

# Legal needs of women in Kinshasa

Exploratory survey among female students and  
market traders

January 2026



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# 1.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of the latest 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence campaign, we conducted an exploratory survey among female students at the University of Kinshasa (UNIKIN) and women market traders operating in several popular markets in the city of Kinshasa. **The objective was to identify the main legal issues encountered, the forms of violence experience, including online violence in the case of students, and the barriers to accessing justice**, in order to formulate operational and advocacy-oriented recommendations.

The findings show that many female students face sexual harassment and gender-based violence in the university environment, while having only partial or limited knowledge of available remedies and expressing a strong fear of retaliation.

A significant proportion of students regularly use social media and report experiencing online gender-based violence (harassment, threats, exposure to unsolicited images), which

is rarely reported to the authorities or university administration.

Among market traders, the vast majority operate in the informal sector without licenses or official registration and are exposed to repeated confiscation of goods, arbitrary fines, and ongoing harassment by public agents or market authorities. Barriers to formalization are multiple and include costs, complex procedures, lack of information, fear or mistrust of authorities, and time constraints.

Across both groups, participants expressed a strong demand for free legal assistance, clear information on their rights, protection against violence, and, for some, psychosocial support.

**The report notably recommends the establishment of a Legal and Psychosocial Aid Office for students at UNIKIN, the organisation of legal aid clinics within markets, and the conduct of a larger-scale, in-depth survey on the legal needs of women in the Democratic Republic of Congo.**



# 2.

# CONTEXT AND OBJECTIVES



Kinshasa, a megacity of over 10 million inhabitants, is characterized by a large population of university students and an informal economy largely driven by women, particularly in neighborhood markets.

**The 16 Days of Activism campaign provides a strategic opportunity to document gender-based violence and legal needs, and to propose concrete responses grounded in the lived experiences of those directly affected.**

Two groups were targeted:

**1) Female students at the University of Kinshasa**, future professionals and agents of change, yet exposed to asymmetric power relations and risks of harassment and violence within academic spaces and online.

**2) Street and market traders**, who form the backbone of Kinshasa's informal economy but face constant legal insecurity, abuses by authorities, and challenges in reconciling economic activity with family responsibilities.

**The specific objectives** of the survey were:

- To identify the main rights violations and forms of violence experienced by these two groups;
- To document barriers to access to justice and to the formalization of economic activities;
- To identify priorities in terms of legal, psychosocial, and economic support;
- To inform advocacy efforts targeting relevant ministries and donors in support of structural reforms.

# 3. SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The study is based on an exploratory survey conducted using two structured questionnaires, tailored respectively to students and traders.

The questionnaires combined closed-ended (multiple-choice) and open-ended questions, enabling both quantitative descriptive analysis and qualitative understanding of participants' experiences with justice.

Data were collected by **a team of law students, members of the UNIKIN Human Rights Club**, who received specific training on questionnaire administration and confidentiality.

For students, **110 interviews** were conducted on the UNIKIN campus, in various lecture halls and student life spaces. For traders, **99 interviews** were conducted across four sites: Matete Market, Mbanza-Lemba Market, UPN Market, and Liberté Market.

**The sample is non-probabilistic and purposive:** interviewers approached available participants matching the target profiles (students and traders) in the selected locations.

**While this approach does not allow for statistical generalization to the entire population of Kinshasa, it provides a robust and rich qualitative diagnosis sufficient to inform advocacy and guide pilot interventions.**

Data were entered and centralized in a relational database tool (Airtable), enabling analysis by group, municipality of residence, age, and other profile variables. Particular attention was paid to data anonymization, and all quotations used in this report are de-identified.



# 4. ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOR STUDENTS

## 1. Knowledge of rights and perceptions of justice

**The survey indicates that the majority of students report knowing their rights, although a significant proportion state that they know them only partially or not at all.**

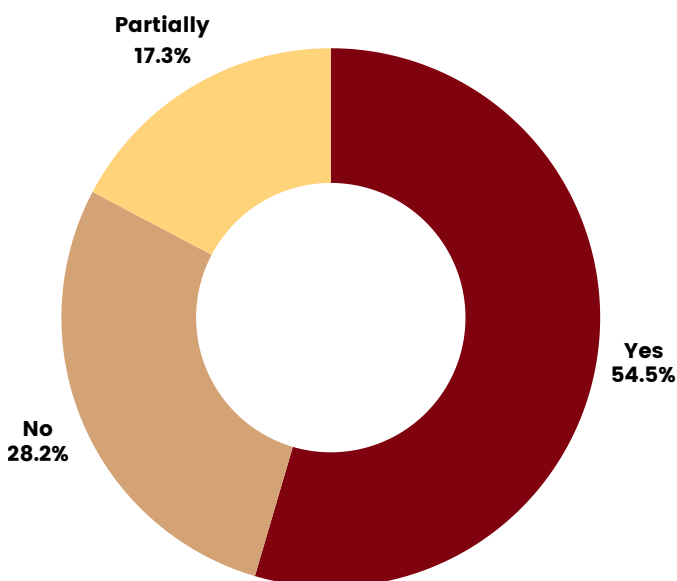
When asked to identify the most important rights, some cited general rights (equality, privacy, physical integrity), while others mentioned more pragmatic expectations (right to decent study conditions, access to reading rooms, quality teaching).

This diversity of responses reflects both an

awareness of certain fundamental protections, particularly against violence and harassment, and confusion between formal rights and material or pedagogical needs.

Several students explicitly cited the right to protection against harassment and violence, the right to a safe learning environment, and the right to appeal in cases of academic injustice as essential rights they should know and be able to exercise.

### Do you consider yourself informed about your rights as a student?



### Non-exhaustive list of rights mentioned by female students:

- Right to equality
- Right to information
- Right to housing
- Right to legal remedies
- Right to life
- Right to privacy
- Right to assistance
- Right to a healthy environment
- Right to physical integrity
- Freedom of expression
- Right to sit for examinations
- Right to effective education
- Right to have study spaces
- Right to education
- Freedom of opinion

## 2. Violations of fundamental rights and gender-based violence

**Nearly one quarter of students reported having experienced situations they identify as violations of their fundamental rights.**

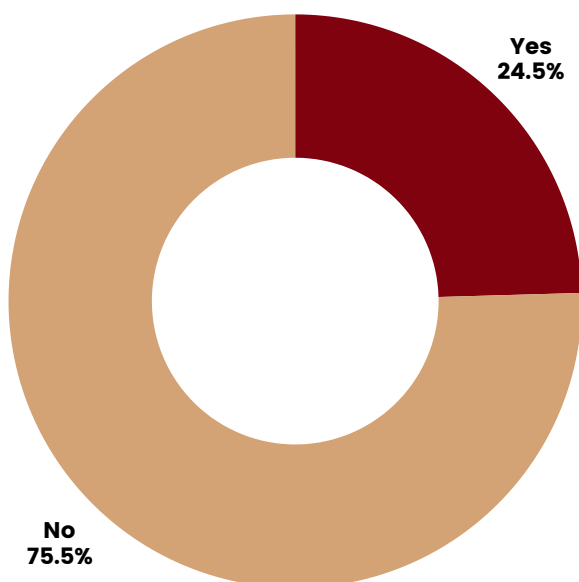
Some described cases in which teaching assistants or instructors conditioned exam success on sexual favors or exerted pressure by implying that refusal would lead to failure.

Others reported inappropriate behavior and humiliating remarks by academic staff or university security personnel.

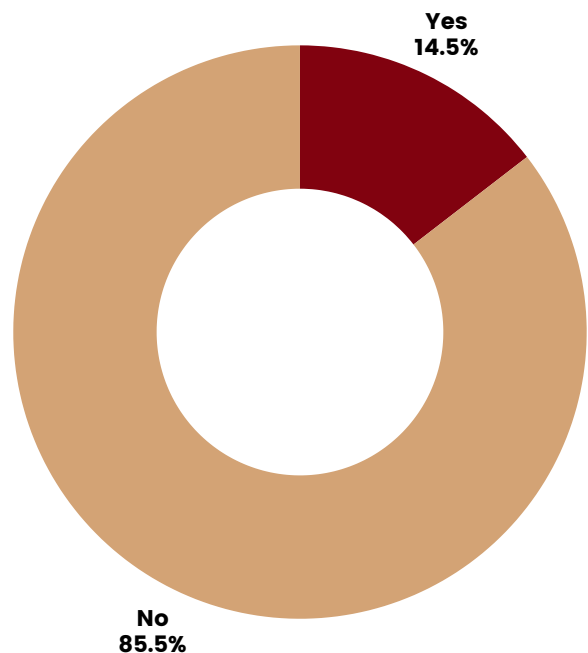
Cases of physical violence and abuse of authority on campus were also mentioned, including the use of force to prevent students from entering lecture halls and threats issued by student representatives who used their influence to intimidate female students.

These **situations deeply affect students' sense of safety on campus** and may discourage victims from continuing their studies or asserting their rights.

**Have you ever faced a situation in which you consider that your fundamental rights were violated at university or in a personal context?**



**Have you ever experienced sexual harassment or physical violence at university or in a personal context?**



“

*Our rights are violated at university. I asked a teaching assistant to resolve an issue with my marks, and he asked me to have sexual relations with him.*

*A student in my lecture hall made advances. I refused, and he and his friends came to beat me.*

”

“

*I was a member of a mentoring club. The club coordinator made advances and threatened to harm me if I refused.*

*He asked me to give him money to publish my real marks. Otherwise, he told me I would have to sleep with him.*

”



## Remedies and expressed needs

Only a small minority of female students who experienced rights violations or violence report having attempted to pursue a formal remedy, by contacting the Dean, the Vice-Dean, campus security, or the police.

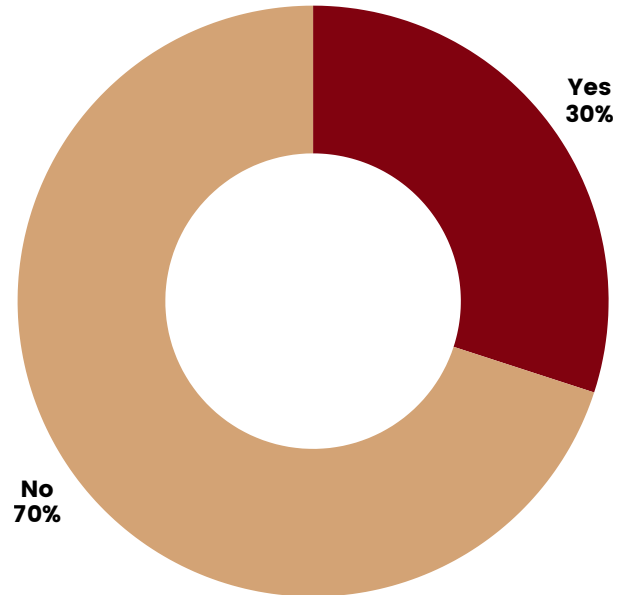
**Major barriers** include the perceived cost of the process, the complexity of procedures, fear of academic retaliation (failure, stigmatisation), and mistrust in a system perceived as slow or corrupt.

Students interviewed expressed **several recurring needs:**

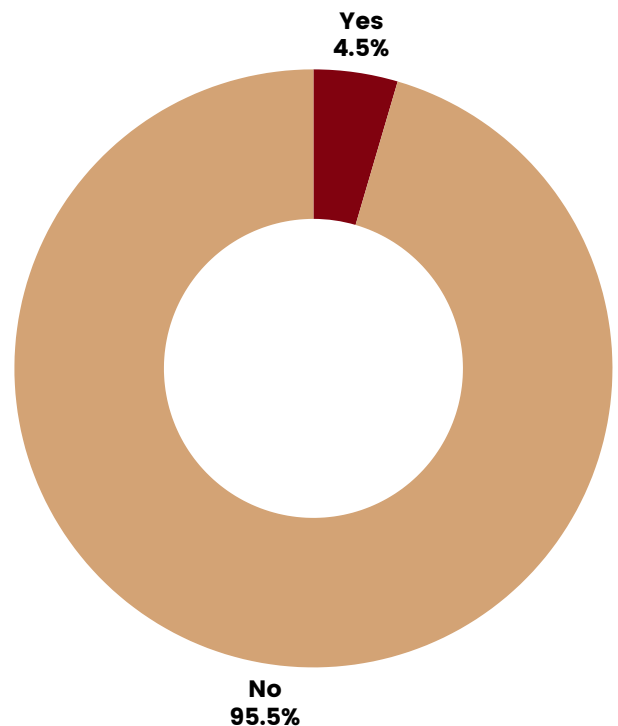
- the establishment of an accessible legal support service on campus;
- access to psychosocial support;
- the organisation of information sessions on rights and available remedies; and
- the creation of an independent structure where they could report cases of harassment and violence in full confidentiality.

Some students explicitly expressed the wish for Ius Stella to establish a physical presence at the university to help them report abuse and assert their rights.

## Do you know who to contact in cases of harassment or violence at university?



## Have you ever used an assistance or reporting service for these issues?



### Who do female students typically contact to report harassment or violence at university?

- The Rector
- The Faculty Dean
- Campus security
- The police
- The class representative

### 3. Online gender-based violence

Almost all students surveyed (**94.5%**) regularly use social media, primarily Facebook and TikTok.

Nearly **20% reported having experienced online gender-based violence**, including insulting or threatening messages, persistent harassment, aggressive sexual advances, or unsolicited video calls in which the callers exposed their genitals.

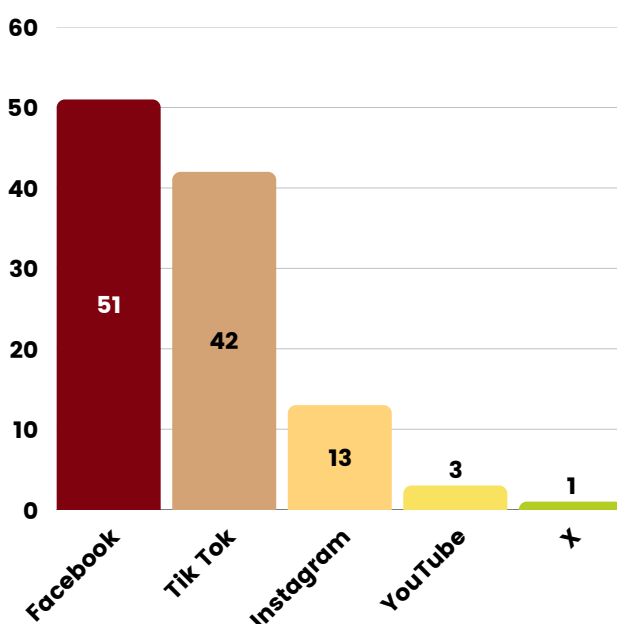
**Very few of these incidents are reported to university authorities or the police.**

The majority of students (**82.7%**) stated that they are unaware of the legal remedies available or the competent bodies to receive such complaints.

Those who considered taking action most often mentioned the police or, less frequently, academic authorities, but **few had actually reported the violence** due to fear of retaliation, shame, fear of not being taken seriously, the perceived absence of appropriate support services on campus, and lack of knowledge of procedures.

Many expressed a strong desire for **clear and accessible mechanisms for reporting digital violence**, as well as **specific training on their rights and available steps** in cases of cyber-harassment or non-consensual dissemination of personal images.

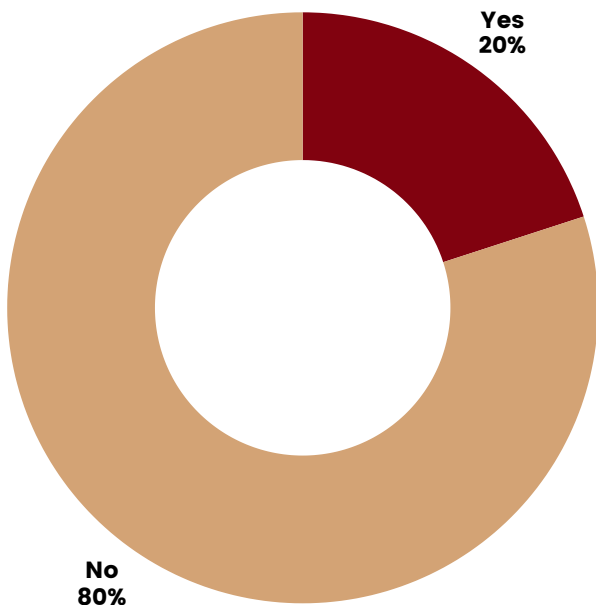
#### Which online platform do you use most frequently?



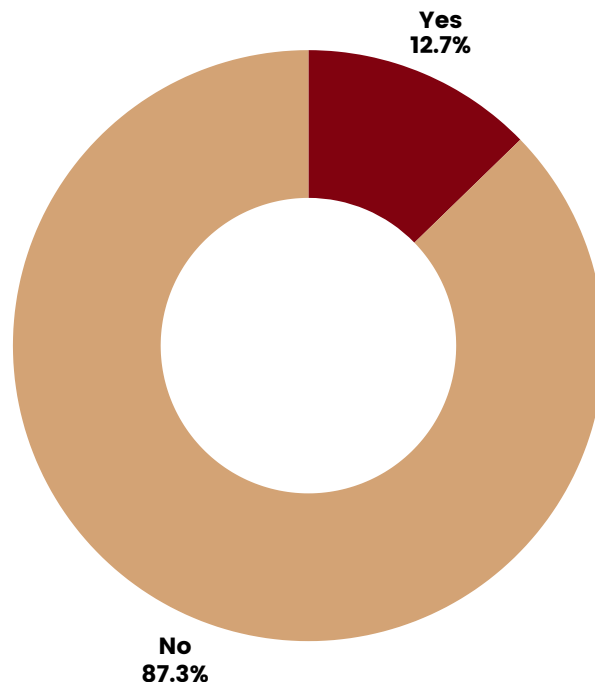
Values expressed as number of responses



Have you ever been a victim of harassment, verbal abuse, threats, or the non-consensual sharing of images online or by phone (online gender-based violence)?



If so, did you file a complaint or seek to report these incidents?



*A man using a strange name and no identifiable profile threatened and asked me to send him nude photos. He said that if I refused, he would abduct and kill me.”*

*On Facebook, a group demanded that I post nude images. Since I did not know who had added me, I asked to be removed.*

*A stranger called me on a video call and immediately exposed his genitals.*

*I was the victim of defamatory allegations: a stranger posted my photo on Facebook and spread false information about me.*

# 5. ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOR TRADERS

## 1. Socio-economic profile

The survey collected **responses from 99 women market traders** operating in **four popular markets in Kinshasa**: Matete Market, Mbanza-Lemba Market, UPN Market, and Liberté Market.

### Age and family situation

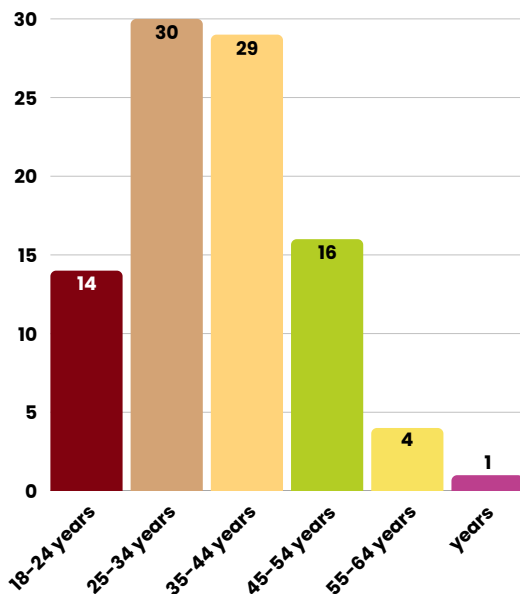
The profile of the women market traders who participated in the survey shows a group of women in active working age, predominantly in their thirties and forties. **The majority of women interviewed are between 25 and 44 years old, with a median age of 35.**

Some younger women enter street trading as early as the age of 18, while a small proportion of women over the age of 55 continue to trade despite their age. This indicates that this activity often remains the primary, and sometimes the only, source of income available.

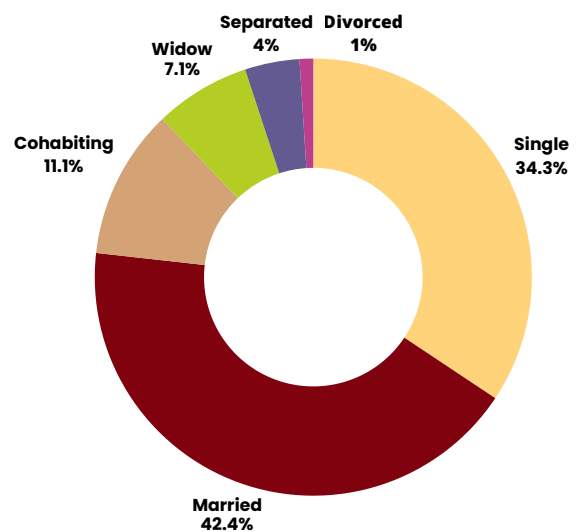
The family situation of women market traders highlights very diverse life trajectories, with one common factor: the economic responsibility they assume for their families. **Nearly 80% of the women interviewed have at least one dependent child**, with an average of three children per trader, and some supporting up to ten children.

Just under half of respondents are married, while a significant proportion are single, cohabiting, separated, or widowed. This means that many women bear alone, or largely alone, the financial responsibility of their household and children.

**Taken together, these elements highlight the central role of market trading as an essential source of income, placing women at the heart of the economic survival of households in Kinshasa’s low-income neighbourhoods.**



Values expressed as number of responses



## Commercial activity and informal economy

**The women market traders surveyed have been engaged in trading for an average of 6.7 years, with a median of 4 years.** The breakdown by length of activity shows that 23% have been trading for two years or less, 35% for three to five years, 28% for six to ten years, and 13% for more than ten years. The maximum length of activity reaches 25 years, reflecting the long-term and durable nature of this activity for some women who have devoted most of their professional lives to it.

The length of engagement in trading shows that this activity is not a short-term or occasional job, but rather a sustainable livelihood strategy.

**The vast majority of women market traders (91.1%) report that they do not have any official registration or licence for their economic activity,** confirming the predominance of informality in this sector. Many have never attempted to register their

activity (80.8%), while those who have considered doing so report significant financial, administrative, and psychological barriers.

Among the obstacles to registration and formalisation, women market traders cite, in order of importance, the cost perceived as too high, the lack of clear information on procedures, administrative complexity, fear or mistrust of the authorities responsible for these processes, as well as time constraints linked to long working days.

Some also report negative past experiences, where steps previously undertaken did not lead to any tangible outcome, reinforcing the perception that these procedures represent a “waste of time” or an additional space for corruption.

Despite these obstacles, **7 out of 10 women market traders say they are interested in receiving legal assistance** to support them in formalisation processes and to better understand their economic rights.



## 2. Legal issues related to their professional activity

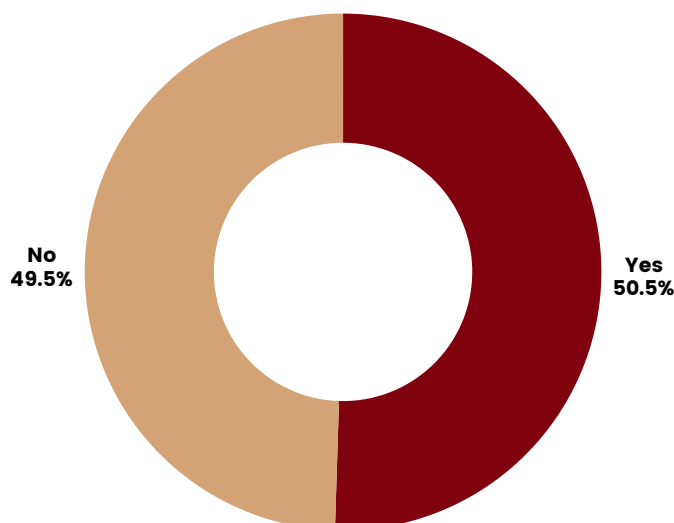
Half of the women market traders report **repeated experiences of confiscation and, in some cases, destruction of their goods** by municipal agents, the police, or other state authorities. These practices are often accompanied by demands for fines or payments in order to recover confiscated merchandise.

Some women mention the near-daily presence of public agents, who compel them to pay significant amounts, comparable to extortion, without any real counterpart in terms of protection or public services.

These practices lead to **serious economic and legal insecurity**, as the loss of goods directly undermines household survival.

Several women market traders indicate that there is no clear mechanism to challenge these confiscations or seek compensation. They also fear opposing the authorities, due to the risk of permanently losing their place in the market or being subjected to further violence.

**Have you ever experienced legal problems or conflicts related to your trading activity (e.g. issues with authorities, confiscation of goods, unequal treatment, etc.)?**



*We are forbidden from selling in the street and our goods are confiscated, even though there are not enough spaces in the markets. Every day, up to ten state agents pass by and enrich themselves at our expense through fines imposed during each confiscation.*



*Every day, my goods are destroyed or confiscated by law enforcement agents, without respect for procedure or any prior warning.*

### 3. Expressed needs and priorities

The responses collected make it possible to identify several priorities expressed by women market traders, presented below in order of importance.

First and foremost, women highlight the **need for direct economic support**, in particular access to financing or small loans to strengthen or stabilise their trading activities. This need appears repeatedly in their responses, reflecting the urgency of securing their daily income.

This is followed by a strong **need for information and awareness-raising on their rights**, whether regarding market regulations, taxes, or how to protect themselves against abuses by authorities or other actors. Many explain that they “do not know” how taxes are determined or who to contact in the event of a problem.

In third position, women market traders emphasise the **need for protection against violence and harassment**, whether

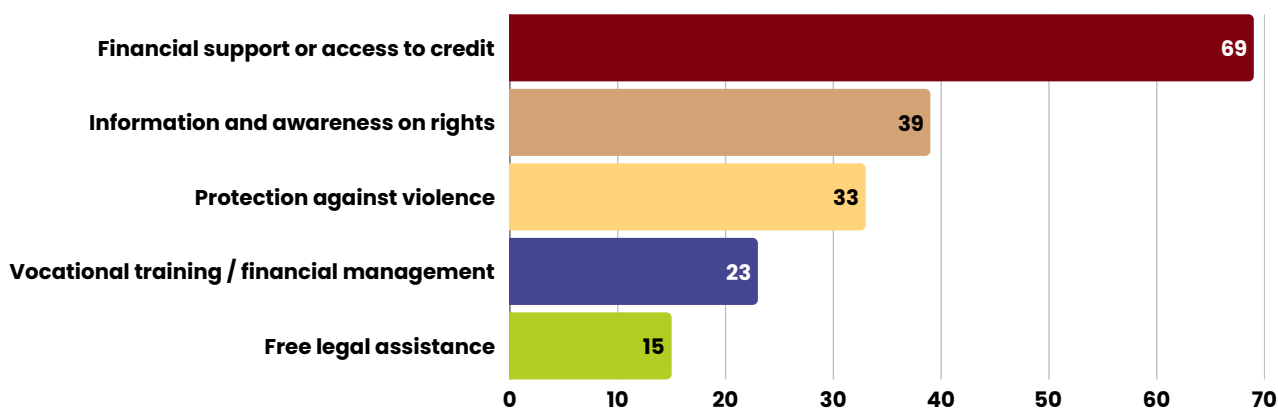
perpetrated by public agents, market managers, or private actors.

They also express the desire to be able to work without arbitrary confiscations, threats, or humiliation.

Several women further call for **safer and more stable spaces in which to carry out their activities**, stressing the need for a “secure place” where they can sell their goods without being constantly chased away or harassed.

Finally, a significant number of participants underline the **need for free, local legal assistance**, capable of advising them, supporting them with administrative procedures (complaints, formalisation, negotiations with authorities), and defending their interests when their rights are violated.

Taken together, these priorities point to **a clear need for community-based justice**, combining economic security, legal recognition, and protection against abuse.



Values expressed as number of responses

# 6.

## SHARED CHALLENGES AND STRUCTURAL ISSUES

The findings reveal **different realities shaped by similar structural mechanisms**. Both female students and women market traders face unequal power relations, institutions that are difficult to access, and opaque or costly procedures. **Fear of retaliation and mistrust of authorities consistently emerge as major barriers to access to justice for both groups.**

On the UNIKIN campus, female students experience gender-based violence, harassment, and abuses of authority that are embedded in a culture of silence and impunity, reinforced by the absence of dedicated complaint and protection mechanisms.

For women market traders, the lack of clear

legal status exposes them to a range of everyday economic violences, including harassment, extortion, and arbitrary confiscations. **In both cases, legal vulnerability intersects with gender and socio-economic status to produce persistent injustice.**

These findings underscore the importance of an approach that combines community-based justice, strengthening women's capacities, institutional reforms, and targeted advocacy actions. They also justify the need for a larger and more rigorous survey to quantify these trends at the city level, and potentially nationwide.



# 7.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this initial survey highlight the need to **strengthen community-based justice** for different categories of women, **by combining prevention, effective remedies, and human-centred support.**

The recommendations below aim to create an environment in which women can study, work, and live in safety, with effective remedies when they experience abuse, and where their economic activities and educational pathways are recognised and protected.

These recommendations can be jointly implemented by public institutions, universities, civil society organisations, and technical and financial partners.

## 1) Establishment of a Legal and Psychological Aid Office for female students on university campuses

The launch of a pilot Legal and Psychosocial Aid Office at UNIKIN, prior to its gradual roll-out in other universities, appears as a strategic priority.

This office could:

- Provide **a confidential reception and support desk** for female students who are victims of harassment, violence, or violations of their academic rights, with the possibility of anonymous or named reporting.
- Organise **legal aid clinics**, led by lawyers, in collaboration with law students trained as paralegals, in order to inform, advise, and, where necessary, accompany victims throughout their procedures.

- Put in place **a psychological support and listening mechanism**, in partnership with specialised professionals or services, to offer basic support and appropriate referrals.
- Develop **secure online reporting tools**, consistent with the forms of gender-based violence, including online violence, documented in this survey.

This office could also organise **regular awareness-raising and training sessions** on students' rights, gender-based violence, and existing remedies, with a particular focus on first-year students and the most exposed faculties. This would respond directly to the expressed demand for better information and for a visible, accessible protection mechanism on campus.

## 2) Establishment of regular legal aid clinics in markets

For women market traders, it is recommended to structure and expand free legal aid clinics within markets, prioritising those where harassment and abusive confiscations are most frequently reported.

These clinics could:

- Inform women market traders of their **rights vis-à-vis state agents and market authorities.**
- Support victims of abusive confiscations or violence in **the documentation of abuses, the drafting of complaints, and referral** to appropriate complaint or remedy mechanisms.

- Propose a **gradual pathway towards formalisation**, including clear explanations of existing options, assistance with completing administrative forms, and advocacy for simplified procedures and reduced costs.

These actions should be complemented by **training modules on business management**, integrating information on women's rights, basic financial management skills, and links to appropriate savings or microcredit solutions. Such measures would help strengthen both the economic empowerment and negotiation power of women market traders, thereby reducing their vulnerability to abuse and extortion.

### 3) Conduct an in-depth survey on the legal needs of Congolese women

Although exploratory, **the survey presented in this report highlights strong trends and clearly expressed needs**, particularly in relation to legal assistance, protection against violence, and access to information on rights.

To consolidate these findings, it is recommended to design a **larger-scale professional survey**, based on a

**representative sample and expanded geographic coverage**, including other municipalities of Kinshasa and different groups of women.

Such a survey would make it possible to identify variations across areas, gain a deeper understanding of the diversity of situations, and refine intervention priorities.

This survey could build on the methodology developed for the present study, while adapting it to a broader scale. In the longer term, **it would contribute to the regular production of data on women's legal needs**, facilitating the monitoring of evolving situations and the adjustment of policies and interventions.

Donors are invited to support this approach through **funding and technical support for the implementation of such a study in Kinshasa and, in the longer term, across the DRC**. This study would enable the production of representative data, strengthen the evidence base for community-based justice initiatives, and support the scaling of the most effective interventions to other settings.





## **For more information:**

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