

## **Lubumbashi Police Tackle Sexual Violence**

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Hundreds of cases investigated by officers, but so far few prosecutions.

A new police unit in Lubumbashi, in the southeast of the Democratic Republic of Congo, appears to have made significant progress in tackling crimes of sexual violence, but the scale of the problem it faces is daunting.

The police unit, which was set up in April 2010 in order to provide greater protection for women and children, recorded 2,000 cases of sexual violence in Lubumbashi alone during the first five months of its operation.

“Every two days, someone is arrested for a rape committed on a young girl or their own child,” said Captain Aloïs Kalasa, the commander of the police unit. “The most common cases are those of people who rape their own children, and we see parents even making their own children pregnant.”

The police unit, which is located in the Bel Air neighbourhood of Kampemba in Lubumbashi, is funded by the United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA.

“The purpose of our unit is to prevent sexual violence and track perpetrators of such crimes, in order to bring them before competent judicial bodies,” Kalasa said.

Among the cases that have been reported to the police unit is that of Jeanne Mbelu, whose husband raped their 15-year-old daughter.

“One night, I had an argument with my husband,” Mbelu said. “The argument was so bad that he beat me up, and I had to flee the house.”

She said that she went to the local church, with the thought of spending the night there, but she felt too ashamed to enter because of her injuries. She decided to return home instead.

“When I got there, around 11pm, my daughter heard me knocking and opened the door crying,” she said. “I asked her what had happened and she said that her father had raped her. She said, ‘He often does this. Every time you spend the night at the church, he calls me and says I have to replace my mother’. I couldn’t stand to hear that so the following day I went to the special police unit. He was arrested and he is now serving a 20-year prison sentence.”

Prisca, not her real name, who has also been the victim of sexual violence, says that the police unit has helped her pursue justice.

“My mother died when I was eight and my father never remarried,” the 16-year-old said. “I have two sisters. I am the oldest. The other two are 14 and 12. My father said that we had to sleep with him, and if we did we would get a lot of money since it would bring him happiness and luck. Each day, he would sleep with one of us. Unfortunately, I became pregnant. My father was frightened and wanted to run away, but our neighbours caught him and we reported him to the women’s protection police unit.”

Speaking to IWPR from the police station where he is being detained, her father said, “I beg for forgiveness. I ask all parents not to do what I did. I want to say that I did this under the influence of beer. I wish my daughters would forgive me, I deserve to be sent to prison, I acknowledge I did bad things.”

Other cases of sexual violence have occurred at schools, where some teachers abuse their students, sometime promising good marks in return for their compliance.

Francine, 12, says that she was one such victim.

“The teacher told me to stay in the classroom after the end of the class in order to clean the room,” she said. “When I stayed, he pressured me into having sexual intercourse with him, saying that he would give me more marks than anybody else in the class.”

Francine said that this sort of the abuse happened on more than one occasion.

“One day, when I was staying late at school, my mother came and found out what had been happening,” she said. “She went immediately to the police.”

But there is some concern that only a small number of the thousands of cases the police investigate result in convictions.

Kalasa says his unit is doing all it can to address the problem and that, given time, their work will be able to have a real impact.

“The purpose of our unit is to bring alleged rapists into custody and, within a period not exceeding 48 hours, transfer them to the prosecutor’s office so that they can be judged,” he said.

“I assure you that in all cases we receive, we do our job. It is true that if you go to the prison, you will not find 2,000 prisoners convicted of rape, but at least we have done our job. Today we continue to record instances of rape and I can tell you that the frequency has not diminished all that much.”

Jackie Kabera, who heads a governmental body for the protection of women and families, welcomes the work that the police unit is doing, but says that the manner in which it investigates cases needs to be improved.

Given the stigma that surrounds rape, Kabera is critical of the heavy-handed way in which the police sometimes conduct investigations.

“The police unit should review the way it works by applying some guiding principles, notably confidentiality,” she said. “Cases of sexual violence should not be publicised excessively.”

In particular, she says the police regularly carry out raids on hotels without regard for people's privacy.

“Police officers should not look for sexual violence cases in hotels,” Kabera said. “The private life and dignity of others should be respected.”

She suggested that minors, and those who take them to hotels, should be arrested discreetly, at the entrance or exit of the premises, and that the police should target hotel managers, who allow these practices to take place.

Kalasa, though, said that raids on hotels were part of his unit’s remit, and claimed that the media was to blame for any sensationalism regarding such crimes, “The responsibility of the confidentiality of sexual violence cases that are pending investigation lies with journalists, who speak in the heat of the moment about sexual violence.”

**Heritier Maila is an IWPR-trained journalist.**

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