



# **VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA**

## **A concise appraisal**

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Health, Education, Equality, Protection  
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# Context and process

In 2005, thousands of children are still the victims of multiple forms of violence which are part of specific economic, social and cultural contexts.

Physical, sexual and psychological aggression that children are subjected to in the family, community and institutional environment may have serious repercussions on their development, health and learning capacity.

Aware of the extent of the problem and of the devastating effects of this scourge on children's lives, the Secretary General of the United Nations Organisation received the mandate for conducting a comprehensive and in-depth study on violence to children in collaboration with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organisation (WHO).

The consultation to take place on violence to children in West and Central Africa, organized by UNICEF and the Mali government, is the result of a long process of collaboration and exchange between the different partners. High-level representatives of the governments of the 24 countries making up the region, representatives of International Organisations, regional organisations and NGO, children and the media will all be present.

**The definition of Violence by the World Health Organisation : « the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation »**





# I. Violence within the family

Families make up the very first circle of protection for the child who has a central place therein. However, violence to children within the family exists but more often than not remains hidden. The contours of these acts of violence are multiple and polymorphous: they vary according to the context and the position of each family member. Although some acts are violent, they are not always considered as such by all. The dialectic of children/parents/society cannot be simplified and each component interacts.

There are no single causes to violence. There are several cultural, economic, social, geographical and political factors which determine the different forms of violence in the family : physical, sexual and psychological.



## II. Community violence

**Article 24.3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child :**

**States must take « all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children ».**

Each community in West and Central Africa has its own cultural customs and practices which constitute the framework of these societies. The problem is that some of them result in violence to children, such as excision and early marriage.

In general, these practices are not carried out with the aim of harming the child but are connected to the socialization process of the child in society and to marriage.

### **Excision and early marriage**

Strategies should be identified leading to changes in behaviour and attitudes, particularly as far as parents are concerned, and enabling the integration of the guiding principles for child rights and child protection while respecting the religious and cultural values of those communities.

Such an approach requires all the community to be involved in the process of behaviour change : men, women, children, traditional and religious leaders, as well as the administrative authorities. Thus, abandonment of the practice of excision can only be collective ; otherwise, there is a major risk of young girls being marginalized and prevented from getting married.

Setting up legislative measures to prevent and suppress early marriage is not sufficient. The first step is to inform parents of the harmful effects of early marriage, particularly the risks connected to early pregnancy which can have serious consequences on the health of both the young mother and her newborn baby.





## **Child witches and mystical beliefs**

The phenomenon of children known as « sorcerers » exists in various forms, more particularly in Benin, Gabon, Nigeria, Liberia, Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

These sorcerer children, considered as having evil powers, are often made responsible for the local population's misfortunes. They are driven out from their families, marginalized by society or placed in rehabilitation centres. They are frequently victims of abuse, or even torture, sometimes leading to death.

## **Stigmatisation of children with HIV/Sida**

Children made vulnerable by HIV/Sida often find themselves in a state of great psychological distress made worse by the stigmatisation and discriminations around HIV/Sida, the consequences of which are their exclusion from the community, from school and from access to healthcare, etc.

These children often have extremely difficult conditions of existence which may drive them to survival strategies which expose them to further danger.



## **The culture of violence in post-conflict countries**

During armed conflict, children and adults are indoctrinated in a culture of violence and may later have huge difficulties in adapting to the values of peace as they are « desensitised » to violence.

This can promote a culture of violence as the foundation of interpersonal and inter-group relationships and place the child in danger.

Women and young girls who have been raped often speak of the rejection they suffer from their husband, family and the community. Psychological trauma is added to the physical trauma and suffering, when they see themselves rejected onto the fringes of society.

## III. Violence in institutions

### Violence in schools

Views on the educational virtues of corporal punishment have been echoed within the school institution. All pupils questioned say that they have witnessed, at least once in their school life, physical violence towards one of their schoolmates or that they themselves have been victims of violence.

Once inside the classroom, the teacher is all too often in sole command and alone to decide upon the gravity of the punishment and the methods applied. In addition, girls are victims of sexual abuse and harassment by teachers and schoolmates. The Ministries of Education in the different countries recognize the existence of such criminal acts in the schools but do not take all appropriate measures to make school the place for the fulfilment of children where they can feel completely protected.

In West and Central African Islamic societies, the children's religious education is a duty for Muslim parents. They therefore entrust their children to a marabout who is to teach them the Koran.



Today with the urbanisation and pauperisation of families, a perversion of this practice can be witnessed with some Koranic teachers placing their Talibe, i.e. religious scholars, essentially boys of between 5 and 15, in a situation of high vulnerability by sending them to beg in the streets of the capital cities; thus turning a legitimate process of religious education into a phenomenon of economic exploitation of children.

At the end of the day those Talibe who do not bring back the amount of money fixed by the marabout or those who show a breach of discipline are subjected to abuse and harsh physical punishment.



### **Children in conflict with the law**

Imprisonment is always tragic and traumatic for a minor. Whatever he has done, he has rights. Moreover, his rights are often flouted throughout his dealings with the police and judicial system.

In order to protect children, juvenile justice calls for specific treatment, approach and solutions whether at detention or defence level. This presupposes the setting up of special criminal courts for minors in conflict with the law, a minimum age of 13 for criminal liability, reduced penalties compared to those incurred by adults for similar acts, conditions of detention which take into account the need to protect children (separate from adults) and above all, setting up of alternatives to imprisonment whenever possible.



## IV. Child labour

The supply of child labour has been growing over the past two decades along with the increasing pauperisation of families and the incapacity of the education system to retain children. Children are obliged to work in order to contribute to family earnings and cover basic household needs.

In West and Central Africa, captation of the child workforce mainly takes place within a family-type framework (informal activities, domestic chores, agriculture, etc.). But for several years, there has been a progression in activities which are particularly dangerous for children.

Children who work run specific risks for their development and they may see themselves denied their most basic rights.

### Child trade

With child trade, violence generally takes place on three levels : (i) when taking the child from his family setting, (ii) during the transfer process and (iii) exploitation of the child through labour, including sexual exploitation. In fact, the point is not to fight against violence linked to the child trade but to fight against the child trade itself.

### Domestic work

As early as 1989, the International Labour Organisation declared that « young people who are working as domestic staff are probably the most vulnerable and most exploited children of all, and also the most difficult to protect ». However having recourse to child labour in the domestic sector does not fall under any regulations and is not subject to any control.

Children working behind the closed doors of private houses are particularly exposed to acts of violence as the latter will be perpetrated without the outside world knowing it. Young girls working as domestic staff are also particularly exposed to violence and to sexual abuse from their employers or collaterals who live or spend time in the house.



Taking into account their precarious economic situation, and afraid of being dismissed, young girls feel obliged to yield to the advances of their employers. Those who flee oppression end up more often than not on the street and are pulled into the spiral of prostitution.

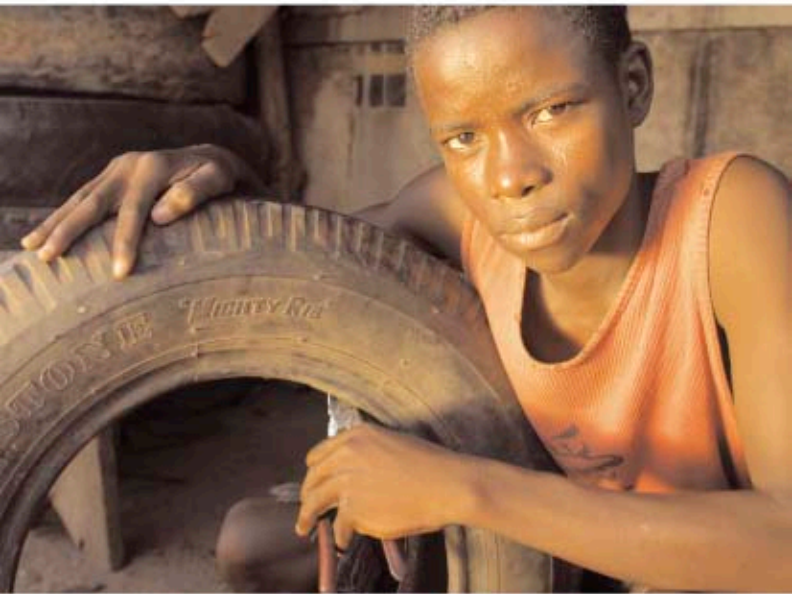
Information on this invisible and often ill-treated child workforce is still limited. It is difficult to study the problem and to document and quantify it.

## **Everyday violence to street children**

The daily life of street children is often the same all around the world and even their most elementary rights are flouted.

For these children, the loss of family support, the lack of education, the desperate need to find an income and the absence of access to networks of assistance and protection combine to make them particularly vulnerable to different forms of violence.

Street children live in appalling conditions. Many suffer from different sorts of illnesses. When they grow up, they will be illiterate or without professional experience if they survive malnutrition, illness and lack of access to care, dangerous badly paid work, prostitution, sexual abuse, social exclusion, police harassment, hassle with the law, prison, destructive cheap drugs and domestic work turned into slavery.



As long as children remain invisible and silent, violence will continue. Informing children, listening to their point of view and supporting their participation in decisions and solution-finding to problems which affect them, is in itself a way to prepare them to better protect themselves.

## TO BE KEPT IN MIND

### THE CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

#### Article 19 :

1. States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.

### THE AFRICAN CHARTER AND CHILDREN'S RIGHTS CONVENTION

#### Article 16 :

1. States Parties to the present Charter shall take specific legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of torture, inhuman or degrading treatment and especially physical or mental injury or abuse, neglect or maltreatment including sexual abuse, while in the care of the child.

### CONVENTION 182 WORST FORMS OF CHILD LABOUR CONVENTION, 1999

#### Article 6 :

2. Such programmes of action shall be designed and implemented in consultation with relevant government institutions and employers' and workers' organizations, taking into consideration the views of other concerned groups as appropriate.

