

**FACING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES:
THE CASE OF MARROON COMMUNITIES IN THE
BROKOPONDO DISTRICT IN SURINAME**

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The situation and its context

As per January 1998, Suriname had an estimated population of 422,175. Population data in Suriname should be interpreted very cautiously, however, as the last census was held in 1980 and population trends have been difficult to administer properly. In comparison with other Caribbean States, Suriname has a relatively large urban population, with over 70% of the total population living within a radius of 30 kilometers of the capital of Paramaribo.

Maroons, or Bush Negroes, are descendants of escaped slaves who settled in the hinterland of Suriname in the 17th and 18th centuries, where they have lived for years in tribal communities and created a culture with strong African roots. Maroons have always had to cope with stress and have had to constantly adapt in order to survive. In the mid-twentieth century, a large part of the Maroon communities was disrupted when a hydro-electric dam was built in the Suriname River, and 28 Saramaka and 6 Ndyuka villages had to be moved out of their living area, which was to be covered by the rising water. The villagers were relocated in so-called transmigration villages, situated in what is presently known as the District of Brokopondo. As a result, this district has village communities of three distinct tribes (Saramaka, Ndyuka and Matawai) living in more or less separate areas of the district and literally cut off from the traditional authority of their respective Tribal Chieftains. The civil war (1986 - 1992), which was fought mainly in the hinterland of Suriname, caused further upheaval for the village communities, since many Maroon peoples had to flee to the urban area in and around the capital of Paramaribo or to neighboring French Guiana or to further in the hinterland.

The forced relocation, followed by the civil war, has led to a crisis in the beliefs of the Maroon society. The gods and the ancestors, who are expected to protect the community, were unable to prevent these disasters. Traditional leaders, who had ensured their people that the water would not swallow their villages, were proven wrong. Traditional medicine men and women stood helpless against forces from outside. This crisis was increased and intensified by the war in the interior. Again the “wise old people” were not able to protect their communities against a new disaster. According to people’s reports of the war period, in several villages, the army intentionally humiliated traditional leaders and medicine men in public, to break the faith that people had in them. Moreover, young men with guns became the new heroes. After things turned back to normal, these young men were naturally not inclined to revert to the rule of the old people.

From time to time in the past, the interior experienced gold rushes. The present gold mining activities started after the civil war, particularly in the Districts of Brokopondo and Sipaliwini, and involves some 10,000 to 20,000 small gold miners, the majority of whom are city-dwellers and Brazilians and only a small portion local Maroons. The presence of these ‘migrants’ has exposed

local communities to all the hazards involved with unregulated gold mining: environmental degradation, violence, crime and prostitution. Sometimes women are recruited in Brazil and contracted for three months to cook and clean. During that time they also provide sexual services for the gold miners. Another new phenomenon is that of the women's camps. Street workers of the city, lured by tales of gold and big money, travel to the interior to try their luck. Most gold mining camps do not allow women inside, so these women have set up or rented their own camps. A third group of sex workers in the gold mining area is that of Maroon women from surrounding villages. They are single women with family responsibility, the majority of whom say they have gone into the sex business to earn a living for their family.

The gold mining and also logging activities have caused even more disruption in the lives of the village peoples, who are now going through the stress and frustration of fast change and development. While the new economic activities are vibrant, the education and health sectors have deteriorated and have given cause for serious concern about rising illiteracy and dropout rates, as well as about diseases like malaria, yellow fever and STD/HIV. At present, the Maroon communities of the District of Brokopondo are in transition: they are strongly influenced by urban development of the capital of Paramaribo, while traditional culture is steadily eroding.

The Maroon communities are also experiencing increasing *feminization* of the population, as men often migrate permanently or for long periods to the city or abroad to study and/or seek employment. Most communities have always had to deal with migrating men or migrating younger generations, but the more or less permanent migration of men has become a structural problem since the civil war and the on-going economic crisis in the country. Family life has disintegrated, affecting women and children socially, financially and emotionally. In addition, the traditional division of labor and social life in households and in the villages has changed, resulting in an increased responsibility and workload for women and girls.¹ The phenomenon of increasing numbers of single women with family responsibility, therefore, is the consequence of eroding traditional and cultural values combined with a harsh socioeconomic climate. More and more women are being forced to take up typically male work, for example, clearing plots, small repairs of house and furniture and traveling by boat to distant places. Such activities are by no means a general tendency in traditional Maroon villages, however, where there is still a strict division of gender roles.

Importance and implications

The increased stress and frustration resulting from the complex problems affecting the lives of the Maroon peoples are reflected in increased crime, violence and drug addiction among them, especially in the urban area around Paramaribo and in the District of Brokopondo. It is in particular argued that the men deal poorly with shocks and stress, especially since socioeconomic conditions affect their traditional status as head of household and income-provider of the family. In community meetings held in the framework of the UNIFEM and UNICEF country programmes for Suriname in 1999 and early 2000, participants in the different villages remarked that the increasing autonomy of women requires a process for redefinition of the role of men, since a growing identity crisis among the men might also be contributing to a higher incidence of violence in the community. Among the problems identified were gender-based violence and increased STD/HIV in the interior.

With respect to gender-based violence, the villagers mentioned the following as examples which they said ensue from the new economic activities in the area:

- Increased and sometimes forced prostitution.
- Beating of children and sometimes also the wife, although it was said that this was not a serious problem in Maroon communities.
- Neglect of family: owing to the socioeconomic situation, men are sometimes unable to provide for their family and therefore do not return to their villages. Some men, whose wives' have learned to generate an own income through activities of mainly NGOs in their communities, claim that they now no longer need to provide for their family, since the woman is able to do so.

¹ Karin Boven and Josta Nieuwendam at the Seminar on Economic Opportunities of Hinterland Communities (1999)

As far as STD/HIV is concerned, the villagers claimed that STDs are quite common in Maroon communities, particularly among men who work in Paramaribo or French Guiana. The disruption of community life and the displacement of people were considered as contributing factors. Polygamic relationships, quite common in Maroon culture, seem to have become more casual these past years are considered as a time bomb for the spread of STDs in the interior. A 1998/1999-study conducted in the interior pointed out that among Maroons 47.4% males had had one or more experiences with STDs, while this figure was 18.6% for women.²

A lack of good health and sex education and an underestimation of changing gender roles in the interior will undoubtedly lead to an aggravation of the situation. Gender-based violence is expected to increase as gender socialization patterns change and women refuse to conform to what their tradition or culture requires of them.

Many NGOs developed initiatives for the interior in the past years, which have included the construction of polyclinics, health surveys, malaria campaigns, papsmear screening projects, promotion of breastfeeding, water and sanitation projects, STD and HIV/AIDS prevention, promotion of nutritional food and prevention of malnutrition, preventive and informative campaigns on chronic diseases, prevention of teenage pregnancy, and drug prevention activities. The activities have so far generally been copied or directed from, or carried out by organizations from the city. The focus of many of the activities has been on women and children, because men are absent in the villages, or not included in the "women-oriented" activities. Women have been mobilized into setting up women's groups or women's organizations in most villages. Specific concern has been raised by these women's groups for certain examples of gender-based violence in Maroon communities, which women say are rooted in traditional culture and are causing them to become high risks for STD/AIDS infection. Most organizations dealing with violence against women are located in the urban area, however, and not much has been done until now to gain a better insight into or an understanding of the magnitude of gender-based violence among the peoples living in the interior of Suriname.

Causes

As society changes, gender roles also change. But those who live up to new ideal roles and act in contravention of tradition experience that society is not ready to deal with changes, for example, men looking after children. This is understandable, knowing that traditionally in Maroon ideology, the conceptual distinction between male and female is pervasive and unambiguous, and sexual identity influences every aspect of a person's life, beginning at birth. Children's play is clearly molded by gender expectations. And sex-typed skills are mastered at an early age.³

One of the main causes of gender-based violence is the unequal power relation between men and women. The power of men over women in various domains, for example, culturally, economically, politically and in ownership of property has led to the reinforcement of power of men in the family. Gender-based violence is often also related to unharmonious conditions of people. Globally found correlations between socioeconomic factors and violence most likely also characterize trends in Suriname. The increased stress and frustration resulting from the complex problems affecting Maroon people's lives have been reflected in increased crime, violence and addiction. It is in particular argued that men deal poorly with shocks and stress, especially when socioeconomic conditions affect their status as head of the household or income-provider of the family. Consequently, the increasing autonomy of women requires a process of redefinition of the role of men, since a growing identity crisis among Maroon men will also contribute to a higher incidence of violence in the family. Women constantly pay the price of men's incapability to cope with their frustration, stress and disabilities.

In 1998, a project entitled 'Fighting Domestic Violence', implemented by CAFRA-Suriname and financed by the Inter-American Development Bank, included an awareness training of the police force and social workers, and also trained people of the Districts to become key persons in their communities. In July 2000, CAFRA-Suriname organized a training workshop in the District of

² Julia Terborg and Karin Boven 1999.

³ Sally Price, 1984: 12-14.

Brokopondo as a follow-up activity to the 1998 training in Paramaribo, when one of the members of the women's organization *Lobi ku Pasensi* of Brokopondo was trained.

Further studies will be needed to gain a better understanding of what was presented, since it was the first time issues were raised by Maroon women themselves as examples of gender-based violence in their communities, ensuing from tradition:

- At the end of the traditional period of mourning, a widow must have sex with a male member of her deceased husband's family in order to "cleanse" her body. This practice of "sexually opening" of a widow is now being openly criticized by women. Especially the women who are aware of the risks of STDs and HIV/AIDS, want this tradition to come to an end. Some say this will be difficult to do, since the general belief is still that widows who refuse to submit themselves to this practise will never be able to develop a sexual relationship with another man. The practise was regarded as sexual and emotional abuse.
- After a girl's first menstruation, she is considered a young adult and is eligible for marriage. She is often encouraged to seek a husband, since in traditional Maroon culture a woman without a husband has an inferior position. This sometimes leads to sexual abuse of girls and unwelcome "teenage" pregnancies and by misinterpretation of non-Maroon people in the city that Maroon girls are promiscuous.
- Polygamy is still quite common in Maroon communities. Women claim it has never been fully acceptable to them, contrary to what is generally believed. The women say that men disregard their feelings in this matter. Both men and women say, however, that this practice is leading to increasing numbers of single women with family responsibility, since the men cannot always provide for their wives, or they enter into casual relationships more easily nowadays, without taking the responsibility for a family. Polygamy is being criticized more openly by women as emotional abuse as well. Women explained that co-wives have to wait for their turn to be visited by their husband, who sometimes shows up in the area, but does not fulfil his duties. The fact that some co-wives benefit more from the earning and goods with which men support their families, was also considered as emotional violence. Moreover, women are also becoming more aware of the increased risk for STD/HIV which ensue from polygamy.
- Another form of emotional violence was the fact that men who stay away in the city or go abroad for longer periods, sometimes no longer appreciate their wife upon return to the village.
- Isolation was also mentioned as a form of abuse: women need the consent of their husband to leave the village, or even to participate in a course.

Although domestic violence, in the sense of beating up women and children was not considered a serious problem, in the training session on domestic violence in Brokopondo-Centrum, people acknowledged that physical violence is becoming more evident in different communities. This was ascribed to processes already mentioned above, but which will be touched upon here as well as specific causes of (increasing) gender-based violence:

- The eroding traditional power relations in the community. While in the old days a woman could bring her complaint before the village council (*krutu*) where it was seriously considered (a man could only have more wives if he was able to maintain all of them, economically as well as sexually), nowadays young men do not care much for the verdict of the council and the traditional authorities are losing grip on these younger men.

- With the civil war of the nineteen eighties, violence became the norm. The generation of children who grew up with and experienced violence, is now the generation of adolescents, and young men and women. It is not known how many of them are seriously affected mentally by the violence they witnessed or experienced. For the men who were active in battle, violence and aggression were the only way to survive. Since there has been not any form of counseling or aftercare, it may be assumed that these men have never learnt to deal with their traumas.
- Promises made in peace negotiations by both the Government and their own leaders were hardly kept. The discrimination which people from the interior experience when they move to the city, and the feeling that they were left with the “shitty end of the stick”, enhance their frustrations and aggression.

An alternative

During the above-mentioned training on domestic violence in July 2000 at Brokopondo-Centrum, the views of the participants on the ideal man and women showed hardly any difference between the sexes. In one of the working groups there was even no difference at all, which indicates that the ideal man would also be expected to take responsibility as well for part of the reproductive activities, and the ideal women would also be able to drive a car. This first training workshop on gender violence in a Maroon community marked the beginning of the first steps towards curbing the problem of gender-based violence, which, though not clearly visible in the community, is nevertheless manifest in society. Young and old women and men expressed, among other things, what they qualified as being violence against women and which they considered as typical examples for Maroon society.

Participants claimed that Maroon people are becoming more aware of gender-based violence and its consequences for their health and well-being and development. After they had discussed the issue of gender-based violence extensively, they decided to form a local network on domestic violence. This Brokopondo network now consists of 9 members (7 women and 2 men), drawn from women's organizations, the local police, community development organizations of six villages, and individuals who were concerned about increasing violence. The members decided to hold awareness meetings in their respective villages, in order to make gender-based violence more visible, to learn about what Maroon communities in fact think about gender-based violence, and what can be done to prevent it, and to discuss possible tradition-rooted gender-based violence. They also decided that they should meet more often to discuss what they had done and what they had learned, so that eventually a strategy could be devised to prevent and fight gender-based violence and its consequences for the health and well-being of the community.

One of the greatest problems identified was how to approach forms of gender-based violence, which are rooted in tradition and culture. If information and education programmes do not take specifically Maroon cultural aspects and traditions into account, they might not be acceptable to the village communities or traditional authorities, and will be doomed to fail. The Brokopondo network members said they will act as key persons for their respective local communities. They will also like to act as “local trainers”, who will be using culturally acceptable and appropriate manners to raise health issues and the issue of gender-based violence in the village communities, and train others to help them.

To avoid making the issue too threatening for men, the focus will be on common values. The following are examples of how education and information activities have been and will be undertaken in traditional Maroon communities:

- Everybody appeared to be very sensitive to the costs of violence to children. Children are valued as the highest gift in Maroon society. So, showing the consequences of violence for the next generation is likely to be successful.
- Since teenage pregnancies are not regarded as negative but as natural (once the body is mature enough to conceive, there does not really exist a concept of “teenage” pregnancy). The focus will therefore be on the advantages of waiting a little: it is better for the woman's health, she will be better able to care for the baby, she will be able to complete her school.

- The possibility of positive change: the traditional mourning period has been shortened to accommodate family from the city. If this is possible, certainly other changes are possible as well. The education and information activities will display culture should as a flexible, living thing that both women and men should take pride in to identify with.
- Build a sense of community: the focus will be placed on the loss of traditional protection and care patterns, and on the essence of culture and community. Every individual is better off if he or she is part of the community. If people do not learn to be proud of being part of a community, the community itself will erode further, and young people who move away will not return, for they will want to liberate themselves from a culture that does not respect their rights and views too.

The Brokopondo network recently became part of the National VAW Network. The incorporation into the National Network ensures a mutual exchange of information and views and allows a better understanding of Maroon issues by individuals and organizations operating in other areas of the country. The methods being used by the Brokopondo network will be further developed in their district, after which they can be copied by persons and organizations working among Maroon peoples who have migrated to the peri-urban areas of the city of Paramaribo, where the problems of increased violence are becoming more and more visible.

Conclusions and recommendations

The fact that Maroon people themselves have been able to discuss the issue of gender-based violence has had the following results in the short time since the project was initiated in the District of Brokopondo:

- The people have come to realize that there is more gender-based violence in their communities than they thought.
- The urban-based organizations have become aware that there are entirely different forms of gender-based violence than they had so far defined.
- The people of Brokopondo have started to discuss among themselves the best approach to making gender-based violence visible to start discussions in their villages.
- The Brokopondo network has realized that it will need to devise a strategy and try out different approaches, not all of which will be successful.
- The people of Brokopondo have realized that education and information on gender-based violence is best undertaken as a health issue, since it might be less threatening to the communities and since it has such clear linkages with the health and well-being of the communities.
- Local information and education methods and techniques are now being thought up. The next step will be to actually increase the education activities and take them beyond the one-to-one method that is now being applied.

One of the greatest problems remains how to approach these so-called “traditional gender-based violence”, since regular information and education programmes, which do not take specifically Maroon cultural aspects and traditions into account, are not acceptable and doomed to fail. The challenge is finding a way to attack gender based-violence if it is embedded in traditions and culture. The strategy could be aimed at making men and women understand that “neither law nor customs (or culture) are neutral entities. Both are formulated by those in power and therefore both tend to preserve the status quo. Parallel legal systems exist (particularly in ex-colonial states): the formal codified laws, customary laws and sometimes also religious laws. Sometimes these systems run parallel to each other and sometimes they are in conflict. But in many instances the internalized

informal code is more powerful and binding than formal law where plural legal systems exist, the worst is applied to women.”⁴

Further studies will be needed to learn more and to be able to give better guidance to these changing societies. For example, it would be interesting to compare the way young women in town feel bound by their culture with the way in which young men there deal with it. It would furthermore be interesting to learn more about “traditional gender-based violence” and find out whether the initiatives of the people of Brokopondo will bring some measure of change.

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⁴ Farida Shaheed, *On Laws, Customs and Stereotyping Women living under Muslim Laws*, 1993