and young women. By 2015, the development agency's goal is to ensure all girls are supported to complete quality secondary schooling. To make a donation or find out more about Plan's work in Cameroon and beyond, visit [plan.org.au](http://plan.org.au) or call 13 75 26.



## Money Matters

Helping women manage their money makes it far more likely that their children will finish secondary school and go on to have healthy and educated children of their own. Over the past two years, 5000 women in Cameroon have taken part in Plan's microfinance program, and demand is rising. The program allows women to pool their savings and borrow when they need to pay for school fees, finance businesses, or pay medical costs. The women pay back the loans with interest, and at the end of nine to 12 months, the money and any interest is shared between the women.

"Plan does not inject any money but trains them how to manage group dynamics and conflict, run elections, and record savings and loans," explains Powel Tchata, program-unit manager for Plan International-Cameroon. The system is simple, so those who cannot read or write can still take part – stamps represent sums of money and thumbprints can replace signatures if necessary.

The system is having far-reaching benefits. "When you give 100 francs to a woman and give the same 100 francs to a man, men will spend 30-40 per cent on the children, where women spend 80 per cent on the children."



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roles. "If the boy has a hand in order to write, so does the girl. If the boy can think, so can the girl. These examples convinced many that girls can go to school just like boys."

With Plan's help, Afhadev has also convinced the community to register their children's births, taught them about HIV prevention, and shown them the importance of allowing a girl not only to finish school, but also to marry when and whom she chooses.

"If there is not love in the house, there can be no peace," Hawaou says.

Plan is also working to improve conditions in schools (there are typically more than 100 students per teacher) and to promote gender equality through student-elected governments open to both boys and girls. Gender equality will take time to evolve, however. According to Plan International-Cameroon intern Ngeutcheu Ngoungo Jasmin, "the man is at the top" in African culture.

"We should not think women are made for the kitchen or that men are supposed to be like masters and women like slaves," he says. "Women here aren't allowed to participate in decision-making. They don't have the right to say no or to give their opinion about

things that concern them or their family. Few girls really have the choice about their husband, about if they keep on going to school or stop. They don't have the chance to express themselves."

### TRADING PRESTIGE FOR PERIL

Child marriage is likely to continue for many in the short term, he adds. "Marriage gives a certain prestige to the family. It has a very big cultural significance, and people attach a deep meaning to it. It's not just the money."

For 17-year-old Hadiza\*, this prestige came at enormous cost. At 16, she was forced to leave school and marry one of her father's 30-year-old friends. Traumatized by her ordeal, Hadiza is angry. "It is like a burden in my heart. I lost my childhood," she says.

Hadiza agreed to share her story with MiNDFOOD to break the taboo around child marriage and to convince parents to keep their daughters in school. Fearing reprisal from her family, however, she kept her face covered for photographs.

"I met him before the marriage, but I did not love him," she says. "He forced me to have sex with him; he was very violent. He was older than me; he was



stronger ... I had to just comply.”

Her husband would find other excuses to beat her, even for being a few minutes late returning from prayers at the mosque. After a particularly bad beating, Hadiza fled to her parents' house and hid in the bedroom. When he arrived at her house to demand her return, he hit her mother and beat Hadiza so badly she woke up in hospital.

“I could not recognise my face when I saw it in the mirror,” she says. When her father saw the photos of her battered face, he was too shocked to speak. Hadiza's younger sisters will now be spared from having to marry young – the one blessing to come from Hadiza's experience.

Lamana's father, too, has been deeply affected by her experience, and her younger sister will be free to choose her own husband and finish secondary school. As for Lamana, it is now her father who reminds her to get ready so she isn't late for class.

#### EMPOWERED

*Opposite:* Lamana at home with her mother and sister. *Above, clockwise from top left:* Boys in Cameroon are also learning about gender equality; Lamana is finding joy again through education. *Below:* Making enough money is difficult in Cameroon.



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VISIT us online for more stunning photographs from MiNDFOOD's trip to Cameroon.

KEYWORDS: CAMEROON, GALLERY

## Child-Marriage Perspectives

Even if they're not forced to marry, girls often get married before the age of 18, simply because their parents do not have the means to keep sending them to school. But child marriage does nothing to help girls escape the cycle of poverty, ill health, illiteracy, and powerless. Child brides are far more likely to face domestic violence and have their first children at a younger age – pregnancy-related complications are the leading cause of death for girls aged 15 to 19.

For 17-year-old Habiba\*, however, getting married is a dream come true, and she feels lucky to have been able to choose her own husband.

“Deep from my heart I can say that I am very happy to have made my own choice,” she says. Habiba is sharing her story on her wedding day from the tiny room where she will share a bed with her

new husband for the first time. She is a little nervous about what lies ahead and sad about being separated from her family – she won't be allowed to leave her husband's house until she becomes pregnant. She also wishes she didn't have to give up school.

“I gave up everything to get married – my education, my family, my best friends – but I regret it only a little because I know marriage is what every woman is waiting for.”

Describing her 35-year-old husband as joyful, kind, and handsome, her father has advised her to respect and obey him. “He told me: ‘If he asks you to do something, please just do it, be submissive, and learn how to sweet-talk and caress him.’”

Men in Cameroon can legally have multiple wives, so most aim to keep their husbands happy lest they be cast out of the house or replaced by other women.