

RESEACH REPORT SUMMARY

---

# **SEXTORTION**

## **BREAKING THE SILENCE IN THE DR CONGO**

---



SEPTEMBER 2024



## **ABOUT THE STUDY**

This study, conducted by the research office of the Association of Women in Media (AFEM) under the leadership of researcher Georgette Nkunzi Ntakwinja and supervised by Julienne Baseke Nzabandora, aims to break the silence and address certain research gaps, particularly regarding sextortion in South Kivu in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

The research concludes that sextortion not only constitutes a serious violation of human rights but also hinders victims' rights in other areas and undermines sustainable development as a whole. Sextortion exacerbates poverty and poses a greater risk to those living in poverty. To more effectively combat sextortion within the framework of development cooperation, the authors emphasise the need to clearly define sextortion, connect anti-corruption agendas with efforts to combat sexual exploitation, and promote awareness and regulation at all levels, while allocating adequate resources to this work.

The research was carried out with the support of The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).

This material is completely financed by Sweden and Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, that does not mean that they necessarily agree with the opinions expressed within. The author alone is responsible for the content.



## INTRODUCTION

Driven by its commitment to promoting the rights of women and girls and combating all forms of inequality and violence, the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation<sup>1</sup> and their partner Association of Women in Media (AFEM)<sup>1</sup> conducted this research project on sextortion in schools, universities, and workplaces in South Kivu in 2023. This project examines the development of women's and girls' rights in the face of various cultural, economic, educational, and technological challenges. Despite legal recognition in the DRC of their rights to education, and access to the labour market, these rights are often undermined by discriminatory and dehumanising practices. One such practice is "sextortion," where sexual favours are demanded in exchange for access to rights or other benefits, representing a deeply discriminatory form of corruption.

The term "**sextortion**" builds on the words "**sex**" and "**extortion**." It refers to a form of corruption where sex, rather than money or goods, is requested in exchange for services, favours, or under threats of punishment. The **International Association of Women Judges** (IAWJ) played a key role in defining and promoting awareness of sextortion through its "**Stopping the Abuse of Power for Purposes of Sexual Exploitation**" campaign. This initiative highlighted how sextortion is a specific form of gender-based corruption where those in power demand sexual favours in exchange for services. A 2012 study by IAWJ revealed that sextortion occurs globally, affecting women disproportionately, particularly in vulnerable situations where they seek basic services or rights like education and employment.

Since then, more research has been conducted in various countries to understand the extent of sextortion. Studies in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda have identified sextortion as a widespread issue in both public and private sectors, deeply entrenched in patriarchal structures<sup>2</sup>. In for example, Colombia and the Philippines, sextortion has been documented in the legal and education systems, where women seeking justice or educational advancement often are

---

<sup>1</sup> The Association of Women in Media (AFEM) is an organisation of women journalists based in South Kivu, it was founded in 2003, in a context marked by recurrent armed conflicts where sexual violence was used as a weapon of war, alongside regressive and discriminatory social norms against women, AFEM's mission is to promote and defend women's rights and gender equity.

<sup>2</sup> Transparency International. (2016). Gender and corruption in East Africa: Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. Transparency International. [Topic guide gender corruption Final 2016.pdf](https://www.transparency.org/publications/Topic_guide_gender_corruption_Final_2016.pdf) (transparency.org)

subjected to sexual demands<sup>3</sup>. Although sextortion is recognised as a human rights violation and a form of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), many countries lack specific legal frameworks to address it effectively, making it difficult to prosecute perpetrators. The combination of conceptual, legal and empirical obscurity, the issue of perceived “consent” and the stigma and taboo associated with sextortion often leads to impunity for perpetrators. In addition, and despite that the concept of sextortion has existed for some years now, it has remained largely absent in anticorruption work as well as in development cooperation. Empirical knowledge about sextortion - where, how and to what extent it occurs and how it is perceived and dealt with - is still rather limited<sup>4</sup>.



Photo: Training workshop on sextortion with feminist organisations in Eastern DRC.

---

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). (2020). Corruption and gender in the public: The sector role of gender in corrupt practices in the justice and education sectors. UNODC. [THE TIME IS NOW 2020 12 08.pdf \(unodc.org\)](#), [Issue paper: Organized crime and gender: issues relating to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime \(unodc.org\)](#)

<sup>4</sup>EBA. (2020). Sextortion: Corruption and gender-based violence. [Sextortion \(eba.se\)](#)

## **SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

This research on sextortion explores the impact of the phenomenon on the rights of women and girls. It focuses on five key questions: the awareness and prevalence of sextortion in South Kivu, how it manifests in professional, academic, and university environments, the experiences of victims, and its negative effects on their rights. The study aims to map and highlight these experiences and identify mechanisms to combat the issue. Using a descriptive, multisectoral, and gender-sensitive approach, the research combines both qualitative inductive and quantitative methods to deepen the understanding of sextortion. The study was conducted in various territories of South Kivu, including Kabare, Walungu, Kalehe, Idjwi, and the city of Bukavu.

A total of 320 women and girls aged 11 to 63 participated in the study, including 27 young pupils<sup>5</sup> (8,1%), 32 students<sup>6</sup> (10%) and 261 women workers in:

- The public sector (14.1%)
- the private sector (11.6%)
- the mining sector (27.2%)
- women traders (cross-border sellers) (3.1%)
- media (women journalists) (9.7%)
- schools (women teachers) (8.1%)
- women entrepreneurs (8.1%).

---

<sup>5</sup>Pupils refer to young learners under the age of 18 attending schools.

<sup>6</sup> Students mainly refer to adult learners in universities, colleges etc.

The data was collected through structured, semi structured interviews and focus groups discussions, and the analysis was performed using NVIVO12<sup>7</sup> for qualitative data and SPSS23<sup>8</sup> for quantitative data. The study targeted these specific groups because they represent environments where power imbalances and corruption are prevalent, making women more vulnerable to sextortion. The groups were also chosen to provide a holistic view of how sextortion manifests in both professional and educational environments, allowing the research to identify patterns of victimisation across different social and professional contexts.



Photo: Data collection conducted in Kalehe.

---

<sup>7</sup> NVIVO12 is a software programme used for qualitative data analysis. It helps researchers organise, code, and analyse non-numerical data like interview transcripts, focus groups, and survey responses to identify patterns, and relationships within the data.

<sup>8</sup> SPSS23 is a software used for analysing quantitative data. It allows researchers to perform statistical tests, generate descriptive statistics, and visualise data patterns, making it suitable for large-scale survey data analysis.

## KEY FINDINGS

### LOW AWARENESS OF THE CONCEPT OF SEXTORTION

The study revealed a striking lack of awareness regarding the concept of sextortion among the respondents, with 94.4% reporting that they had never heard of the term before participating in the study. This highlights the hidden nature of sextortion and accentuates the need for increased education and awareness campaigns.

The lack of awareness was particularly pronounced in rural areas, where traditional norms and limited access to information further suffocating the issue. Women working in sectors such as mining and public administration are frequently subjected to exploitation due to the hierarchical and patriarchal power structures, while students and pupils face sextortion in academic settings where teachers or administrators hold authority over their academic success.

A woman encountered at the Nyabibwe mine in Kalehe said:

*"In the mining area here, I transport sand and stones containing cassiterite. For each load I carry, I am paid 500 Congolese francs, which is about \$0.20. To earn 5,000 FC, or \$2 a day, I need to transport 10 sacks of sand. But this is impossible because there are so many of us. The miners often force us to sleep with them to get this job, to be assigned sand to transport, or to carry a maximum of five sacks. Sometimes we are forced to accept, otherwise it's hard to survive".*

### HIGH PREVALENCE IN SOUTH KIVU

The findings also showed that 69.1% of the respondents had experienced sextortion, indicating a high occurrence of this form of corruption in the province. Younger women, particularly those aged 20 to 30, were found to be especially vulnerable, often targeted by those in positions of authority, such as teachers, employers, or local officials.

Employers and managers often fail to provide staff training to equip workers with necessary skills and competencies. This is highlighted by the testimony of a young journalist:

*"I am a journalist, and I was inspired by a female journalist who spoke very well on the radio. After I received my high school diploma, I applied for an internship at the radio station. Following the internship, I was hired. However, I never received any formal training. My journalist colleagues tell me what to do, like how to gather data. But I don't know how to process it. Sometimes, they do it for me, often after some negotiation, and then I present the news. On one occasion, a colleague demanded sexual favours in exchange for continuing to help me process the data I collected in*

*the field, because I don't know how to do it myself. He said he wouldn't keep providing free services when he had his own tasks to take care of."*

A lack or insufficiency of the required competencies for a position makes women vulnerable and predisposes them to sextortion as the person with the knowledge holds power over the one who lacks it—in this instance, technological skills.



Photo: Sensitisation workshop on sextortion for women journalists.

## **PERCEPTION OF SEXTORTION: "A COMMON AND NORMAL PRACTICE"**

The practice of sextortion was perceived in various ways by the respondents. Many respondents described it as a common, though hidden, practice within their communities.

It is often played down as a "normal" aspect of life, particularly in environments where gendered power dynamics are deeply rooted. 'An inevitable part of life', particularly in sectors where economic survival is closely tied to satisfying those in power. This perception stresses the systemic nature of the issue, where women feel, they must comply to secure or maintain jobs, grades, or progress in their careers. Others saw it as either a form of corruption, but with a sexual component that differentiates it from more conventional forms of corruption or as a form of sexual and gender-based violence, linking it to broader issues of gender inequality and violence against women.

## **CAUSES OF SEXTORTION**

According to the interviewees the biggest cause of sextortion is poverty, followed by insufficient salary/unemployment and abuse of power and authority. The interviews showed that behind the normalisation is also a perception of women as less worthy and as subordinate to men, and of male entitlement.

Due to traditional customs and practices, men are privileged over women: "they are the ones who have typically received education geared toward paid work", while women were educated in domestic tasks. Most working women interviewed occupy lower-level positions, which expose them to inferior treatment and make them vulnerable both socially and economically.



This was the case for one woman who shared her experience, saying:

*“No! It's inhumane! I had applied for a job at an organisation, but the recruiter asked me to sleep with him in exchange for the position. I accepted, and I was hired. However, some time later, I heard rumours that the man was HIV positive. I thought it was just gossip. I went to get tested... and it was true! I was infected. No! How could I have been so foolish...”*



Photo: Community dialogue on sextortion in Walungu.

## MANIFESTATIONS OF SEXTORTION

The study identified multiple ways in which sextortion is manifested across different environments:

- **In schools and universities:** Sextortion is often manifested through unfair punishments, poor grades, and sexual advances. Teachers or administrators might demand sexual favours in exchange for grades the student is entitled to or other academic benefits, exploiting their positions of power over students.
- **In professional settings:** Women in both public and private sectors reported being subjected to sexual propositions, blackmailing, and other forms of exploitation by superiors or colleagues.
- **In mining and informal trade sectors:** Women working in these sectors described being pressed into sexual relationships as a condition for accessing work opportunities or protection. The economic vulnerability of these women often leaves them with little choice but to comply, perpetuating a cycle of exploitation.

## EFFECTS OF SEXTORTION

On the individual level, many victims reported feelings of shame, traumatised, and helplessness. The emotional toll often leads to low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression. Victims in academic settings may drop out of school, while those in the workplace may leave their jobs, limiting their future opportunities for personal growth and success. Some victims, as mentioned in the quote above, suffer from sexually transmitted infections (such as HIV/AIDS), unwanted pregnancies, and other health-related consequences stemming from coercive sexual encounters.

On the societal level, the normalisation of sextortion perpetuates gender-based power imbalances and reinforces patriarchal norms, limiting the participation of women in education and the workforce. As women are forced to leave educational institutions or professional roles due to sextortion, society loses out on their potential contributions, which further hinders economic growth and development.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **FOR POLICY-MAKERS IN THE DRC**

- Introduce legal frameworks that explicitly criminalise sextortion as a form of sexual corruption. Currently, sextortion is inadequately covered under general corruption and sexual violence laws, which do not address the transactional element of it.
- Improve the enforcement of laws related to sexual harassment and corruption to include the specific dynamics of sextortion, making it easier to prosecute offenders. Ensure victims of sextortion have access to legal aid and protection services. Many women are reluctant to report sextortion due to fear of retaliation or shame, and adequate legal support can empower them to seek justice.

### **FOR CSOS, INGOS, TRADE UNIONS, AND CHURCHES**

- Mobilise resources to expand the study to other sectors, particularly the legal field, to other categories of women, and to additional provinces in the DRC.
- Lead and support awareness raising campaigns aimed at educating women, men and communities about sextortion, its consequences, perceptions, manifestations, causes, and prevention mechanisms, as well as the rights of victims. The high level of ignorance (94.4%) regarding sextortion highlights the urgent need for targeted educational programmes.
- Develop community-based support systems that provide victims with psychological, legal, and social assistance. Civil society organisations and trade unions can create safe spaces where victims can report sextortion without fear of stigma. Especially for trade union it is their role to support workers with these issues at work places.
- Integrate awareness of sextortion in programmes, promoting positive masculinity, to change norms around male entitlement and harmful power hierarchies including trade unions to include sextortion in their trainings and to hold employers accountable to their anti-discrimination work.
- Ensure that there are structures in place to prevent and respond to cases of sextortion within their own organisations and unions, and establish support systems for victims, including legal assistance and counselling, and advocating for stricter enforcement of laws against sextortion in workplaces.

### **FOR DONOR COMMUNITIES AND EMBASSIES**

- Make sure that the risk of sextortion is included in women economic empowerment interventions, with the aim of reducing the vulnerability of women to sexual exploitation.

- Fund initiatives that support legal reforms and capacity-building in the justice sector to combat sextortion effectively. This includes training for law enforcement on how to handle sextortion cases. Support programmes that enhance women's economic independence, particularly in sectors where sextortion is prevalent, such as mining and informal trade.
- Ensure that there are structures in place to prevent and respond to cases of sextortion within their own organisations.

### **FOR JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA OUTLETS**

- Journalists should actively investigate and bring attention to sextortion cases. Media coverage plays a critical role in raising awareness and holding institutions accountable.
- Offer safe, anonymous platforms for victims to share their experiences and highlight the impact of sextortion on their lives, helping to break the silence and stigma around this insidious corruption.

### **FOR RESEARCHERS (RESEARCH CENTRES) AND UNIVERSITIES**

- While this study focused on interviewing women, who are disproportionately impacted by sextortion, more research on the topic is needed to also include men's perspective as both perpetrators but also as husbands and fathers of victims. This can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of sextortion.
- Moreover, extending the research to include more geographic areas within the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as a deeper exploration of certain sectors would support the development of more tailored and effective interventions to combat sextortion at both local and national levels.
- Mobilise resources to expand the study to other sectors, particularly the legal field, to other categories of women, and to additional provinces in the DRC.

# ANNEX



Photos: From the workshop where the research findings on sextortion was presented to and validated by the research and social communities.

This research project, which employed a research approach, required that the results be validated before publication. Subjected to scientific rigor, the research findings underwent thorough evaluation by specialists in the field and in research methodology.



Photos: Launch of the sextortion report in Bukavu and presentation of the results.



Photo: Launch of the sextortion report and presentation of the results (AFEM & Kvinna till Kvinna teams).



Photo: Report launch in Kinshasa organised by the Swedish Embassy.



Photo: Report launch in Kinshasa organised by the Swedish Embassy. From the left: Georgette Nkunzi, in charge of research at AFEM, Evelyne Ndiponjou, Country Director DR Congo, Kvinna till Kvinna, and Julienne Baseke, coordinator at AFEM.

