Policy Briefing:

Safeguarding Children's Rights in Cameroon

Overview:

This policy briefing synthesizes key insights from the Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals meeting held on March 26, 2022, focusing on the theme "Safeguarding Children's Rights: The Cameroonian Context", presented by Dr. Judwin Ndzo, paediatrician, and Barrister Joyce Nyamboli, human rights lawyer.

Context:

Abuse of children in Cameroon is common but rarely measured or reported, and practices such as harsh corporal punishment, child domestic servitude and early marriage are often treated as normal. The armed conflicts in the North West, South West and Far North have increased the number of displaced and separated children. Cameroon has ratified the main treaties, but the session found that prevention (safeguarding) is largely absent and that response (child protection) is under-resourced.

Key Issues:

1. **No prevention system:** There are no general requirements for vetting, training or safeguarding policies in schools, hospitals, churches or other settings where adults work with children.
2. **Weak civil registration and records:** More than two million children lack birth certificates, records are handwritten, and certificates of non-conviction are issued without real checks, so background screening is not possible.
3. **Limited places of safety:** The state runs few residential places for children (three orphanages of about 40 beds each, as stated), so children reported as abused often remain with their abusers.
4. **Gaps in law and practice:** A girl can marry at 15 with parental consent, FGM and breast ironing persist in some regions, and many cases end in family settlement rather than prosecution.
5. **Health workers not trained to recognise abuse:** Neglect and physical abuse present in hospitals, but staff lack training, documentation standards and a referral pathway.

Discussion Highlights:

- Participants agreed that child abuse is not cultural, while recognising that cultural context shapes how it is addressed.
- The Victoria Climbié case showed that agencies failing to share information can be as deadly as the abuse itself.
- Economic dependence on abusers and the cost of legal action push families toward settlements.
- Children cannot be expected to report abuse themselves; adults and institutions must carry that duty.

Recommendations:

- **Adopt a national safeguarding framework:** The Ministry of Social Affairs, with MINSANTE, the education ministries and justice, should adopt a safeguarding framework requiring policies, designated safeguarding leads and vetting in all settings that serve children. A first step is a joint working group to adapt existing models to Cameroon.
- **Train health workers and set a hospital pathway:** MINSANTE and training schools should add recognition of abuse and neglect to pre-service and in-service curricula, with refresher training every few years. Hospitals should adopt a written pathway for suspected abuse, starting with paediatric and emergency units in regional hospitals.
- **Digitise civil registration and criminal records:** Government should move birth registration and criminal records to a central digital database, make late registration simple and affordable, and use birth registration at immunisation and antenatal visits to reach unregistered children.
- **Expand places of safety and kinship care:** The Ministry of Social Affairs should fund emergency places of safety and formal support for kinship care in each region, working with faith-based and civil society organisations.
- **Reform the law on marriage age:** Parliament and the Ministry of Justice should set 18 as the minimum marriage age for both sexes and ensure rape cases cannot be closed through family settlement.
- **Collect data on child abuse:** Regional delegations and partners should begin routine reporting of child abuse cases seen in health facilities and social services, as a basis for planning.

Next Steps: The town hall planned to continue the discussion with partners. The Chair announced a COVID-19 update, including Omicron BA.2, for the next session.

Conclusion: Cameroon has ratified the main treaties on children's rights, but without prevention, records, places of safety and trained staff, those rights stay on paper. Health workers, lawyers and the diaspora each have a role in making safeguarding everyone's responsibility in practice.

Prepared by the Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, from the session of March 26, 2022. Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=69lpfOw1i0w