

Rwanda's Street Children

Author: [Fawzia Sheikh](#)

Government wants communities to take more interest in the children left to fend for themselves.

The authorities in Rwanda are encouraging local communities to look after an estimated 7,000 to 8,000 children who live on the street.

"We never had such a problem in the past," said Anne Gahongayire, secretary-general at the ministry of gender and family promotion in Kigali.

"But because of the realities in the family after the war and the genocide, we have lots of children who have taken to the streets because their families have... become so fragile.

"You don't have anyone to blame right now."

The street children are in part the legacy of the 1994 genocide in which some 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were massacred. But young people are often made homeless by simple economic pressures, and the tradition in areas such as Gisenyi and Ruhengeri where men can take several wives, leading to domestic conflict.

Rwandan politicians continue to develop new ways of helping them, but the message is clear -local communities, which have the closest ties with the children, must take on greater responsibility for their well-being.

The principle is similar to the way in which "Gacaca" or community-based courts, rather than the state judicial system, are being employed to try those accused of taking part in the genocide, Gahongayire says. "We have to equip the community," she said. "They know better. They can be trusted better."

But the non-government organisation Point d'Écoute, which has worked with street kids in Gisenyi for the past seven years - providing counselling, food and blankets - says many in the area are shunning their children.

Aloys Kaberuka, coordinator of Point d'Écoute, says Gisenye has 65 to 70 street kids aged 12 to 17, the majority of whom have parents who are simply unable to care for them.

"It's very complex," said Kaberuka. "I have some cases of children unable to find a resolution. It is possible they'll turn to crime to support themselves because they're in a bad situation."

In an effort to earn money, children do odd jobs such as carrying loads or washing cars.

Claudine Muhamawenimana, a petite, unsmiling 18-year-old with short black hair, started out as one of these street children, but now rents a room in a mud-brick house.

Wearing a grey Adidas T-shirt, she carries her one-month-old baby Isame in a makeshift sack on her back in traditional African style. The child is sick.

Asked to tell how she came to be here, Claudine says, "It's a long story."

After her father died and her mother remarried, her stepfather refused to accept her.

Working the streets as a prostitute to make ends meet, she met a 20-year-old homeless man who bought her food, clothing and soap. But under the circumstances, she was still forced to continue selling her body. When she became pregnant, the man deserted her.

Point d'Écoute has been instrumental in helping her. But there is only so much financial aid it can provide.

"I have no means to pay the rent, to feed the baby," she said, sitting on a neighbour's veranda. She wishes she had enough money to start a business selling cassava, bread and bananas.

The street children are by no means the only headache facing the government. It is currently trying to reunite as many as possible of 3,600 children now living in 25 orphanages across the country with their families.

And there are many children, particularly girls, who have been forced to assume control of households after parents and other adults lost their lives to Hutu killers during the genocide, or subsequently to AIDS. UNICEF estimates that Rwanda has some 100,000 families where the de facto adult is aged 10 to 18.

The United Nations agency has responded to difficulties in relying on social workers by offering these young heads of households a mentoring programme in which community members take them under their wing.

Rwandan politicians are working with international donors to establish a fund of nearly 11 million US dollars for organisations working with children. That money should be available by September.

Fawzia Sheikh is a regular IWPR contributor.

Location: [Africa](#)

Focus: [ICC - International Criminal Court](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/rwandas-street-children>