

# GROWING UP ON THE STREETS



Girls experience and sexual exploitation in Bukavu, DRC

The research project is taking place over three years and in three cities:

Accra, Ghana

**Bukavu, Democratic Republic of Congo**

Harare, Zimbabwe



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# Introduction

- Street children have fallen through the policy net (Poretta, 2013; van Blerk 2014).
- Street children do not fit within the powerful discourses of childhood that dominate public policy and programme design.
  - They are ‘out of place’
  - They lack agency because of their age
- Current provision lacks sufficient tailored responses to individual needs.
- Street children often have complex need and backgrounds.



# Research Aim & Questions

## Aim:

The aim of the research is to understand street children and youth's capabilities on the street and to seek better ways of supporting them to have adult lives of value.



## Specific research questions:

- How do street children in three diverse African cities employ capabilities both in their daily and future lives?
- In what ways do street children face difficulties as they grow up on the streets? How might they be better supported?
- What are the changes in policy and practice that are required for a better understanding of street children's needs?





# Capabilities Approach

The approach has been tailored for street children, to explore the conditions that enable and constrain choice for street children, and to ascertain the freedoms they have to create a life they value (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum 2000; Shand, 2013).

- Through my work I can build assets for my future.
- I frequently receive the support of friends.
- I am able to realise my plans for the future.
- I am resilient in the face of problems that affect me.
- I usually have enough to eat.
- I am able to behave in ways that protect my health and wellbeing.
- I am able to earn enough money to meet my basic needs.
- I am able to move freely and be safe in my local area.
- I have enough time to play.
- I have access to shelter.



# Sexual exploitation on the streets

The right of the child to protection against all forms of sexual exploitation, including child pornography and child prostitution, is set out in Article 34 of the UNCRC

- Sexual exploitation in SSA:
  - A contested term, bridging a gap between abuse and 'work'. The key issue being related to an exchange.
  - Literature: few reviews in Africa outside South Africa, but Lalor (2004) suggests significant exploitation related to AIDS, poverty, migrant labour etc...
- Street children/youth literature:
  - Survival strategies on the street (mainly girls but also boys).
  - Hierarchical power relations for creating subordination.
  - Alternative forms of earning including sex work.



# Methodology: project structure

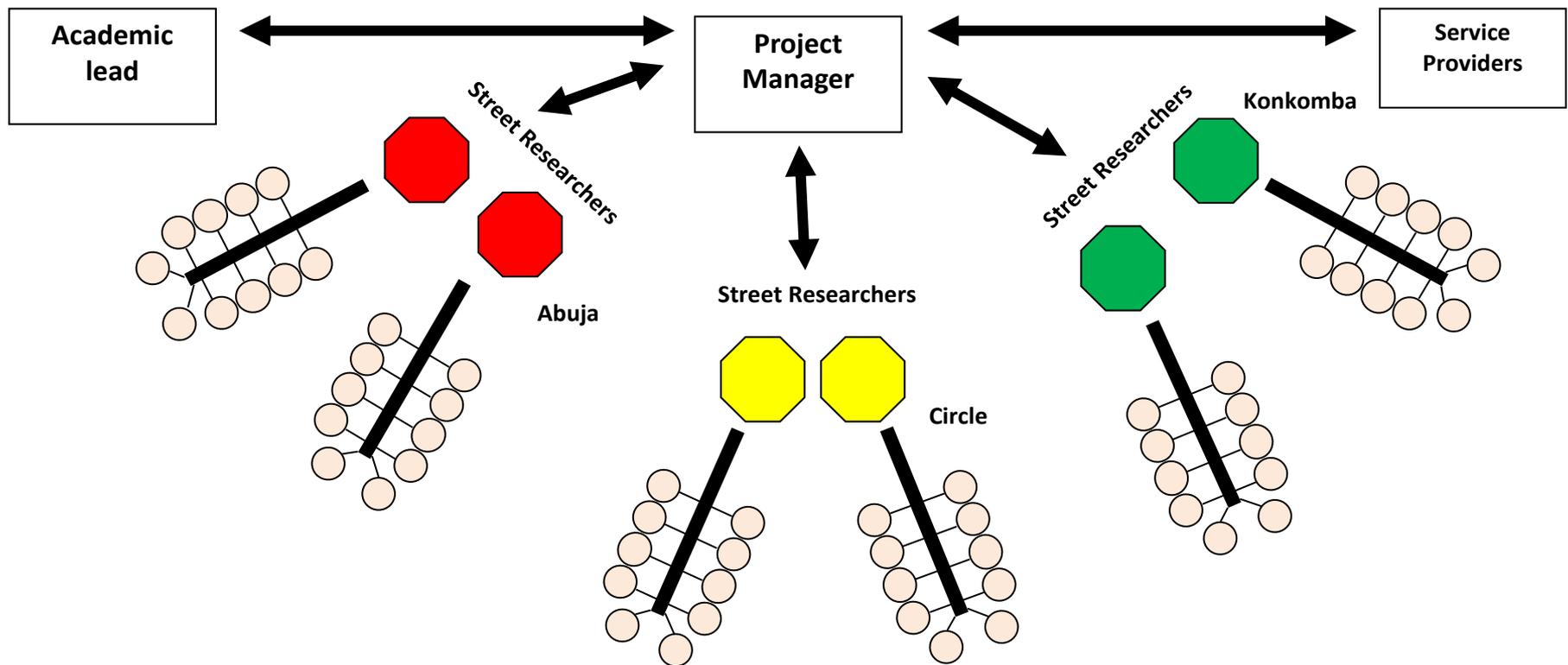
Participatory street researcher approach (see Bemak 1996; van Blerk 2013).

**Breadth:** 198 participants: 66 street children and youth in each of 3 cities.

Girls in Bukavu were aged 14-18 at the start of the research, with only 2 out of 12 aged 18.

**Depth:** 6 research assistants, who are currently living on the streets, were selected in each country to undertake their own participatory ethnography.

**Collaborative process:** the project management team, an African peer network, project managers and researchers all engage in on-going dialogue about the research process.



# Methodology: training

Two stages of intense training for selecting researchers through a participatory model:

1. **Open information sessions:** Introduce the research; discuss what it will do; generate informed interest in engaging with the process
2. **Ethnography:** Develop active listening skills; establish deep rapport; discuss problems with the process.



# Basic needs and exploitation

- “The bar is for minors and we are happy... because we will be new there, elsewhere people have had enough of us... He found that it is minors who attract customers and earn him the most money so he has even bought us food in a restaurant” (Girls FG work).
- “I have sex because of hunger and poverty. When you are hungry you cannot think twice/ Even for 500 francs you can have sex provided that you get some food” (Girls FG food).
- “Very often it is due to hunger. Once you start worrying about how you can get some food, you wish you had a ‘customer’ even for a very low price so that you can find food” (Girls’ FG food).
- “We befriend the soldiers in the surrounding and they give you food, soap and lotion” (Girls’ FG safe movement).



# Safety and exploitation I: sleep

“Sometimes I am obliged to have sex ‘free of charge’ with a man simply because he will give me a place to sleep...”. (Girls’ FG shelter).

“One night we saw a young girl from Bagira and asked her where she will sleep?... I told her to come and sleep with us in the sector. At first we were reluctant to have sex with her but [one boy] had a loincloth which he gave to her to protect her from the cold. This act allowed him to make a compromise with her and he was the first to have sex. After this I and [another] also had sex with her” (Boy, RA).

“If a girl arrives at our place to sleep we must have sex with her before she goes away... Girls don’t come to our place often; once one tries she must have sex with all the boys who stay there” (Boys’ FG shelter).



# Safety and exploitation II: movement

“Here if you walk at night the policemen and the thugs are talking to you asking you where you are going [allowing you to pass safely in return for sex]” (Girl, RA).

“The ‘omboys’ [thugs] and the police usually take us by force all night long. Sometimes a policemen takes you by your underwear, pushes you in the emergency car and then says in your ear ‘today I will have sex with you’. Then if you tell him ‘ok’...he has sex with you and you go on your way” (Girls’ FG safe movement).

“Once we saw a girl... Then we caught her by blocking her mouth and some others were taking her by the neck, hands and feet. We were about to take her to the place where nobody reaches but a watchman reacted when she cried. He came to help her”. (Boys’ FG shelter).



The police can [make somewhere safe]. They usually chase the thugs but after they claim a sex turn from us” (Girls’ FG safe movement).

# Earning and exploitation I

“Sometimes you may wish to become a prostitute... when you see your friend in the street you may be tempted to join her. Once in, you are stuck....” (Girls’ FG Earnings).

“The [young girls] are always there at night... When you arrive, you chose one, after talking to her she arranges with the watchman who will take you down to a shelter where you will have sex...” (Boy, RA).

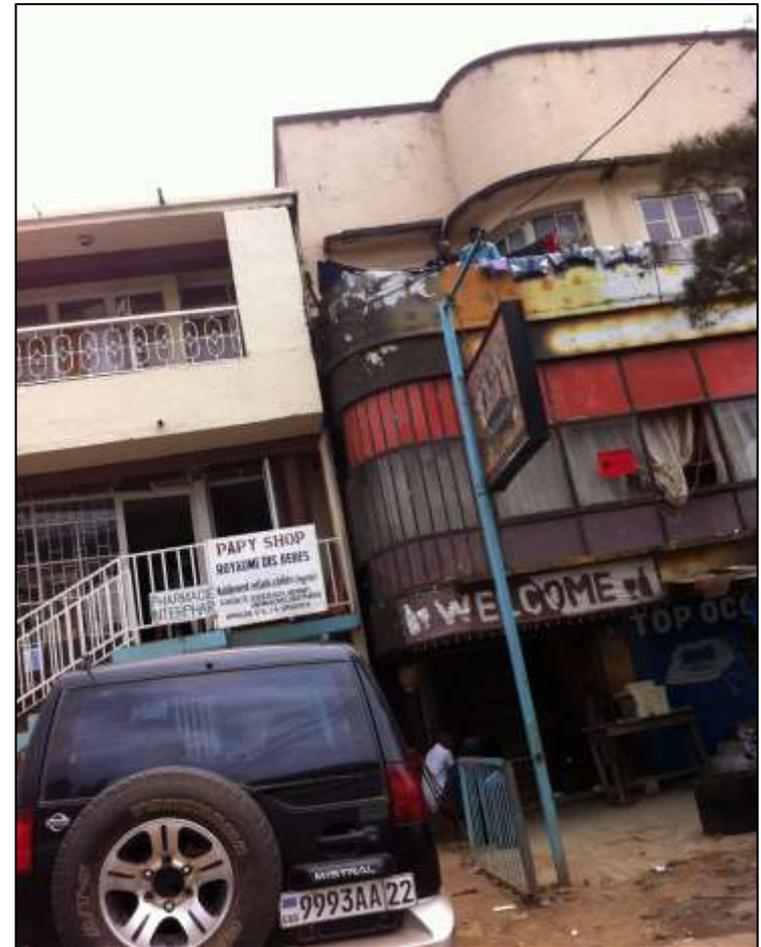
“Where do you find that money?” “...from the men who sleep with us but the work is hard and heavy. The money you are given is not satisfactory...” (Girls’ FG food).



# Earning and exploitation II

“If you are seduced in the bar and the lover proposes \$5 for one sex. You feel tempted as he says you will have sex even just out on the wall... Then, once out and at your surprise, you find a series of men waiting. There is no other way to escape and return in the bar so, you have to give your sex even if it is unwillingly” (Girl RA).

“A man proposed to me a greater amount than usual and asks me to follow him at his place. Once there I meet many men in the house who wish to have sex with me. They all pass one after the other then they let me go in the morning with no payment” (Girl, RA).



# Futures and exploitation

Girls mentioned having to engage in sex in order to support their future and feed their children:

“I am in 4<sup>th</sup> secondary school... I look for \$5 in the street to pay one month’s school fees and progressively end the school year without debt. I do seduce men at night, I am given 3,000 francs and I pay what I can” (Girls FG work).



# Agency/exploitation nexus

Girls do employ agency through exploitation that is relational, purposeful/even powerful?, but also places them at risk.

- Relational

“When he has money, we like him and when he has nothing left, we can’t even greet him on the road” (Girl, RA).

- Stealing

“Another technique is to be seduced; accept the proposed amount for having sex, and put [something] in his drink... Once in the room he falls in a deep sleep and we quickly check his pockets, steal everything and leave without having sex..” (Girls’ FG, work)

- At risk?
- “She cannot walk around now... There is a group of young boys who are determined to rape her and to put a piece of wood into her vagina”.
- “We fear those who come in cars, they usually create problems for us.”

The agency/exploitation nexus requires further exploration.



# Emerging conclusions

- Sexual exploitation is **relational** and often carried out by those known to the girls or whom they befriend.
- The concept of **agency** is important: particularly ‘thin agency’ - where any choice is actually constrained choice.
- Sexual exploitation for street girls is **hidden**: enmeshed within the context of their ‘work’ where the boundaries between work (expressing agency) and abuse (forced) are blurred. What may seem as ‘work’ in this case should be considered exploitation in many ways because of the need to meet basic survival needs.
- Sex for street girls needs to be conceptualised as a **process** that is **non-linear** and at any one time can be abuse, exploitation and work. These bounded definitions are therefore inappropriate for exploring how sexual exploitation occurs on the streets.

