



# Sexual Violence among Street Children in Urban Areas (Case of the City of Lubumbashi in 2021)

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Endemic poverty and the consequences of multiple armed conflicts, the number of street children is constantly increasing throughout the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the sexual violence they suffer is becoming more and more common. This presents a real public health problem in the DRC in general and in Lubumbashi in particular. This study consists of establishing the societal state of street children, more particularly by assessing the sexual violence they suffer. **Methods:** To achieve this, we carried out a cross-sectional descriptive study accompanied by a survey questionnaire on 250 street children of mixed ages and sexes. **Results:** At the end of our study, the prevalence of sexual violence was 53.6%. The different types of sexual violence to which street children have been exposed are rape (79.8%), sexual harassment (32.8%), forced pregnancy (23.8%), forced prostitution (23.1%) and the initiation of minors into debauchery (18.6%). The main reasons for family breakdown were the prophecy of witchcraft (25%), the death of one or both parents (25%) as well as other reasons (mistreatment, divorce, family exclusion for witchcraft, influence of friends) having 25%. **Conclusion:** From the above, street children suffer violence of all kinds, from desired sexuality to imposition, overall, it is an alarming situation which endangers the physical and mental health of children.

## Subject Areas

Public Health

## Keywords

Sexual Violence, Street Children, Urban Environment, Lubumbashi

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, empirical knowledge and theoretical reflection on children living in public environments separated from the family roof have progressed considerably [1].

Despite interventions carried out almost everywhere in the world, the issue of street children remains a very complex reality since the problems these children face is very cumulative. The literature data available to us reveals that in Haiti, the presence of street children has been growing remarkably since 1986. With poorly defined origins, these children practice violent sexuality regularly [2].

The European continent does not escape the inevitable problem of street children and young people and the situation is serious in the different countries of this continent. In Russia, for example, more than 30,000 minors are arrested each year in the Russian capital during daily raids carried out by the Juvenile Police. The problem is quite significant in Türkiye and Greece. Street children have also appeared in recent years in Hungary, Poland, and Romania. In Bucharest, there are between 1500 and 2000 of them wandering the streets, hanging out at night, like moles, in every possible corner, in pipe trenches, sewers, cellars, bus and railway stations [3]. In Russia, children in street situations (ESR) are very exposed to sexual violence and they suffer abuse which has serious effects on their physical and psychological health [4].

Africa is not spared from this phenomenon. In Morocco, the city of Casablanca is home to approximately 0.3% of street children. There we find young girls in the range of 8 to 20 years old. The latter represent a real emergency not only regarding the rape experienced daily in the street but also in the process of its social reintegration [5]. A similar situation is observed in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Early motherhood, single parenthood, the attraction of the city and easy earning power lead to the phenomenon of street children. The proliferation of nightclubs, bars, brothels, the uncontrolled proliferation of video clubs, easy access to the Internet, the humanitarian emergency situations generated, among other things, by Political and armed conflicts (ongoing or experienced by almost half of the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa) are major determinants perpetrating the phenomenon of wandering children. In Africa, victims of sexual violence present vulnerability factors predisposing to this situation, namely being street children, orphans, children in care or under guardianship, victims of war and domestic conflicts, dealers in the fugitive and the poor [6]. In Abidjan,

the large number of girls in the street is the basis of sexual rape which results in the birth of children in the street, who will be abandoned to their sad fate. Apart from the voluntary sexual practices that her children engage in, some girls suffer real violence in relation to their living conditions. Street mothers are not always sure of the father of their child, and this worries them less. The observations highlight an exacerbation of violence against several categories of people that young girls experience in the street. In the case where the violence results in birth, the babies are supposed to be welcomed by society and enjoy all the best conditions and yet in most cases it is the gang leaders who take care of them [1].

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), due to endemic poverty and the consequences of multiple armed conflicts and wars, populations in situations of socio-economic vulnerability have been swollen by the large number of people living in precarious conditions (such as street children, widowers, and orphans). For multiple reasons (poverty, wars, school and family dropouts, stigmatization, family exclusion under the pretext of witchcraft and the influence of friends), many children find themselves homeless and are forced to live on the street, a place in which they carry out their daily work while they are partially or completely cut off from family contact. The number of these children is constantly increasing throughout the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). In general, young people through their lifestyles are exposed to Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), exposure increases with life led out of control on the street. This sexual violence is dual to the extent that apart from friends in the community, even people who seem responsible rape them. There are approximately 14,000 children, of all girls only a quarter receive help and intervention from the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Médecins du monde [7] [8]. To combat this phenomenon and the abuse of which children are victims, several solutions are emerging in several regions, for example in Kasai, for a very long time, the approach has resulted in the creation of several child protection associations, with the aim of guideline article 2 of the African Charter providing for the Rights and Welfare of the Child. About the crucial question, the Charter places street children in a good position of protection [9].

In Lubumbashi, street children, commonly called “Shégués”, (in the local language? Shégué is the given name of street children) are increasingly looking for a job to survive. Most of them mainly engage in small-scale trading activities in the form of pirate markets, a practice which is accompanied by a thousand difficulties. Currently, the entrepreneurship of street children is also oriented towards specific activities such as shoe shining, emptying trash cans, gardening, or babysitting at parties at private homes. Girls are invisible during the day as they are used more in restaurants and are sometimes attacked, mistreated, and raped by police officers [10].

Most of the services inflicted on girls apart from torture are sexual violations and humiliation. Such is the sad fate reserved for them. Their vaginal lips are sometimes burned with a cigarette. They may also be subject to violent sexual touching. These practices of sexual initiation between street children do not take

age into account. It is believed that this is the right way to teach the initiate, whatever her age, to no longer be afraid of men because a girl who has been raped would never again fear of men. They are thus prepared to survive on the streets because girls cannot do the same small jobs as boys. It is then appropriate to prepare them for prostitution through the “desacralization” of the man and his sex. It is important to emphasize that in this rite of integration, the neophyte girls are not exclusively abused by the former occupants of the street. Sometimes they are collected by street boys who rape them in groups [11].

## 2. Methodology

We conducted a cross-sectional study on sexual violence in the city of Lubumbashi in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the province of Haut-Katanga, from 03/25/2021 to 25/07/2021.

### 2.1. Study Population and Sampling

Our study population consists of street children of all ages and both sexes.

Regarding the sample size, we included 250 street children among which 134 experienced sexual violence. We proceeded with cluster sampling. We chose three sites of the five sites where street children meet and all street children attending these sites were included in our study. There were 257 of them. Seven children were excluded from the group because they were over 17 and considered adults or adults according to the law of my country. Among the 250 children identified, 174 had already experienced sexual intercourse and were all included exhaustively in our study.

### 2.2. Data Collection

The data of our study were collected on a form and encoded with Excel, analyzed with the software Epi info version 7.2.0.1 to be analyzed.

We drew up a questionnaire based on which the data was collected.

## 3. Results

From **Figure 1**, we notice that most street children had been victims of sexual assault, (53.6%).

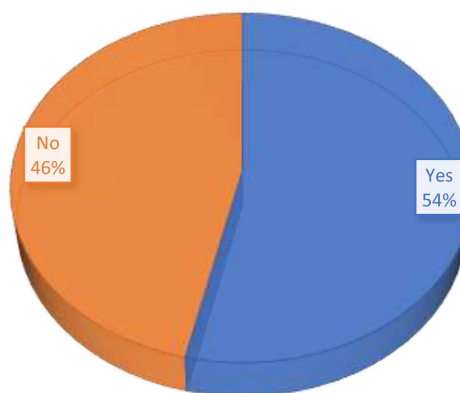
As shown in **Table 1**, Rape is the frequent types of sexual violence in the street (79.8%).

**Figure 2** shows that most street children were males 73%.

As shown in **Table 2**, in 54.4% of case, elder of the street were the most representative socio-professional categories of perpetrators of sexual violence.

As shown in **Table 3**, the city of Lubumbashi has the majority of street children 70.8%.

As shown in **Figure 3**, maltreatment, friends influence, divorce, accusation of witchcraft and death of one parent are the frequent reasons of being in the street (25%).



**Figure 1.** Proportion of sexual harassment.

**Table 1.** Distribution of respondents according to types of sexual violence in the street.

Types of sexual violence in the street	Frequency (n = 134)	Percentage (%)
Forced prostitution.	31	23.1
Initiation of minors to debauchery	25	18.6
Forced marriage.	16	11.9
Forced pregnancy	32	23.8
Molestation	14	10.4
Sexual harassment	44	32.8
Rape	107	79.8



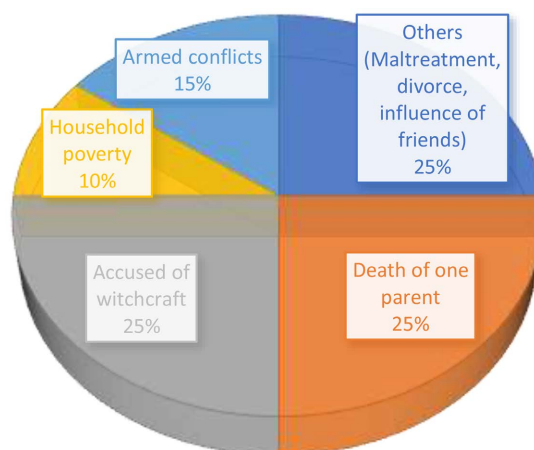
**Figure 2.** Distribution of respondents according to the gender.

**Table 2.** Distribution of cases according to the socio-professional categories of the perpetrators of sexual violence.

Socio-professional categories of perpetrators of sexual violence	Frequency (n = 134)	Percentage (%)
Elder of the street	73	54.4
Old woman of the street	17	12.6
Security agent	23	17.1
Trader	17	12.6
Passerby	4	2.9
Total	134	100.0

**Table 3.** Distribution of respondents according to origin.

Origin	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Lubumbashi	177	70.8
Rest of Haut Katanga Province (Other cities of Haut Katanga province)	15	6.0
Other Provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo	58	23.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Figure 3.** Distribution of respondents according to the reasons for family breakdown.

As shown in **Table 4**, begging is the most activity regarding the street children source of income in 53.6% of cases.

**Figure 4** shows that most of street children had a secondary school level. (48%)

As shown in **Table 5**, 70.8% of street children had already sexual intercourse.

**Table 6** shows that 70.6 of street children had first sexual intercourse in the street.

According to the time of occurrence of the first sexual intercourse of street children **Table 6** shows that 125 (70.6%) experience the sexual intercourse in the street.

Most of street children were males (73%).

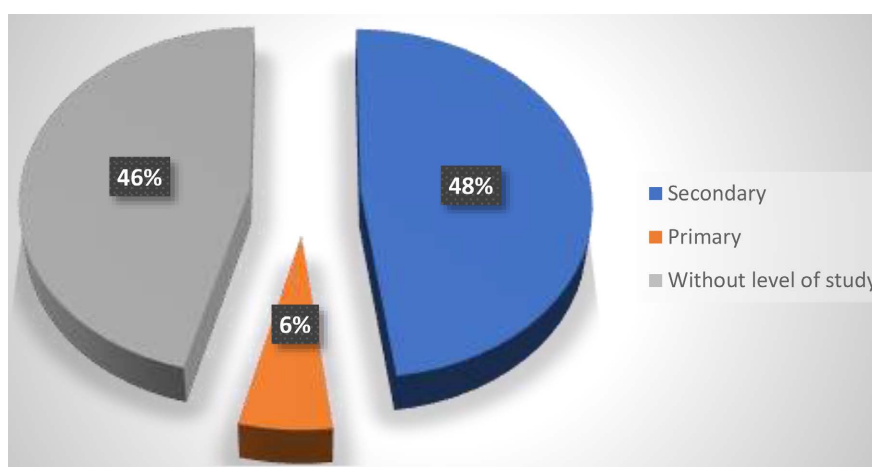
#### 4. Discussion

**Figure 1** indicates that out of a total of 250 street children identified for our study, 134 children, or 54% of cases, declared having already been victims of sexual violence in the street. Our observation is different from that of the survey conducted in 2017 by Lebugle which reported 10.1%. This could be explained by the difference in study environments [12].

Regarding the different types of sexual violence to which children were exposed, we observed the following proportions as indicated in **Table 1**: Rape

**Table 4.** Distribution of respondents according to sources of income.

Sources of income	Frequency (n = 250)	Percentage (%)
Vehicle washing	20	8.0
Begging	134	53.6
Small business	26	10.4
Service in a restaurant	10	4.0
Service in a refreshment bar	21	8.4
thief	39	15.6

**Figure 4.** Distribution of respondents according to the educational level.**Table 5.** Distribution of respondents according to the occurrence of the first sexual intercourse of street children.

Sexual intercourse	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	177	70.8
No	73	29.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 6.** Distribution of respondents according to the time of occurrence of the first sexual intercourse of street children.

Time of occurrence of first sexual intercourse	Frequency (n = 177)	Percentage (%)
Before being homeless	52	29.3
During my life on the street	125	70.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>177</b>	<b>100.0</b>

(79.8%), sexual harassment (32.8%), forced pregnancy (23.8%), forced prostitution (23.1%) and initiation of minors into debauchery (18.6%). It has just been reported that 79.8% of sexual violations occur, this high level of rape is due to

several causes. On the one hand, the condition that the child goes through in the street and on the other hand, the possibility of a blameless act when he goes unnoticed. It should be noted that these results are close to those of a study carried out in 2019 in Lubumbashi by Mwarabu which noted rape (64.1%), sexual harassment (29.5%) and forced pregnancy (20.5%) [13].

Considering the sexual abusers of street children. The study highlights street elders commonly known as land chiefs are in the lead with an action rate of 54.4%. This category is followed at 17.1% by security agents and in last position by passers-by with 2.9%. The high rate of land chiefs would be due to the initiation of adaptation in a new living environment. According to Tassou, most children are regularly harassed and raped, 70% by street veterans (**Table 2**). Prostitution, violence, and sexual abuse are all evils to which they are victims daily [14].

In our sample, 73% of the street children surveyed were male, the male/female sex ratio being around 2.7. Boys are regularly haunted by the spirit of getting by and living outside of supervision in addition to their ability to adapt quickly and easily in environments. In view of these elements, it would be possible to link the predominance of the male sex in the street. This result is like the survey carried out by Bodin and his colleagues who reported that most street children were boys, *i.e.* 95% compared to 5% girls (**Figure 2**). This predominance of males in the street would be due to male resilience in the face of the multiple persecutions to which street children are exposed [15].

Most street children interviewed during the present survey were from the city of Lubumbashi, *i.e.* 70.8% compared to 6.0% of cases who came from the rest of the Haut-Katanga Province (**Table 3**). These results strongly contest OCHA, which affirmed that the strong return of the “street children” phenomenon was linked to the arrival of chégués (who did not even know how to speak Swahili) from the provinces of two Kasai. The difference in sample sizes and study period would justify this empirical controversy [16].

The main reasons for family breakdown were the prophecy of witchcraft (25%), the death of one or both parents (25%) as well as other reasons (mistreatment, divorce, family exclusion for witchcraft, influence of friends) having 25% (**Figure 3**). Which is similar to the study carried out by Yuma which found that the family cause (Dislocation of homes, Child refused by his father who does not know him, Abandoned child, Child orphaned by both father and mother, etc.) is in the majority with 15 children, or 50%; 13 children or 43.3% are on the street for social causes: Child whose mother is a prostitute, parental irresponsibility, external influences, child stigmatization, etc. [17].

Nearly half of the street children declared that they had no level of education, *i.e.* 48% compared to 6% of cases who had completed secondary school but did not complete it (**Figure 4**). This result is consistent with the study carried out by Lubin which showed that 50% of street children had no level of education. The cause of this illiteracy among street children would be family breakdown or the absence of educational support from guardians [3].



In this series, the main sources of income identified among street children were begging (53.6%), theft (15.6%) and small business (10.4%) (**Table 4**). Our results are relatively close to those of Bousquet who reported in 2003 that more than 50% of street children found food by begging and 35% of them admitted to stealing food from kiosks, from passers-by, in the market, on restaurant terraces, in homes and even to their own friends [1]. In Niger, Garba found that the majority of street children were street vendors (50.79%) [18].

Seven (70.8%) street children declared having already had sexual relations (**Table 5**) and many street children interviewed declared having experienced their first sexual relations when they were already homeless, *i.e.* 70.6% (**Table 6**) compared to 29.3% of cases initiated into sexuality before finding refuge on the street. According to Psache, psychologist on the MDM Street Children program; For almost half of street children, the first sexual intercourse was rape, and 76% of these rapes were collective [18].

## 5. Conclusions

This scientific approach consisted of an evaluation of sexual violence suffered by street children in the city of Lubumbashi, especially to determine the prevalence of sexual violence among these subjects which is around 53.6%.

Most street children surveyed were male (73%) with a male/female sex ratio of around 2.7. 40% of these children had no basic level of education. The main reasons for family breakdown identified among street children were the prophecy of witchcraft (25%) and the death of one or both parents (25%). Overall, they are beggars (53.6%), they steal (15.6%) and carry out small businesses (10.4%).

Children face multiple and diverse forms of violence, including rape (79.8%), sexual harassment (32.8%), forced pregnancy (23.8%), forced prostitution (21.4%) and the initiation of minors into debauchery (18.6%). And around 71% of children admit to having experienced their first sexual relations during their first contact with the street.

In view of these empirical data, street children are forced to live in an unusual way, they experience violence of all kinds, desired and imposed sexuality; a set of situations that worsen their physical and psychological health. The sexual violence suffered by these children who have completely broken off from family contact remains a real public health problem in the DRC in general and in Lubumbashi in particular.

Therefore, considering the growth of street children in the city of Lubumbashi, the management and definition of an emergency occupational policy would remarkably reduce the incidence of street children. We recommend the creation of a Special Fund for Survivors of Sexual Violence on the streets and the establishment of a National Multisectoral Program to Combat Sexual Violence among street children. This must be led by a public health expert with the aim of ensuring that the victim and the perpetrator of sexual violence can benefit from holistic care. Laws to protect children exist but their enforceability is lacking. We

suggest that the parents of street children be identified because most children have their parents alive, and it is their irresponsibility that explains this phenomenon. Once identified, these parents must be forced to take responsibility.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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