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► **To cite this version:**

Stéphanie Condon, Sandrine Dauphin, Justine Dupuis. Prevalence of violence against girls in Réunion Island. *Population et sociétés*, 2021, 592, pp.1-4. 10.3917/popsoc.592.0001 . hal-04625725

**HAL Id: hal-04625725**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04625725v1>**

Submitted on 26 Jun 2024

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# Population & Societies

## Prevalence of violence against girls in Réunion Island

Stephanie Condon\*, Sandrine Dauphin\*, Justine Dupuis\*,  
and the VIRAGE in the French overseas departments survey team\*\*

The VIRAGE survey on violence and gender relations conducted in 2015 reveals the scale of violence against children and adolescents across mainland France. What is the situation in the French overseas departments? Examining the results of the VIRAGE survey conducted in Réunion, Stephanie Condon and her team find that the frequency of violence against minors is even higher in Réunion Island than in mainland France. They also examine the circumstances and perpetrators of abuse.

In France, the prevalence of family violence against minors is poorly understood. A national survey on violence against women (ENVEFF) conducted in 2000 provided the first estimates for women during childhood and adolescence [1]. Fifteen years later, its findings were updated and expanded thanks to the VIRAGE survey on violence and gender relations conducted in mainland France in 2015. This survey included a sample of men and provided new estimates of the frequency of physical and sexual violence before age 18. For the first time, it included questions on psychological and verbal violence, considered a form of abuse in international texts [2].

The ENVEFF survey was replicated in the overseas department of Réunion (located in the Indian Ocean) in 2002 [3]. It revealed higher levels of violence on the island and showed how severe social and geographical inequalities increased the risks of abuse among sections of the population. In 2018, the VIRAGE survey was similarly adapted for use in Réunion (see Box 1). This new survey confirmed the higher frequency of violence, with 15% of women reporting exposure to intimate partner violence [4], a proportion 3 times higher than in mainland France. In 28% of cases, incidents of violence reported as severe by the victims occurred in front of the children [5]. In such a climate of violence, is abuse of children and adolescents, teenage girls especially, also more frequent within the family and immediate social circle? Are boys and girls treated differently? Who are the perpetrators of this abuse?

### Exposure to violence before age 18 is above the average for mainland France

In the VIRAGE survey of the overseas departments, 32% of women and 23% of men in Réunion reported experience of violence before age 18 in different spheres of their life (school, leisure, friends, family, etc.). These acts occurred primarily within the family and the family's immediate social circle (26% of women and 20% of men). These same respondents may also have experienced violence in other contexts, but the proportions are much smaller. Violence before age 18 in the family and immediate social circle is much more frequent than in mainland France, with experience of at least one violent incident reported by 1 in 4 women (vs. 1 in 6 in mainland France) and 1 in 5 men (vs. 1 in 8). These higher frequencies also reveal large gender disparities, with women reporting more exposure to violence of all kinds (psychological, physical, sexual) than men.

### Psychological and verbal violence afflicts 1 in 5 people in Réunion

The various forms of psychological and verbal violence were reported more frequently in Réunion Island

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**Table 1. Types of violence experienced before age 18 in the family or immediate social circle (%)**

Type of violence	Réunion Island		Mainland France	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
<b>Psychological and verbal violence</b>	<b>21.3</b>	<b>18.4</b>	<b>14.2</b>	<b>9.5</b>
Regularly exposed to shouting, smashing of objects	18.5	14.6	11.7	8.0
Regularly insulted, humiliated, criticized	8.0	7.0	6.3	3.3
<b>Physical violence</b>	<b>8.6</b>	<b>5.8</b>	<b>7.7</b>	<b>7.2</b>
Beaten, hit with objects, or subjected to other forms of physical brutality	6.9	4.6	6.0	5.8
Locked up, confined inside the home, thrown out, or left on the side of the road	1.9	2.1	1.6	1.4
Threatened with a weapon or object; attempted strangulation or murder	2.1	1.2	1.0	0.7
<b>Sexual violence</b>	<b>6.6</b>	<b>0.9</b>	<b>4.6</b>	<b>0.7</b>
Touching of breasts, of buttocks, forced kissing	4.9	0.4	3.7	0.4
Rape or attempted rape	2.4	0.4	1.5	0.3
Other forms of sexual assault or forced sexual practices or acts*	3.6	0.6	2.4	0.5
<b>General indicator (at least one of these types of violence)</b>	<b>26.1</b>	<b>19.5</b>	<b>17.6</b>	<b>12.9</b>
Number of respondents	2,209	860	15,556	11,712

\* Forced sexual acts without penetration, as defined under the French penal code, or other practices or acts such as being forced to take one's clothes off, to watch pornography, to be filmed during a sexual act, etc.  
 Interpretation: 8.6% of women aged 20–69 habitually resident in Réunion in 2018 reported experience of physical violence in the family or the family's immediate social circle before age 18.  
 Note: Percentages are in italics when the gender difference is not significant at the 10% level using the chi-squared test.  
 Coverage: Men and women aged 20-69 living in Réunion Island or mainland France.  
 Source: VIRAGE survey in the French overseas departments, INED, 2018; VIRAGE survey, INED, 2015 [2].

than in mainland France (Table 1); and for men, the rate is twice as high (18% vs. 9.5%). However, women more frequently report this type of violence, in particular having been exposed to shouting, smashing of objects, etc. Furthermore, the survey reveals that 1 in 6 respondents (vs. 1 in 8 in mainland France) had childhood memories of severe tension or a climate of violence between their parents or guardians.

### Women report more physical violence than men

Levels of physical violence are similar to those observed in mainland France but more often concern girls: almost 9% versus 6% for boys in Réunion Island, compared to 8% and 7% in mainland France (Table 1). This finding is counterintuitive; in similar childrearing contexts, for example in Martinique [6], where boys are expected to show 'manly behaviour', corporal punishment is more frequent for boys. In Réunion, the behaviour of girls inside and outside the home is

perhaps more closely controlled, with discipline enforced by physical means. Another possible explanation is that men see such punishment as 'normal' and so less often report it in interviews.

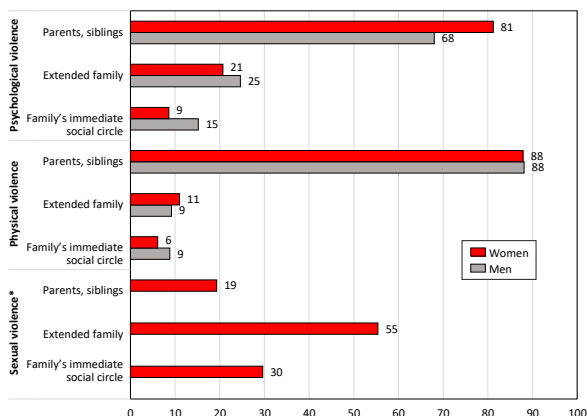
### Repeated sexual violence against girls during childhood and adolescence

In Réunion, as in mainland France, gender differences are largest for sexual violence: 7% of women and 1% of men report experience of sexual assault within the family or immediate social circle. Touching or forced kissing is the most frequent form of assault. Slightly more than 2% of all women experience rape or attempted rape before age 18. Some women are victims from a very young age; for more than a third (38%) of the women who reported such violence, the first episode occurred before age 8, and for 75% of these victims, it continued through their childhood and adolescence.

### Stronger social control of girls by the family, especially by mothers

The mother and father are the main perpetrators of psychological and physical violence within the family and intimate circle, although the father is cited more often than the mother: 51% of women and 37% of men reported psychological violence, and 43% of respondents of both sexes reported physical abuse by their father. That said, women reported having been criticized, humiliated, and insulted by their mothers 4 times more often than men (28% of incidents cited by female victims vs. 7% of those cited by men). They also more frequently reported physical abuse by the mother (37% and 17%), whatever the family type (both parents in the home or lone-parent family). In the VIRAGE survey in mainland France, respondents also frequently reported having been psychologically and physically abused by their mothers, but with a smaller difference between women and men [2]. Gender differences in

**Figure 1. Abuser type by sex and category of violence (%)**



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\* The number of male victims of sexual violence was too small to describe the perpetrators.

Note: Several perpetrators may be cited: parents, siblings, step-parents; extended family: grandparents, uncles and aunts, other relatives; immediate social circle: close neighbours, family friends, etc.

Interpretation: For women who reported psychological and verbal violence before age 18, 81% of perpetrators were parents (or step-parents) or siblings (cohabiting or not). And among all women reporting violence of this kind, 51% cited the father as the perpetrator (or one of the perpetrators).

Coverage: People aged 20–69 living in Réunion Island.

Source: VIRAGE in the French overseas departments, INED, 2018.

the way children are treated appear to be larger in Réunion. It is mothers who assume most responsibility for childrearing, and they may seek to control the behaviour of daughters more strictly, resulting in frequent tension and conflict. Boys, on the other hand, tend to be less closely supervised.

Violence within the family does not simply concern parents and children or persons living in the household. This is particularly true in Réunion Island, where, even among the youngest respondents, the family circle may include numerous uncles, aunts, and cousins on both sides of the family. It is not unusual for several generations to live in the same home, street, or neighbourhood. Analyses must cover this wide array of relationships, especially in Réunion, where a larger proportion of respondents than in mainland France report psychological, verbal, or physical abuse by members of the extended family outside the immediate circle of parents and siblings (Figure 1). For example, 12% of women victims and 15% of men victims reported psychological abuse by an uncle and almost 7% of both sexes by an aunt. Uncles or other male relatives (cousins, brothers-in-law, etc.) are also often physically violent. While mothers in Réunion play a pivotal role in the education of their children [7], the men of the family play an

active role in supervising the family group and may exercise authority over its activities, especially when members live close together. However, while men mainly report physical abuse by the father and/or mother, a substantial share of women report physical abuse by stepfathers (12% of reported incidents), brothers or half-brothers (16%), and uncles (6%), suggesting that all male family members play a disciplinary role.

### Most sexual abusers are males in the extended family or immediate social circle

Most sexual violence against girls below age 18 occurs within the family or immediate social circle. According to the VIRAGE survey, 12% of women living in Réunion experience sexual abuse before age 18, and in two-thirds of cases at least one perpetrator is a member of the family or the family's immediate social circle. This is the case for just one-third of male victims (3% of all male respondents). Moreover, as in mainland France, while other forms of violence are perpetrated mainly by parents (Figure 1), sexual abusers within the family are more diverse. They are more often uncles (cited by 23% of women victims), other male relatives (cousin, aunt's husband, etc., cited in 29% of cases), or men in the immediate social circle: 7% of women victims cite close neighbours, 7% family friends, and 12% other men close to the family. Sexual violence thus concerns a broader array of potential perpetrators outside the family but within the victim's family's immediate circle.

### Uncles and stepfathers: the main perpetrators of incestuous abuse

Lastly, we looked in more detail at cases of sexual violence against children and adolescents that could be qualified as incest. We constructed an indicator of incestuous rape and assault for women only, since very few men reported violence of this kind in their youth. The indicator covers acts of this nature with a perpetrator whose relations with the victim could be legally qualified as incestuous (father, grandfather, uncle, stepfather, brother; all reported perpetrators were men). Almost 3% of women living in Réunion Island were victims of incest during childhood or adolescence (for mainland France, the VIRAGE survey gives a rate of 2.5% [8]). The perpetrator is most often an uncle (23% of reported cases). Daughters are assaulted as frequently by their stepfather (7% of cases) as by their father (6%). However, if only women who lived with a stepfather during childhood and adolescence are considered, the stepfather becomes the main perpetrator of sexual assault (25% of cases). A similar proportion is observed in mainland France.

**Box 1. The Survey on Violence and Gender Relations in the French Overseas Departments (VIRAGE Outre-mer\*): Réunion**

**Goals**

The VIRAGE survey aims to measure the incidence of verbal, psychological, physical, and sexual violence against both women and men. This includes intimate partner violence, violence in the workplace and in public spaces over the last 12 months, along with lifetime experience of violence, not only in these same spheres, but also within the family and immediate social circle (close neighbours, family friends, etc.). As a retrospective survey in which adults report experience of violence during childhood and adolescence, the survey provides information on past abuse, but also on its effect on adult life trajectories, while avoiding the ethical and legal difficulties of interviewing minors.

**Method**

The VIRAGE in the overseas departments survey was coordinated by a team of researchers and support staff at the French Institute for Demographic Studies. Using a protocol adapted to local conditions, the survey took place in Réunion from 18 January to 16 July 2018 via phone interviews conducted by Creole-speaking interviewers employed by Ipsos Outre-mer and its subcontractor Sagis. The sample was drawn randomly from a database of phone numbers (around 40% landlines and 60% mobile phones), and 3,069 people aged 20–69 were interviewed (2,209 women and 860 men). Correction coefficients were applied to ensure that the results were representative of the general population of Réunion. To avoid any prior judgement about respondents' understanding of the word *violence*, the terms *violent* and *violence* were never mentioned. Instead, the precise names of the different forms of violence were used, as was the case for the ENVEFF and VIRAGE surveys in mainland France.

\* This survey received funding from national institutions (Secrétariat d'État à l'égalité femmes-hommes, Ministère des Outre-mer, Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, Commissariat général à l'égalité des territoires, Caisse nationale des allocations familiales, GIP droit et justice, Mission interministérielle de lutte contre la drogue et les conduites addictives, Comité interministériel de prévention de la délinquance et de la radicalisation, de la Caisse des dépôts et consignations), and for the survey in Réunion, from the regional council and the regional health authority.

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The VIRAGE survey in Réunion provides data on experience of violence that often begins in early childhood. This experience concerns all social groups and all generations, but girls are more frequent victims of all forms of abuse. The situation is similar in mainland France [2], although the frequency of violence before age 18 is higher in Réunion and the gender gap regarding physical and sexual abuse is wider (as is also the case for adults).

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**Abstract**

In Réunion Island, according to the VIRAGE survey conducted in three French overseas departments, 30% of women and 25% of men reported experience of violence before age 18 in different spheres of their life (school, leisure, friends, family, immediate social circle). These proportions are much higher than in mainland France. Within the family, women reported more exposure than men to violence of all kinds (psychological, physical, sexual). Most sexual abusers of girls under age 18 are men in the extended family or the family's immediate social circle.

**Keywords**

family violence, childhood violence, sexual violence, abuse, gender, family, Réunion, France