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Position Paper

Being victim in a postcolonial context: A quantitative study on power relations in Mayotte

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1. Introduction

Since the late 20th century, there has been an increasing focus on victims in academic research (Semprevivo and Hawdon, 2021), popular culture, and media representations (Chermak, 1995). This trend has fueled debates among legal professionals and policy-makers in Europe and the United States, leading to new regulations to protect and empower victims in criminal proceedings (Barbot and Dodier, 2014). Serge Moscovici, a social psychologist specializing in the theory of representations, considered the victim a new human figure from modern societal concerns about ethics (Moscovici, 2012). In his view, social representations and inter-group relationships play a significant role in victimization processes. Also, studying them is relevant to approaching the mechanisms of domination (Jodelet and Kalamalikis, 2015) and better understanding their collective underpinnings. Other researchers have stressed the link between the assertion of victim status and the divisions between social groups based on class, gender, or ethnicity (Greer, 2007). Didier Fassin (2006), for his part, believes that victims today are not only better represented but also more aware of the systemic violence they experience. This increased awareness can lead to resistance among the general population and create social tensions for which these victims may be paradoxically blamed in public opinion.

Our interest in the victimization processes and their foundations emerged in Mayotte, a Southeast African French island where we work as a forensic expert witness and researcher.¹ Although Mayotte faces extreme criminality (Buffet et al., 2022), there is a lack of refined data on the victims. Field observations led us to believe that relations of domination are a significant factor in Mayotte's criminal situations. Research on power dynamics and victimization is limited and mainly focuses on school bullying (e.g., Garandeau et al., 2014; Rodkin et al., 2014; Schumann et al., 2014). Additionally, different researchers hold different views on the subject. Some suggest that power dynamics play a significant role in victimization processes (Adler, 1966; Volk et al., 2021), while others argue that the relationships between victims and perpetrators could be more balanced (Andrews et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, many victims we encounter during clinical assessments imply an unfavorable power relationship. This prompted us to investigate our justice files to gain contemporary insights into the victimization processes in Mayotte and the role of power dynamics in this context. We designed an inductive research protocol based on quantitative data from case files and enlightened it with multidisciplinary literature and field-drawn clinical considerations. We paid particular attention to the modalities of appealing to justice so that institutions could have reliable data to develop future public policies on receiving victims' words.

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In addition to the findings, the current article also deals with the subjective aftermath of collecting data related to criminal violence. The study of crime can elicit complex emotional responses, potentially compromising researchers' objectivity and leading them to carry part of the victims' suffering (Fohring, 2020), which may jeopardize their objectivity. The research team used methodological proposals from qualitative sciences to mitigate these subjective consequences. This led to the development of fruitful tools that help control biases and offer protection against vicarious suffering in crime-related research.

2. Review of prior literature

2.1. Multidisciplinary perspective on victimization

2.1.1. Socio-anthropology of the victim

The idea of a victim, as Western public opinion understands it today, has its roots in the Judeo-Christian world. It is partly shaped by a religious understanding of the sacrifice and influenced by ancient and recent collective history (Garçet, 2021). Over time, cultural factors have increased victims' social visibility and representation since the 1980s, leading to a universal intended definition that can mask the power relations potentially at stake (Mythen and McGowan, 2017). Scientific interest has also augmented, resulting in a growing number of publications on the place and role of victims in society (McGarry and Walklate, 2015).

The media representation of victims is often distant from the actual case files they relate to (Pollak and Kubrin, 2007). They don't provide context and usually leave historical background aside, offering few perspectives except strengthening sanctions (Ginsberg, 2014). In response to public expectations and the growing concern for victims, there has been a surge in legislative activity aimed at tightening criminal sanctions against offenders (Colson and Field, 2010), and the 20th century marked a moral transition from victim suspicion to recognizing their subjective needs (Fassin, 2014). Entanglements between political, academic, and popular dimensions may represent an opportunity for victims to acquire improved consideration. However, it also underlies risks on a collective level, such as political instrumentalization (Pratt and Clark, 2005), and could expose victims to complex determinants. In particular, it could be challenging for adolescent victims who frequently struggle with identity development (Naem et al., 2022) to identify these factors and protect from them.

In today's society, there is a growing emphasis on the victims and what defines them. Consequently, victimology and its applications are gaining significance. While criminology traditionally examines the causes of crime from a sociological and anthropological perspective (Romano, 2009), victimology is now being shaped by multiple disciplines through complementarity. Although not considered a social science in its own right, victimology is already more than a mere branch of criminology (O'Connell, 2008). While academic research on victims has resulted in significant progress regarding their subjective needs, advocacy for victims can inadvertently reinforce gender essentialism and primarily portray women as victims (Kapur, 2002). Therefore, victimization rhetoric can harm the cause, especially when lobbyists employ it for political ends, sway public opinion, and obstruct scientific research (Fattah, 1989).

2.1.2. Victims in clinical literature

Sigmund Freud addressed victimization processes through the study of traumatic phenomena. He used a psychodynamic metaphor to define the trauma based on intensity, resistance potential, and electrically induced tetany (Chatillon, 2005). Like electrical remnants, victims' symptomatology would be traces of the traumatic event. Sándor Ferenczi was a privileged interlocutor of Freud on these questions. He noted that war neurotics experience somatic symptoms without bodily harm (Ferenczi, 1990). According to Ferenczi, their symptoms revealed a fragmentation of the self mainly due to external elements suffered in their life experience (Ferenczi, 1974). Although Ferenczi's affiliation with Freudian theory ultimately made it difficult for him to develop his ideas completely (Bruno, 2017), he paved the way for numerous developments in psychology and theorized many still-relevant concepts. Notably, he introduced the 'identification with the aggressor' (Ferenczi, 1933/1982, p. 130) based on his work with child victims. He had already noticed the phenomenon of internalizing guilt and the confusing and splitting effects of child victimization by adults. Anna Freud (1936/2001) later picked up on this concept and participated in its popularization. Many psychoanalysts adopted the notion until broader psychology literature and international classifications eventually integrated it. Although cutting-edge for their times, Ferenczi's ideas have been put aside for decades, probably due to the controversy with Freud on trauma-induced responses (Rachman, 1997) and their divergent views on therapy relationships (Kirschner, 1993). When conceptualizing the current research and analyzing the data, we found that Ferenczi's humanistic approach offers valuable guidance for understanding mechanisms and patterns of victimization. His clinical and theoretical insights enhanced our comprehension of the issue and fostered a deeper discussion.

Contemporary authors in the psychoanalytic tradition keep leading theoretical musings on the figure of the victim and observe how their number constantly increases due to a progressive expansion of the definition (de Rochebonne, 2007) that can be detrimental to the victims and lead to stigmatization and exclusion (Fassin, 2014). Some of them address the victim notion as closely related to the normative psychiatry-justice couple and consider psychoanalysis as the only discipline capable of denouncing its dark side and pathogenic effects (Lemler, 2008). Several productions refer to antic mythology to depict the perverse nature of victims and how they depend on torturers² and heroes to exist symbolically (e.g., Deswaene, 2002; Jacobi, 2010; Miller, 2013). Such interpretations bear the risk of offending actual victims and might contribute to the discrediting of Freud's rich thinking.

² French papers use the word *boureau*, literally 'executioner'. However, we chose the term 'torturer' as it conveys the underlying oppression contained in the widespread usage of the French word *boureau*.

Since the early days of studying victims through the war traumas lens, Western societies evolved and marked the fall of the Freudian understanding of the subject. Jacques Arènes (2005) remarks that the focus has shifted from issues of insurmountable debt or barred desire to considering the impact of real-life events on mental health. The extensive clinical studies that took place during and after the late 20th-century wars contributed to this shift in establishing the link between traumatic experiences and psychological consequences (Laufer et al., 1984). This ultimately led to conceptualizing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and its inscription in international classifications (Boscarino and Boscarino, 2015; Mulligan, 2004).

Many papers focus on victims in international clinical literature, and trauma is one of the primary concerns. Most articles address the process of victimization (e.g., Beckley et al., 2021; Berliner and Conte, 1990; Gollwitzer et al., 2015; Zur, 1994), the consequences of trauma (e.g., Bodziak et al., 2021; Iffland and Neuner, 2022; Yilmaz, 2021), and how to treat them (e.g., Schrader and Ross, 2021; Stein, 2024; Wild and Gur, 2008). Traumas suffered in childhood, and their long-term effects are particularly well-documented (e.g., Downey and Crummy, 2022; Dye, 2018; Thoma et al., 2022) and have led to broad-spectrum meta-analyses in recent years (e.g., Ireton et al., 2024; Mäirean et al., 2023; McKay et al., 2021).

Since Harris and Fallot (2001) coined the term 'trauma-informed', there has been a significant increase in the scientific literature on this concept. Trauma-informed care (TIC) is designed to consider individuals' traumatic experiences in various frameworks, leading to publications with often practical and applicative aims. Several academic fields address TIC, such as clinical psychology (e.g., Lyons and Fernando, 2023; Nikopaschos et al., 2023; Sweeney et al., 2018), social sciences (e.g., Edelman, 2023; Mark et al., 2021; Slovinsky, 2023), social work practical research (e.g., Knight, 2019; Levenson, 2020; Mersky et al., 2019), medicine (e.g., Davidson et al., 2023; Javakhishvili et al., 2020; Lefever-Rhizal et al., 2023), and educational sciences (e.g., Gubi et al., 2019; Stokes, 2022; Stout and Martin, 2022). TIC is also discussed in law-related journals (e.g., Ellison and Munro, 2017; Jones, 2021; Paulson et al., 2023) and frequently linked to restorative justice (e.g., James, 2020; McKenna and Holtfreter, 2021; Randall and Haskell, 2013).

2.1.3. The victim and the law

Although the word 'victim' historically belongs to the religious and sacred, it has been continuously redefined throughout Western history (Josse, 2019). The term first appears in 17th-century ancient texts preserved at the French National Library. Its occurrences increased over time, peaking in the 20th century when its use multiplied in the legal field (Lamarre, 2000).

The French criminal trial system differs from common law in its primary objective, which is to uncover the truth rather than evaluate two subjective arguments (Inchauspé, 2012). Theoretically, offenses are viewed as being committed against the French people and tried on their behalf (Jan, 2017; Vergès, 2011). Even though doctrinal aspects lead to a lesser place for the victims in French criminal proceedings, they still hold a significant position, with guaranteed rights, occasional involvement, and continuous information being provided to them (Pin, 2006). The *Code of Criminal Investigation*³ of 1808 laid the groundwork for the legal recognition of victims, even though the word itself is not mentioned (*Legal Bulletin of the French Republic, 1812*, p. 257). During the 19th century, the major famous trials that gained public attention brought the victims into the spotlight, providing lawyers with a platform to expose political scandals (Halpérin, 2000). This trend continued to develop to gradually address societal issues and social injustices, especially during the interwar period (London, 1928).

The 20th century witnessed a growing interest in Western societies regarding victimization processes, and it has become a significant topic in both political and academic circles (Pérouse de Montclos, 2020). In France, the former Minister of Justice Robert Badinter and his collaborators initiated modern victim protection policies (French Ministry of Justice, 1983). They aimed to develop the associative network of victim assistance, improve the reception of complaints, promote victims' information, and facilitate civil action. Since then, various European and national regulations have continued this work towards more consideration for victims (Vitry, 2010).

Worldwide, reflections multiplied, and new ideas focused on the victim's perspective and needs. Amongst them is the concept of restorative justice, which was born in the United States in the 1970s when victims' associations and community civic movements were gaining influence (Lefranc, 2006). Initially a small-scale experiment, this approach to justice has become one of the most significant criminal policy reforms in the United States (Dzur, 2015). Since then, many studies have shown the positive impact of restorative justice practices on victims' mental health (Nascimento et al., 2023). Notably, restorative justice offers a soothing alternative for victims of sexual violence (Wemmers et al., 2023), who often view responses from the judicial system as unsatisfactory (Lessard, 2017). In French law, restorative justice is a relatively new notion. Despite lawyers and researchers advocating for its use (e.g., Cario, 2022; Guzniczak, 2014), conclusive field experiments, and support from magistrates, the idea is still struggling to become an institutional reality. In the 1990s, judicial measures such as *criminal reparation*⁴ were introduced (Bahans et al., 2009), but they primarily focused on the perpetrators and not the victims (Walgrave and Zinsstag, 2014; *Official Journal of the French Republic, 2014*). In France, as well as in other countries, victims assert their right to be recognized. However, their peripheral position in French criminal proceedings might limit the development of measures prioritizing their needs.

2.2. Clinical assessment of victims in the French justice system

The highly publicized Outreau trial influenced forensic evaluations of victims in France. This child sexual abuse case highlighted the role and limits of forensic expert witnesses (Lachaux et al., 2008; Rongé, 2004) and led to several legal reforms. Notably the

³ Translated from French « code d'instruction criminelle ».

⁴ Translated from French « réparation pénale ».

creation of a specific procedure for victim children (Official Journal of the French Republic, 2007) and the suppression of credibility analysis from the expert witnesses' task list (French Ministry of Justice, 2005). Credibility analysis, although unmentioned in the 1998 law on sexual offenses, was imposed through a Ministry of Justice circular (French Ministry of Justice, 1999) and posed practical and ethical difficulties for many expert witnesses - psychiatrists or psychologists. Questions asked to them still lack harmonization, which we observed in Mayotte, where orders sent to expert witnesses' can mention credibility analysis. Even when not explicitly put on paper, it often remains an implicit expectation from justice professionals when they designate a forensic expert. As a result, French scientific research continues addressing credibility assessment, sometimes using the term 'plausibility' to do so (e.g., Descarpentries, 2012; Fernandez et al., 2010; Levy Haesevoets, 2011) and proposing standardized methods to evaluate it (Favard, 2010).

Due to Outreau's memory, concerns about possibly false allegations by child victims could not be evaded. Authors suggest a balanced positioning that avoids sacralizing their discourse or constantly doubting their credibility (Jonas and Voyer, 2013). Practically, this balance can be challenging to achieve. Just as expert witnesses may be influenced by reactions of collusion or rejection when assessing offenders (Casoni, 2007b; Thiry, 2016), evaluating victims might also lead to such psychological biases. To avoid such pitfalls, conducting assessments for alleged perpetrators and victims in the same case can favor impartiality, ease decentering, and reduce oriented judgments.

Some authors suggest generalizing scientifically validated tools to limit the effects of external factors on clinical evaluations (e.g., Van Gijsegem, 2003; Voglet, 2003). Others consider forensic assessment a peculiar clinical act (e.g., Casoni, 2007a; Rumen, 2001) that cannot fit quantitative requirements. This second approach is the most widespread among French expert witnesses (Combalbert and Andronikof, 2007). These conflicting views have resulted in debates and mutual criticism: defenders of the clinical approach argue that tests and scales are too mechanistic, while those who prefer standardized tools view qualitative interviews as too informal, based on subjective impressions, and unreliable (Grove and Meehl, 1996). Multiple theories are applied without official or legal guidelines, and every professional is responsible for their methods. This methodological blur exposes expert witnesses to various influences, resulting in three typical postures: criminological and rationalizing, subversive and clinical, or compassionate and oriented (Viaux, 2012).

Research on secondary victimization indicates that criminal proceedings and trials can be even more traumatic for victims than the initial victimization, resulting in a loss of faith in a just world and causing significant distress (Tamarit et al., 2010). Some individuals may feel "re-raped" (Campbell and Raja, 1999) and encounter negative experiences when interacting with law enforcement or social and medical professionals. Moreover, the literature suggests that the severity of the penalty is not of primary concern regarding the victim's well-being and highlights how human interactions during criminal proceedings are much more critical (Orth, 2002). Informed training can help prevent those secondary victimizations. Especially in an intercultural setting, medical professionals should be aware of the socio-historical context to avoid being unintentionally dismissive and inducing a sense of rejection in the victims (Ruiz et al., 2023).

Clinical evaluation can be challenging in intercultural contexts due to the need to adapt practices. Especially when dealing with someone from a different culture, clinicians should contextualize their analysis and be aware of their subjectivity (Costa-Fernandez, 2001). Moreover, when forensic expert witnesses cannot use their usual methods, collaborative work and reference to other academic fields can provide insight (Théodore, 2014) and lead to the development of new tools. Devereux's complementarist and metacultural approach (Devereux, 1972/1993, 1983) can prove fruitful in many situations, including intercultural ones. When applied to forensic assessment, this framework may limit biased reflections and provide a solid basis for more authentic clinical encounters. Ultimately, it helps untangle subjective and collective dimensions and favors identifying, distinguishing, and sorting intimate feelings, experience-induced reactions, prejudices, social representations, and historical factors.

2.3. Contemporary Mayotte

Mayotte is a small island in Southeast Africa, part of the Comoros archipelago between Madagascar and the African continent (Fig. 1). It became a French territory in the 19th century in a conflictual period between the four islands of the archipelago (Dumont, 2005). Andriantsouly, a Malagasy royal heir from the Boeni region (Molet, 1985), had become Mayotte's sultan after a coup and sold the island to military representatives of the French Crown in 1841 (Cave, 1867; Hachimi-Alaoui and Lemerrier, 2018). The other three islands were conquered by force in the following decades. During the Cold War and in response to the United Nations summons, the French Republic organized a referendum in 1974 to determine the islanders' opinion about independence (Idriss, 2013). Despite initial engagements from the French State to preserve unity within the archipelago (Oraison, 2009), the votes led Mayotte to remain French, while the other islands became the Union of Comoros following a unilateral declaration of independence in 1976 (UN, 1994).

The separation of Mayotte from the other islands created a border in a historically open region, which resulted in migration issues that reflect the geopolitical challenges of the 21st century (Gros, 2024; Suquet, 2023). Mayotte has had various legal and administrative statuses. Most were derogatory, inherited from the colonial administration (Roinsard, 2023; Saada, 2007), and supposedly intended to recognize Mayotte's cultural uniqueness (Hyst et al., 2008). Derogatory regulations have also been explicitly designed for Mayotte to assist law enforcement in fighting illegal immigration.⁵ Notably, Law No. 2018-778 (Official Journal of the French Republic, 2018) introduced a double *jus soli*,⁶ requiring that at least one parent can prove legal residence in Mayotte at birth to acquire French

⁵ Literary translation of French idiom "Lutte contre l'immigration clandestine".

⁶ Right of soil.

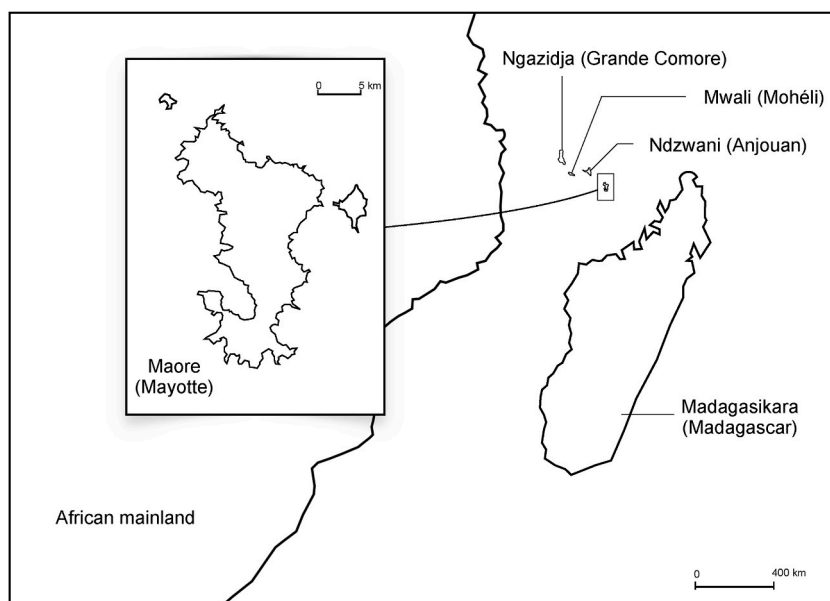


Fig. 1. Description: This figure shows Mayotte's location in the Western Indian Ocean, between mainland Africa and Madagascar. True toponyms are used, with Western names in parentheses. Title: Mayotte's geographic location.

nationality. Since then, there have been legislative attempts to establish *jus sanguinis*⁷ in Mayotte, including Law Proposition No. 2024-297 (Assemblée, 2024), which calls for the complete elimination of all forms (simple and double) of the right of soil for the island. Those derogatory regulations raise questions about the supposed equality of rights and have significant subjective and practical consequences for an entire generation, automatically excluding them from citizenship.

Perhaps because of the perceived threat from the Union of Comoros and concerns about the revocability of French overseas territories' status, the Maorais have been consulted several times and consistently expressed their desire to become a *département* ruled by national law. This status was eventually granted in 2011, although without adequate preparation from the government (Blanchy, 2018; Blanchy and Moatty, 2012). Despite implementing common law, the numerous specific local derogations render Mayotte an exception within the French Republic. Ultimately, these exceptional legal regimes may have resulted in an excepted body,⁸ a marginalized segment of the population, directly leading to a distinct mechanism of administrative and police control (Barkat, 2003).

Although the state has repeatedly rejected Mayotte's request to become a *département* by insisting on its cultural distinctiveness, this aspect is largely overlooked in discussions about integrating the island into the French Republic. Like the other three islands in the archipelago, Mayotte is a territory rich in East African culture and Muslim traditions, shaped by Bantu philosophy and its animistic roots (Yssouf, 2020). Our field experience in Mayotte has shown us that this unique identity is often ignored by the agents of the state, who insist on the Maorais' desire to be French and the cultural assimilation that this should entail. Confronted with this pressure to conform and be French, the Maorais find themselves in a precarious situation, caught between their cultural ties and the wish to differentiate themselves from the other three islands of the Comoros. Over time, it has become increasingly difficult for them to identify as both Maorais and Comorians, resulting in an identity tension that can have significant personal and social repercussions. Likely for political reasons, the State contributes to this inability to conceive of cultural identity as plural, and the administration of justice in Mayotte serves as a prime example.

Today, Mayotte faces many issues: poverty and inequalities (Roinsard, 2014), immigration (Marie et al., 2017), large-scale exclusion phenomena (Morano, 2022), extreme delinquency, and crime (Grangé, 2021b). The inhabitants experience a strong sense of insecurity (Grangé, 2021a; Guedj and Moreau, 2018), which can lead to violence, notably among the island youth (Roinsard, 2019). Political tensions divide the local population and create an increasingly sensitive opposition between Maorais and the Comorians from the other islands. The society of Mayotte is segmented based on administrative and ethnic criteria (Bréant, 2021; Girard et al., 2022; Hachimi-Alaoui et al., 2013), as the colonial world described by Frantz Fanon in his time (Fanon, 2002, p. 5). Maorais citizens can be asked - more or less explicitly - by the French authorities to help manage public order, especially by assisting in the fight against immigration (Carayol, 2009; Geisser, 2016) and the destruction of immigrants' homes (Hachimi-Alaoui et al., 2019; Lehuger, 2023). These inter-group tensions fueled by authorities are increasing ethnic-based division despite historical proximity (Carayol, 2007; Meloche, 2022; Walker and Fouéré, 2022) and are likely contributing to the rise of violence by creating new figures of rejected alterity.

Despite its pressing needs, Mayotte lacks proper investment and presence from the state. Paradoxically, public spending in Mayotte

⁷ Right of blood.

⁸ French translation of Sidi Mohamed Barkat's « corps d'exception ».

is the lowest among all the overseas territories (French Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2022). The locally elected governance seems to lack the necessary dynamism to manage regional difficulties (Moreau and Marszek, 2012), and some crucial institutions deeply malfunction, such as the child protection system (Duflo and Ghaem, 2014; French Court of Auditors, 2019). Fieldwork in Mayotte highlights inadequacies, including a lack of resources and staff, high unemployment (Jonzo, 2023), and insufficient training (Fleuret and Paillole, 2019) or professional experience. Life situations created by these deficiencies are difficult to describe, and victims especially suffer from institutional failure. They feel abandoned by the state, an experience shared by many of Mayotte's inhabitants (Blanchy et al., 2019; Buffet et al., 2022; Lehuger, 2022). During a recent trial, the President of the Court was appalled by the situation of a 14-year-old girl placed under the local child protection system. The teenager, a victim of sexual violence, had been left without any accompaniment throughout the procedure, including the day of the hearing. She had no one by her side to provide support: no referent educator, ad-hoc administrator, or invested foster parent. She had to travel half the island by herself in a shared taxi to attend the hearing. She would have been left alone at night to fend for herself in the most criminogenic French territory if not for the President, who reminded everyone of their responsibilities. Unfortunately, victims cannot constantly benefit from a humanistic magistrate's authority to guarantee their rights and safety in Mayotte.

3. Data and methods

3.1. A complementarist approach

The current study represents the quantitative part of a broader mixed research project that explores the relationship between Mayotte's residents and the French State's justice system. It uses qualitative and quantitative data, including interviews with justice staff and the analysis of justice cases. The theoretical framework is based on George Devereux's complementarist approach (Devereux, 1967/1994, 1972/1993), which encourages looking at phenomena from multiple perspectives. While a first article boiled down to a population of presumed authors, this one focuses on the quantitative study of victim files. Eventually, a future article will present and analyze the qualitative data collected from research interviews and analyzed using the grounded methodology developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967/1999).

Despite dealing with quantitative data, we have borrowed some tools from qualitative methodologies. We followed the framework proposed by Devereux and developed by other scientists, emphasizing the need for researchers to be attentive to their subjectivity (Gounongbé, 2008; Laroche-Joubert et al., 2018; Rouchon et al., 2009). According to Fielding and Fielding (1986), adding qualitative tools to quantitative research enhances the depth and quality of the analysis and interpretation of results. Combining quantitative and qualitative elements is particularly useful for analyzing social phenomena (Pithon, 2018), as it enables links from individual to collective dimensions. This approach also increases credibility and meaning (Guével et al., 2016) by facilitating multi-level analyses and the integration of complementary disciplines.

The research team was notably inspired by the practice of *memos* and *prejudice boxes*, which are systematic recording tools used to document the researchers' reflections and reactions (Benoit, 2021). We applied them to the exploration of quantitative data and recorded our immediate impressions on a dedicated file for each case explored during the digging phase. When interpreting the results, we considered this material to remain aware of our spontaneous reactions regarding crime-related data. This method purges emotional content when it occurs and helps control the influence of the researchers' subjectivity during the theorization phase, allowing more neutrality and distance from defense mechanisms, as advised by Devereux (1967/1994, p. 129). It can help researchers better control the effects of their intimate relationship with research objects and study phenomena with fewer biases and more accuracy. These qualitative tools in quantitative research have proven fruitful and do not pose any methodological difficulties.

We worked inductively to analyze the collected data and draw hypotheses. To do so, we considered the scientific literature, elements from our clinical practice, and immersive anthropology. After selecting the indicators and gathering the data, we performed descriptive statistics. We opted for univariable analyses due to the categorical nature of most variables (Bugeja-Bloch and Couto, 2021) and our interest in comparing different groups of subjects (Delacroix et al., 2021). We examined the impact of multiple variables and conducted significance tests to determine variations in variance.

3.2. Current study

The files explored in this study come from our practice as a forensic expert witness in Mayotte's criminal proceedings.⁹ Between January 2020 and January 2024, the local judicial authorities tasked us with assessing a thousand people - victims and alleged perpetrators. In France, psychological expert witnesses are responsible for evaluating personalities, investigating offenses committed or suffered, and issuing recommendations for rehabilitation and care (Ravit, 2015). They serve justice occasionally and are not affiliated with the court or Ministry of Justice. Consequently, their work is more of a function than a profession (Gély-Nargeot, 2009). As independent clinicians, French expert witnesses are not bound to specific training or methodology obligations (Ballouard, 2016; Gillardin, 1994). They are selected for their skills and experience in general psychology and psychiatry.

To conduct our analysis, we removed files that pertained to presumed offenders and only kept the 613 files relating to victims. We collected various data points from these files, such as the dates they were created; the gender¹⁰, place of birth, and age of the victim at

⁹ First author.

¹⁰ As assigned by birth registration.

the time of the offense; the nature of the offense; who the information was first revealed to¹¹; the proximity of the alleged perpetrator to the victim; whether there was a power relation between them and if so, what kind; and the primary emotion surrounding the events.

We have compiled the above indicators from several sources, including judicial police files, court documents, clinical interview notes, and the psychological reports we produced. The criminal qualifications for the offenses come from the judicial authorities. It is worth noting that a regulatory change occurred in France during the studied period regarding facts of a sexual nature. The 'Billon' law ([Official Journal of the French Republic, 2021](#)) led to a revision of the definitions of sexual offenses against minors that could affect the data recorded by increasing the number of acts qualified as rape from that date.

The diversity of alleged perpetrators¹² limits the possibilities for a statistically analyzable categorization, so we classified them based on their relationship with the victim. We found inspiration in other disciplines to determine the degree of relational proximity ([Alkhateeb et al., 2015](#); [Dodig Crnkovic, 2015](#)) and set up a four-level scale ([Fig. 2](#)). A score of 1 is assigned to family members. A score of 2 is assigned to people regularly in contact with the victim and with whom they have an established relationship. A score of 3 is assigned to acquaintances known by sight but not personally frequented. Finally, a score of 4 is assigned to perpetrators unknown to the victim.

Considering field observations and the compartmentalization and inequalities that are generally observed in former colonies ([Fanon, 1963](#), p. 3; [Man, 2007](#), p. 127; [Roinsard, 2016](#)) and Mayotte in particular ([Berger and Blanchy, 2014](#); [Saada, 2007](#)), power relations have been explored to determine a possible impact on victimization processes. They have been classified into seven categories: *familial*, when an adult of the family has authority; *educational*, when the authority is held by a person in charge of teaching or transmitting knowledge; *hierarchical*, for professional seniority; *legal*, for law-related authority; *religious*, for representatives of the faith; *adult*, when authority is based on age status; *economic and/or administrative*, when the victims are vulnerable due to their financial dependence, immigration status, or both.

The declared emotions were collected in spontaneous speeches or could, in other cases, be obtained on request. For children and adolescents who needed help accessing their emotional experience, we built a visual tool¹³ freely inspired by the *wheel of emotions* conceptualized by Robert Plutchik in the 1980s ([Junier, 2022](#); [Kotsou et al., 2022](#)). Since many people naturally used pain as an emotion, we decided to add it to the wheel. Also, the World Health Organization and the International Association for the Study of Pain integrate the emotional dimension into their definition of pain ([Gillloots, 2006](#); [Vader et al., 2021](#)), so it seemed appropriate to proceed this way. Ultimately, we retained eight emotional states: fear, anger, sadness, shame, pain, love, absence of emotion, and disgust.

3.3. Preliminary arbitrations

Coding the collected indicators required reflection and collaboration. During this process, the researchers discussed and analyzed each case to determine the best way to categorize the data, resulting in the following final arbitrations.

- For minors victimizing minors within family circles, we did not code any power relationship and considered that authors, in such cases, were also vulnerable. Also, this approach limits confusion between categories and favors clarity when looking at domination modes.
- We combined economic and administrative matters because most cases involved both vulnerability types. However, there was one instance where only economic vulnerability was reported without administrative issues. Therefore, we have used the "and/or" precaution in our labeling to address this exception.
- When victims suffered several offenses, we kept the one resulting in the highest penalty, as it usually initiates the proceeding and remains the main focus of the police and court professionals within the files.
- When offenses occurred over more than one year, we retained the victim's age at the time of the first commission.
- We coded *law enforcement* as the recipient of revelations in several situations: victims coming to the police station to file complaints themselves, emergency services interventions, and cases that the court self-referred, such as a victim revealing to a police officer the existence of a second one.
- When dealing with cases where adults victimize minors, we decided to assume that the power dynamic is inherent in such situations. This may be further reinforced by the island's traditional culture that posits obedience and respect as due to all grown-ups, not only family members ([Hébert and Hébert, 2011](#)).
- In cases where the alleged perpetrators were sex work customers, we set up a differentiated scoring: 3 for already known customers and 4 for unknown customers.
- While we encountered judicial situations where impoverished kids would trade sexual favors for money and food, we chose not to define them as prostitution under the age of 13 to align with French legal tradition regarding children's discernment ([Jacopin, 2020](#)).
- When the alleged perpetrators were schoolmates, we also set up gradual scoring to more precisely address proximity levels: 2 for regularly frequented peers and 3 for those only known by sight.
- When victims could not express their emotions and communicated a sense of disconnected and misunderstood feelings, we labeled it as *Emotional numbness*.

¹¹ Consists of the first person who receives the victim's word, believes it, and orients them to the legal process.

¹² Detail in [Appendix A](#).

¹³ See [Appendix B](#).

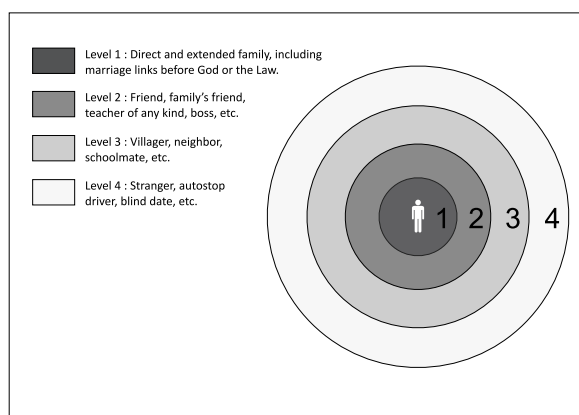


Fig. 2. Description: This figure presents the four levels used to sort alleged perpetrators by relational proximity to victims.
Title: Four-level proximity scale for alleged perpetrators and victims.

The present arbitrations are disclosed to promote transparency and facilitate reproducibility, per open science practices as stated in the literature (Bakken, 2019; Christensen et al., 2019; Derksen, 2019; Prike, 2022; Spitschan et al., 2021). Furthermore, the dataset used for this research is available in an open repository referenced at the end of the article.

4. Findings

4.1. Descriptive statistics

This study is based on 613 litigants under victim status in criminal cases processed between January 2020 and January 2024 in Mayotte. The subjects' average age is 16.44 during the alleged offense. This sample of victims is notably younger than the general population of Mayotte, whose average age is 23 (Chaussy and Merceron, 2019a, b). This could be an effect of the selective appeal to forensic experts, who are mainly ordered to work on sexual offenses, which are widespread among youth. Out of the victims in the present study, 77.16% are minors, with the most common age range being 13–17 years old (36.70%), followed by 6–12 (31.65%). Most of them were born in Mayotte (55%), the Union of the Comoros (30%), and mainland France (9%). A small percentage comes from other French possessions overseas and from abroad within Africa (all less than 2.5%).¹⁴ These statistics align with national ones that show significant proportions of people born in Mayotte with foreign parents and nationality (Chaussy and Merceron, 2019a, b). Moreover, the research population displays a substantial proportion of female victims (85.5%). Large-scale studies suggest that women in Mayotte are significantly more exposed to violence than in continental France, with victimization rates almost two times higher for altogether offenses and four times higher for sexual violence (Grangé, 2022).

The dataset includes 352 cases of rape (57%), 130 cases of sexual assault (21%), 36 cases of child abuse (5.9%), 33 cases of armed robbery (5.4%), 23 cases of domestic violence (3.8%), 22 cases of attempted murder (3.6%), 11 cases of assault and battery (1.8%), and 6 cases of harassment. 30.83% of the alleged perpetrators were family members of the victim, 27.41% had an established relationship with them, 25.77% were known only by sight, and 15.99% were perfect strangers. In 69.49% of cases, presumed offenders are in a position of power. They have authority over their victims for various reasons, such as being an adult against a minor (32.30%), having familial legitimacy (20.88%), or exploiting the economic and/or administrative vulnerability of the victim (7.99%). When revealing what they had lived, victims primarily talked to family members (38%), law enforcement (32%), and school, social, or medical professionals (24.3%). Regarding emotions, 236 victims (38%) recall fear, 118 (19%) do not evoke any emotion, 63 (10%) experienced emotional numbness, 55 (9%) anger, 39 (6.4%) sadness, 35 (5.7%) pain, 35 (5.7%) shame, 16 (2.6%) disgust, and 16 (2.6%) love.

4.2. Univariable analyses

4.2.1. A compartmented society

The analyzed data reveal a social segmentation based on administrative and ethnic factors. These findings are consistent with field observations, shared subjective experiences, and literature. The place of birth is a crucial determinant of various indicators, including the type of offense, power dynamics, and proximity to the alleged offender (Table 1).

In the current study, the type of offense seems to have ethnic underpinnings. Even though sexual violence is the most common crime among all groups (78.79%), victims born in the Western Indian Ocean¹⁵ display a substantial prevalence of rapes compared to other subgroups. Armed robbery, on the other hand, is primarily committed against individuals born in mainland France, La Réunion,

¹⁴ Detail in Appendix C.

¹⁵ Madagascar, Union of the Comoros, Mayotte and La Réunion.

and Madagascar, while assault and battery are mainly perpetrated against individuals born in Mayotte. Lastly, psychological violence refers to a relatively homogeneous population, consisting of 80% of adults born in mainland France, victims of workplace harassment from a person with hierarchical authority.

People born in Mayotte, the Union of the Comoros, and Madagascar are more often exposed to relations of domination (74%, 73%, and 60%) than those born in continental France or La Réunion (44% and 25%). Also, the modes of domination vary depending on the place of birth. For instance, people born in Mayotte and other islands of the Comoros are particularly exposed to victimization processes based on adult authority (39% and 34%) or family authority (22% and 21%). On their part, people born in Madagascar are more subject to economic and administrative vulnerability (33%) when they are victimized in Mayotte.

The overall findings suggest that the number of victims tends to increase as the relationship between the alleged perpetrator and the victim becomes closer, consistent with national data (Hamel et al., 2016). However, the victim's birthplace correlates to the degree of proximity between them and the presumed perpetrator, and there are differences in this matter. Individuals born in the Union of the Comoros and Madagascar are more likely to experience victimization within their family (36%). Compared, those born in continental France more often undergo offenses from unknown individuals (31%). Moreover, people born in Mayotte and La Réunion show less variability regarding proximity to the offender and are uniformly exposed to levels 1 (29% and 25%), 2 (28% and 25%), and 3 (30% and 25%).

4.2.2. Underage female victims sexually exposed to a domination system

Current results suggest that minority and female gender are major risk factors in Mayotte. Birth gender significantly correlates with the presence or absence of power relations. Female victims suffer such constraints for 74% of them, against 42% for male victims. Additionally, birth gender influences revelation, with 29% of female victims reporting to the authorities and 52% of male victims doing so. Underage subjects are more confronted with sexual offenses (88%), while adults equally face physical (48%) and sexual (49%) violence, along with a small part of work-related psychological situations. Minors are especially exposed to power relations and subjected to more varied modes of domination than the adult population (Table 2). Sexual offenses are significantly more related to power dynamics (85%) than physical ones (13%), and female victims are more exposed to both sexual offenses (88%) and power relations (91%) than male victims (12% and 8.7%).

4.2.3. Victims' words and their reception

Studying the revelation process and the type of offense taught us that family members are generally the first to receive the victims' word (37,52%). For victims of sexual offenses, in particular, talking to someone from their family (43%) or some school or socio-medical professional (26,5%) seems to be facilitating. Conversely, the address to law enforcement is prevalent for physical and psychological violence (63% and 100%).

The way minors reveal their experiences of violence varies depending on their age. Those between 13 and 17 tend to use a broader range of approaches and are more likely to confide in socio-medical professionals or school staff (41% cumulatively). These professionals play a crucial role in supporting young victims of violence and receive a third of all disclosures relating to family authority-based victimization. However, when an adult victimizes a minor, it is usually a family member who is the first to be informed (51%). All in all, the study suggests that victims can struggle to talk to the authorities. This could be due to the power dynamics in Mayotte, where systems of oppression may discourage reporting. Interestingly, in cases free of power dynamics, most victims (57%) directly appeal to French justice.

Discussing the violence one has experienced is a complex and sensitive process, which can hinder the expression of emotions, notably among youth. In Mayotte, the current data shows that fewer people report having no emotional response as age increases (Table 3). This raises the question of whether young people cannot share their emotional experiences or if the socio-institutional environment and power dynamics prevent them from doing so. Given that minors are predominantly subject to domination systems, it is essential to consider how these factors may impact their ability to communicate their subjective experiences.

4.3. Highlights on specific subgroups

While manually exploring the 613 justice case files, we identified several noteworthy subgroups, although they may only refer to a small number of situations in proportion to the total population. While lowly represented in our sample, our clinical experience in the field and five years of immersion in the island's society suggest that they are part of the existential realities of Mayotte's inhabitants.

4.3.1. Systemic vulnerabilities

Upon studying files that demonstrate an economic or administrative power dynamic, it becomes possible to examine the social vulnerabilities of victims closely. Victims subjected to financial and administrative vulnerability were mainly born in the Union of the Comoros (55%), Mayotte (31%), and Madagascar (10%). People born in mainland France are rarely affected (2%), and people born in La Réunion are absent from the subgroup. 96% of the 49 files concern female victims, and 73% relate to sexual offenses. However, a focused analysis revealed an unexpected uniformity in the distribution of other indicators. Age-related factors show that economic and administrative power relations affect both minors (51%) and adults (49%) and are seen among 6 to 12-year-olds (18%), 13 to 17-year-olds (33%), 18 to 25-year-olds (16%), 26 to 35-year-olds (18%), and 36 to 55-year-olds (14%). For these cases, the alleged perpetrators are also relatively evenly distributed inside the proximity levels (1: 35%; 2: 22%; 3: 35%; 4: 8.2%). The distribution of victims among age groups and alleged perpetrators among proximity levels in Mayotte evokes a transversal phenomenon of exploitation of otherness based on economic or administrative vulnerability. In these cases, victims more frequently go to the authorities (61%), suggesting that

Table 1
Distribution by place of birth based on the type of offense, nature of power relation, and proximity level.

		Mayotte (n = 337)	Union of the Comoros (n = 184)	Mainland France (n = 55)	Madagascar (n = 15)	La Réunion (n = 12)	Rwanda (n = 5)	Burundi (n = 2)	RDC (n = 2)	La Martinique (n = 1)	n	p	test	
Type of offense, n	Sexual	268 (80%)	147 (80%)	39 (71%)	12 (80%)	10 (83%)	3 (60%)	2 (100%)	2 (100%)	0 (0%)	483	0.047	Fisher	
	Physical	68 (20%)	37 (20%)	12 (22%)	3 (20%)	2 (17%)	2 (40%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	125	–	–	
Nature of power relation, n	Psychological	1 (0.3%)	0 (0%)	4 (7.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5	–	–	
	Statutory	130 (39%)	62 (34%)	5 (9.1%)	0 (0%)	1 (8.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	198	<0.001	Fisher	
	None	88 (26%)	49 (27%)	31 (56%)	6 (40%)	9 (75%)	1 (20%)	2 (100%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	187	–	–	
	Familial	75 (22%)	39 (21%)	5 (9.1%)	2 (13%)	2 (17%)	4 (80%)	0 (0%)	1 (50%)	0 (0%)	128	–	–	
	Economical	15 (4.5%)	27 (15%)	1 (1.8%)	5 (33%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (50%)	49	–	–	
	...													
	Educative	16 (4.7%)	3 (1.6%)	9 (16%)	1 (6.7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	29	–	–
Religious	9 (2.7%)	2 (1.1%)	0 (0%)	1 (6.7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	12	–	–	
Proximity level, n	Hierarchical	3 (0.89%)	1 (0.54%)	4 (7.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	8	–	–	
	Legal	1 (0.3%)	1 (0.54%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2	–	–	
	1	99 (29%)	66 (36%)	10 (18%)	6 (40%)	3 (25%)	4 (80%)	0 (0%)	1 (50%)	0 (0%)	189	<0.001	Fisher	
	2	95 (28%)	42 (23%)	24 (44%)	3 (20%)	3 (25%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	168	–	–	
	3	101 (30%)	46 (25%)	4 (7.3%)	2 (13%)	3 (25%)	0 (0%)	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	0 (0%)	158	–	–	
4	42 (12%)	30 (16%)	17 (31%)	4 (27%)	3 (25%)	1 (20%)	1 (50%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	98	–	–		

Table 2
Distribution by age group and nature of the power relation.

		0–5 years old (n = 49)	6–12 years old (n = 194)	13–17 years old (n = 225)	18–25 years old (n = 42)	26–35 years old (n = 52)	36–55 years old (n = 46)	56–75 years old (n = 4)	75–100 years old (n = 1)	n	p	test
Nature of power relation, n	Statutory	15 (31%)	68 (35%)	115 (51%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	198	<0.001	Fisher
	None	7 (14%)	34 (18%)	35 (16%)	30 (71%)	42 (81%)	35 (76%)	3 (75%)	1 (100%)	187	–	–
	Familial	14 (29%)	68 (35%)	44 (20%)	2 (4.8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	128	–	–
	Economical ...	0 (0%)	9 (4.6%)	16 (7.1%)	8 (19%)	9 (17%)	7 (15%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	49	–	–
	Educative authority	12 (24%)	6 (3.1%)	10 (4.4%)	1 (2.4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	29	–	–
	Religious	1 (2%)	9 (4.6%)	2 (0.89%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	12	–	–
	Hierarchical	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.44%)	1 (2.4%)	1 (1.9%)	4 (8.7%)	1 (25%)	0 (0%)	8	–	–
	Legal	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (0.89%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2	–	–

Table 3
Age groups categorized by primary declared emotions.

		0–5 years old (n = 49)	6–12 years old (n = 194)	13–17 years old (n = 225)	18–25 years old (n = 42)	26–35 years old (n = 52)	36–55 years old (n = 46)	56–75 years old (n = 4)	75–100 years old (n = 1)	n	p	test
Primary declared emotion, n	Fear	5 (10%)	64 (33%)	95 (42%)	19 (45%)	30 (58%)	22 (48%)	1 (25%)	0 (0%)	236	<0.001	Fisher
	None	26 (53%)	34 (18%)	40 (18%)	7 (17%)	7 (13%)	3 (6.5%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	118	–	–
	Emotional numbness	2 (4.1%)	20 (10%)	26 (12%)	5 (12%)	6 (12%)	4 (8.7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	63	–	–
	Anger	6 (12%)	16 (8.2%)	14 (6.2%)	7 (17%)	3 (5.8%)	9 (20%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	55	–	–
	Sadness	2 (4.1%)	19 (9.8%)	7 (3.1%)	2 (4.8%)	2 (3.8%)	5 (11%)	2 (50%)	0 (0%)	39	–	–
	Pain	7 (14%)	18 (9.3%)	8 (3.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (4.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	35	–	–
	Shame	1 (2%)	14 (7.2%)	14 (6.2%)	1 (2.4%)	3 (5.8%)	1 (2.2%)	1 (25%)	0 (0%)	35	–	–
	Disgust	0 (0%)	4 (2.1%)	10 (4.4%)	1 (2.4%)	1 (1.9%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	16	–	–
	Love	0 (0%)	5 (2.6%)	11 (4.9%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	16	–	–

French law could be viewed as a way to neutralize social inequalities.

4.3.2. Youth prostitution

The study data reveals instances where alleged perpetrators are prostitution customers and victims are minors. Out of these 11 cases, exclusively female subjects between 13 and 17 years old, with an average of 14.2. All of them were subjected to power dynamics by an adult based on their economic or administrative vulnerability. All suffered sexual violence. Moreover, they were all born in Mayotte, indicating possible local determinants. 81.8% of them approached the authorities, twice as many as the victims from the main sample. Thorough qualitative scrutiny of this subgroup's files shows that the decision to seek help from the police was mainly driven by their experiences with abandonment, exclusion, and wandering, which left them with no one else to turn to but the law. These harsh life stories manifest through the emotional expressions of the young victims, which were predominantly limited to the absence of emotion or numbness (54.5% in total), fear (27.3%), and pain (9%). This may result from a shielding mechanism that distorts emotional experience and generates distance. Interestingly, we also observed distance from professionals dealing with adolescents practicing sex against money. Even though French law considers prostitution a critical danger indicator ([Official Journal of the French Republic, 2002](#)), these minors were less often protected or reported to the childhood protection system despite their victim status in criminal case files.

4.3.3. Relationships between adults and minors

Sixteen sexual offense cases mention *Love* as the victim's primary emotion, thereby raising questions about their link with the abuser. These case files involve minor female victims from 11 to 17 years old and male adult perpetrators. In most cases (86.6%), the alleged offender is presented as the victim's *boyfriend*.¹⁶ While the revelation's recipient is typically labeled as *family member* (62.5%), the victims only sometimes agreed to file the complaint, for most processes were initiated by parents or professionals who reported the abuse to the authorities. When victims did not participate actively in the legal process, many cases were classified without further action, possibly participating in the trivialization of relationships between minors and adults in the local society.

A second type of relationship between minors and adults consists of female teenagers married off by their parents without their consent. The study includes five such cases, with victims aged 14 to 17 primarily born in the Union of the Comoros (80%). Among them, 80% reported acts of rape by their grown-up husband or husband-to-be. Out of this group, 60% of the victims first reached out to social and medical workers for help, likely due to collusion between the alleged perpetrator and the family in situations of forced marriage.

4.3.4. Territorial issues

Among the various authors identified in this research, seven are labeled *Territorial opponents*. The related case files exclusively pertain to male victims who suffered physical harm, including attempted murder (86%) and assault and battery (14%), because they belong to a particular village or quarter. Among them are three minors and four adults, averaging 21.9 years (sd = 6.41). All were born in the region, with three subjects from Mayotte, three from the other islands of the Comoros, and one from La Réunion. Lastly, 71% of this subgroup of victims recall fear as primary emotion. Evidence from forensic fieldwork on territorial conflicts suggests that alleged perpetrators also experience fear when acting out. Furthermore, the profiles of the presumed authors and victims in these cases are very similar, consisting of marginalized young men living in deprived environments. Interestingly, all these cases are devoid of power dynamics, suggesting that the lack of social recognition and leverage might favor the use of violence in impoverished settings. Such observations are consistent with the conclusions of the 1985 study by Wilson and Daly, a world-known reference in the sociology of violence ([Wilson and Daly, 1985](#)).

5. Discussion

5.1. A domination system born of a former colony

The statistics presented in this article demonstrate that victimization processes in Mayotte often involve power dynamics, which are closely tied to social factors. The different population segments are not equally affected, and interactions are usually based on the power individuals hold - or not -. In this categorized environment, social identities can be strengthened ([Tajfel, 1972](#)), increasing the importance of social representations in interpersonal relationships. Ultimately, the divisions observed in Mayotte's society may be the remnants of past colonial strategies ([Morrock, 1973](#)) and their lasting influence on individuals and groups. Academic research has shown that stigmas related to colonialism can permanently affect social structures and places, both for autochtones ([Gao, 2021](#)) and the perceived privileged shares of the population ([Kowal, 2011](#)). In Mayotte, people's place of birth and origins are constituents of the social hierarchy and can feel like enclosing assignments. Research interviews, forensic assessments, and grounded anthropology allowed us to learn more about intergroup representations in Mayotte. Malagasy women are often described as venal and sexually unbridled, leading them to be particularly solicited to obtain sex for remuneration ([Brial, 2011](#)), whether or not they are sex workers. Young women of Nzwani descent are reputed to be submissive and frequently taken as second or third wives by Muslim men on the island for this reason. On their part, Nzwani men¹⁷ are described as savage and challenging to civilize. While presented with few

¹⁶ We used that word when the victims spoke it themselves.

¹⁷ Most of the time, the word 'men' (« hommes » in French) is used for them, regardless of age.

positive models (Ezembe, 2013a, 2013b), adolescents in Mayotte may grasp these assignments although still developing their identity in a context where questions of belonging are particularly sensitive (Blanchy, 2002; Hachimi-Alaoui et al., 2013; Meloche, 2022; Walker and Fouéré, 2022). This could lead young people to anticipatory socialization paths - as theorized by Robert K. Merton (Marsh, 2010) - and dysfunctional social careers triggered by perceived stigmas. Especially in adolescents deprived of emotional security and prone to multiple traumas, the need to belong can reinforce the self-fulfilling effects of social representations.

Beyond social determinants, the current research results raise interrogations on subjective dimensions. For instance, gang-related and territorial violence is primarily exerted and suffered by the marginalized fringe of the youth. Due to specific local laws, individuals are often regarded as immigrants, even if born and raised in Mayotte. These derogatory regulations have been designed specifically for Mayotte to assist law enforcement in *fighting illegal immigration*.¹⁸ Notably, Law No. 2018-778 introduced a double *jus soli*,¹⁹ requiring that at least one parent legally reside in Mayotte at birth to acquire French nationality. Since then, there have been legislative attempts to establish *jus sanguinis*²⁰ in Mayotte, including Law Proposition No. 2024-297, which calls for the complete elimination of all forms (simple and double) of the right of soil for the island. Not only do those derogatory regulations raise questions about the supposed equality of rights, but they also have subjective consequences for an entire generation of young people. Some can fight and express anger for reasons unclearly understood by local populations, law professionals, and politicians (Blanchy et al., 2019).

Mayotte's youngsters suffer everyday exclusion and systemic oppression (Morano, 2022), which could lead to complex defensive movements. One such movement is the superposition of territorial and psychological dimensions and the defense of geographical spaces as materialized psychic spaces.

Regarding the subgroups about relations between adults and minors and marriage with underaged girls, literature, clinical fieldwork, and forensic experience lead to consider safety issues. In Mayotte, being unmarried can expose women to unwanted sexual solicitations, and some of them can consequently feel harassed (Achiraf, 2005a). Moreover, sexual offenses are widespread, contributing to a feeling of sexual unsafeness for female inhabitants. In such a context, marriage can represent an opportunity to gain, at the same time, legitimacy within the community, material security, physical safety, and sexual protection from abusers - except from the current one -. The violent environment of Mayotte and the primal need for safety could favor inappropriate relationships and facilitate predation on victims that a weak application of the law fails to protect.

Lastly, the study reveals that people born in mainland France more frequently turn to the authorities when they are victims of violence. Although they have less family and social network on the island, automatically limiting levels 1 and 2 on our proximity scale and potential recourse to informal spheres, French people born in France also might have better trust in the legal system, knowing that they are more likely to obtain justice or only just consideration (Jobard and Névanen, 2007; Slaouti and Jobard, 2020). On a cultural level, the French assimilationist tradition appears to nurture a failure to recognize Mayotte's uniqueness or at least to acknowledge its specificities. Consequently, the judicial system does not comprehend the people from the archipelago, just as they find it difficult to understand the functioning of the republic institutions. Without early impregnation of Western culture and its frameworks, many litigants in Mayotte encounter misunderstandings in contexts with considerable stakes. Possibly due to these misunderstandings and a fundamental distrust toward historical Western colonizers, the reliance on French justice is limited. As a result, traditional dispute resolution methods persist, albeit without the benefits once provided by robust traditional social structures, which have now been eroded by gradual acculturation.

5.2. A generation of denied children

Children in Mayotte face brutal realities compared to those living in mainland France. Although violence against children is a global issue, the distinctiveness of Mayotte may reside in the significant latitude granted to perpetrators as a consequence of the state's weakness in this region and the inconsistent application of legal procedures within the territory (Ghaem, 2019). Local politics can also exacerbate the situation by publicly denying young people a child status (Mdere, 2023) and refusing to consider their vulnerabilities. This negation of their status as children could, through a mirror phenomenon, cause them to massively deny their own suffering - an issue highlighted by Yssouf (2024) - thereby exacerbating the subjective, emotional, and behavioral consequences of their malaise.

In Mayotte's tense setting, human and child rights violations are frequent (ECHR, 2021; Gourdeau et al., 2021; Mathieu et al., 2015), and minors are left unprotected. This resulted in a generation of youngsters whose behaviors primarily reflect the lack of support they receive from society. Children are often left to fend for themselves from a very young age due to factors such as poverty, neglect, and denial of their status. Relationships between minors and adults are frequent, possibly favored by inequalities and subjective needs related to the context and its peculiar effects. Clinical studies on perpetrators of sexual violence have revealed a significant level of immaturity (Coutanceau and Smith, 2010), making it easier for them to establish relationships with underaged youth. On the other hand, the victims in Mayotte often seek security on multiple levels, including material, emotional, and physical. Paradoxically, these relationships between adults and minors can have immediate benefits that mask in the eyes of the victims - and perhaps the authors - the reification process to which they are subjected. Based on Sándor Ferenczi's works (Ferenczi, 1949), such inappropriate couple situations arise from a profound misunderstanding where children's search for tenderness and emotional security leads them to consider sexualized expressions from adults as affectionate manifestations. Therefore, the child may give the adult what they expect and conform to their desire despite the fundamental discrepancy between their essential needs. This type of predation

¹⁸ Literary translation of French idiom "Lutte contre l'immigration clandestine".

¹⁹ Right of soil.

²⁰ Right of blood.

predominantly affects vulnerable children, and even though only cases of young girls and older men are typically brought to justice, such situations transcend genders, as revealed by clinical practice and specialized literature (Achiraf, 2005b). In cases where young victims are in a relationship with adults tied to mainland France, the collective history of the region leads us to hypothesize a phenomenon of identification with the aggressor structured around the figure of the colonizer. In this perspective, social representations rooted in the colonial legacy and the introjection of dominant figures of otherness would reinforce the behavioral mechanisms defined by Ferenczi and potentialize the phenomena he described.

5.3. Victims' voice in criminal proceedings

Mayotte is a rural territory with a few urban centers still in development (Ninon, 2007). The island's way of life is centered around village life and a collectivist type of organization (Abels-Eber and Baron, 2002). Most villagers know the others at least by sight, without necessarily maintaining a continuous relationship with everyone. Traditionally, the community manages conflicts between villagers (Bourin, 2014), and preserving village unity is of utmost importance, potentially at the expense of individual satisfaction (Baroukh, 2021). In addition, the person suffering the offense is generally not considered a victim individually, as the family's honor and reputation are primarily at stake. The French authorities are typically kept outside the process of regulating disputes, as social standards dictate. However, more and more victims are seeking recognition of their subjectivity, personal experiences, and intimate suffering, possibly due to progressive assimilation within the Western individual and rational normative system.

We have observed that in cases where victims are economically or administratively vulnerable, they tend to seek the help of the French authorities more often. One could hypothesize that this may be because French law is perceived as capable of neutralizing inequalities. However, these vulnerable subgroups seek so much help from law enforcement that it orients reflection toward subjective dimensions. Their goal might not primarily be to obtain justice but to express themselves and be heard in a society that excludes them and denies them fairness and dignity. Notably, victims in Mayotte frequently withdraw from the procedures they initiate (Le Bris, 2021), suggesting that speaking out is more important to them than the practical outcome.

For the youngest victims, Mayotte's institutional insufficiencies may help explain why they rarely appeal to the authorities. The local justice system is often viewed as ineffective (Aliloiffa, 2021), while the child protective services are inert (French Defender of Rights, 2020). This puts minors in a difficult situation that they struggle to navigate. They may fear that speaking out will lead to further negative consequences, such as being placed under protective services, where they risk facing more violence (Toussaint et al., 2023) or being stigmatized for being under foster care (Neuburger, 2001). Even if the abuse occurs within their family, minors may be reluctant to reveal it when it means being taken away from their attachment basis with no guarantee of safety. Confronted with such complexities and the uncertainty underlying the revelation of suffered violence in a wobbly institutional environment, Mayotte's children sometimes choose silence. Across the world, kids struggle with speaking out and are often disqualified or reputed unreliable. For these reasons, they might be the most invisibilized segment of victims, the most silenced part of the population.

The current data suggests that female gender leads to more exposition to violence and a greater variety of power relations. Additionally, female victims appear less prone to appeal to authorities than male ones, which could relate to domination systems. Considering systemic vulnerabilities and their effects on victims' ability to speak out could help design more adapted ways to welcome their word. Amongst these vulnerabilities is the birth gender, which affects representations (Marková, 2007) and can influence consideration from individuals, institutions, media, public opinion, court professionals, and law enforcement. During interactions with medical professionals in a criminal proceeding, female victims may feel a sense of dehumanization that exacerbates and reinforces the psychological effects of victimization (Ruiz et al., 2023). In Mayotte, where female victims less frequently seek recourse to authorities and tend to prefer speaking with medical or social workers, implementing anti-oppressive practices and informing professionals about the socio-historic context would be an effective way to enhance the reception of victims' testimonies in criminal proceedings. This could be even more beneficial considering the postcolonial context and its effects on interpersonal relationships and group dynamics.

The voices of minors who suffer from violence are often silenced in various ways. Apart from the apparent hindrances posed by power dynamics, their credibility is still a significant concern for both adults and professionals, and the reception of their speech requires appropriate conditions. While false allegations constitute 2%–10% of the complaints filed (Heenan and Murray, 2006; Lisak et al., 2010; Rumney, 2006), the possibility of such cases troubles judicial authorities. The debate between reality and fantasy about children's accounts of violence is still a lively topic in the judicial world and public opinion. While Freud could not accept the disturbing thought that so many victims' claims might be valid (Gauld, 2019), Ferenczi believed them to be authentic and the source of complex long-term behavioral issues (Hilke, 2020; Roiphe, 1996). In a way, Ferenczi was the first clinician to publicly acknowledge the word of victims, almost a century before today's "we believe you" and "believe survivors" movements.

5.4. Possible intercultural misunderstandings and mistrust

The judicial cases heard in Mayotte reveal significant variability in understanding state justice and its methods. Factors such as origins, socio-economic background, level of formal education in the French school, and access to Western media partly influence the comprehension of the judicial institution. Due to its recent implementation, French justice remains obscure for many people, and misunderstandings persist (Ralsler et al., 2022).

The archipelago's culture, along with its mores and modes of operation, remains deeply rooted in the collective consciousness and can lead to significant misunderstandings on both sides. For instance, the language barrier poses a challenge. Using interpreters who are generally not well-trained results in inadequacies that can have serious consequences for both victims and alleged perpetrators. For example, the local and French definitions of rape do not necessarily align, which can lead to complaints or confessions without fully

understanding the French interpretation of the term.

Local traditional conflict resolution methods differ fundamentally from those of Western culture. In Mayotte and the three other islands of the Comoros, the village serves as a jurisdiction where notables and residents manage disputes. Traditionally, various methods of action existed, such as the codified compensation for victims, known as *suluhu*²¹ (Hory, 2004), or the *uzina gungu*, a ritual aimed at publicly humiliating perpetrators of incest along with their family and clan (Abdallah Chanfi, 2000). These practices often confuse investigators and magistrates, who struggle to understand the underlying logic and generally dismiss or condemn them. The purpose of these dispute regulation mechanisms is, in fact, profoundly different from that of Western law. While Western law seeks normative regulation through opposing subjective arguments, East African methods aim to find consensus and swiftly restore social balance without prioritizing individual needs (Attoumani, 2003). This approach aligns with Islamic precepts, which promote harmony and the restoration of order while condemning the persistence of individual demands (Sermet, 1999). Being familiar with these practices, individuals born in the archipelago often feel disoriented when confronted with French justice. They are reluctant to engage with a complex system whose codes they do not fully understand and may not perceive as benevolent. Furthermore, the Western focus on truth and individual satisfaction may limit their willingness to seek recourse from the justice system due to its disregard for restoring community balance. Consequently, traditional regulation methods persist, including physical retaliations that fall under the authorities' scope, resulting in severe penalties.

The persistence of these traditional methods of conflict regulation, the silence surrounding specific facts, or simply the non-use of state justice may be reinforced by difficulties in accessing the law and the uncertainty of the judicial process in a territory where its application is fallible (French Defender of Rights, 2020). Furthermore, the colonial past of Mayotte and the three other islands of the Comoros orients the reflection toward potential reactionary mechanisms. From this perspective, the lesser use of French justice could manifest a resistance stemming from the postcolonial context and its inherent power dynamics (Renucci, 2016).

The law embodies a specific vision of the world aimed at revitalizing a culturally rooted cosmogony (Nicolau et al., 2007). In Mayotte, colonization brought together two distinct civilizations: Bantu and Judeo-Christian. Despite coexisting, they rarely understand each other. The judicial system highlights cultural misunderstandings and struggles to reconcile these divergent worldviews. Bantu philosophy views the being (*mutru*) as a force formed through connections with spirituality, family, ancestors, and clan. From this notion of vital force arises an ethical framework that translates into a legal code: what is ontologically good is ethically sound and recognized as just in legal terms (Diagne, 2000). This perspective inevitably conflicts with the Judeo-Christian conception of the fault, which demands guilt, contrition, and repentance. These fundamentally differing views on life and relationships - toward oneself, others, and the community - collide in the practice of French law in Mayotte, resulting in mutual rejection. Westerners might perceive the attitudes of the archipelago's people as misplaced self-assertion, prompting the repression of deemed inappropriate behaviors. Meanwhile, the latter keep their distance from a justice system that fails to appreciate their deeper cultural essence and applies with no consideration of their subjective needs.

5.5. Merits and limitations

Mayotte urgently requires reliable data to inform and help design its future public policies. The persistent rise in criminal activity and the contemporary social crisis emphasize the need for trustworthy knowledge of the types of offenses, patterns of victimization, and underlying causes of violence. This research represents the first compilation of such data, contextualized and discussed in light of a multidisciplinary literature accessible to professionals from various fields. The choice to study power relations emerged from fieldwork and criminal proceedings, and data proved consistent with clinical and forensic observations. While this study may not yield a groundbreaking discovery or cutting-edge theoretical advances, it contributes to addressing a significant gap in quantitative data and paves the way for further developments in local criminology and victimology. The open dissemination of research data also aims to ensure accessibility for all: professionals across different sectors, state institutions, non-profit organizations, and local governance.

The data presented here generally aligns with national victimization statistics. However, it is acknowledged that sexual offenses are often classified without further action or go unreported, complicating the assessment of data reliability. Moreover, traditional dispute resolution mechanisms and mistrust toward the judicial system in Mayotte can further reduce the number of cases reported to authorities, exacerbating this challenge. To partially address this issue and maximize the available data, we have included files that have been closed without further action. Nevertheless, many cases have likely escaped our notice, impacting the sample's representativeness. Lastly, while the examined files include two cases of sexual offenses against young girls with disabilities, it is also likely that many such victims were unable to press charges, thereby rendering this segment of the population virtually invisible in both the current research and the judicial system itself.

6. Conclusion

Consideration for victims is gradually increasing, especially in welfare states where support mechanisms are multiplying (Gallo and Svensson, 2019). The regulatory arsenal is also adapting progressively, but it faces the victim's codified subsidiary place in French criminal doctrine. Victims can feel unsatisfied and keep seeking recognition for their experience and the consequences they suffer.

While it can be upsetting to see the large number of people who are victims of criminal offenses in their lives, this release of speech

²¹ Still commonly used today and frequently reduced by authorities to a financial settlement.

is an opportunity from a clinical point of view. It allows a distinction between internal and external factors, leading to better comprehension and favoring adapted care. Some institutional actors plead to ensure that victims' word is welcomed and believed (e.g., Durant, 2022), but many elements still hinder its acknowledgment. Among these elements are the polarization of debates, the potential stigmatization of victims, or even their questioning.

Many victims suffer offenses from people close to them who tend to use less physical violence (Woods and Porter, 2008) and more psychological constraints. This can make it even more difficult for victims to speak out, especially in Mayotte, where power dynamics play a significant role in interpersonal relationships. Notably, victims can feel unable to report the abuse due to their age, social background, origin, or immigration status. In this context, the role of people who collect the words of the victims is essential. In particular, that of the authorities, who are not always viewed as a trusted source of support, given the power dynamics in this postcolonial society and how they structure interpersonal matters. The stakes are even higher for children, and the limitations are more profound.

In Mayotte, state authorities often negate cultural peculiarities. In the name of the principle of equality and the indivisibility of the French people, justice fails to be applied in a manner suited to the territory and its challenges. Additionally, the colonial legacy and its repercussions are seldom acknowledged, whether in everyday conversations, the media, political discourses, or the judicial system. Discussing the colonial past is a tacit taboo, as if being part of France precludes any reflection on the implications of collective history. The law is enforced at all costs, without gradual implementation, shifting the burden on the Maorais for having persistently requested the *département* status. However, it is known that this request was motivated by geopolitical reasons and that geostrategic considerations nurtured the state's favorable response. Residents of Mayotte often find themselves unprepared when confronted with a justice system that they have little control over, which operates in ways that are far distant from local customs. Mayotte faces a paradox where the French state simultaneously enforces derogatory treatment and affirms undifferentiation for individuals facing the law, resulting in ongoing misunderstandings. In this social context, the state's minimal investment in Mayotte exacerbates a situation of social distress, leaving individuals rarely protected by the law. The feeling of abandonment runs deep, and power dynamics take hold in the absence of a collective agreement regarding Mayotte, making it impossible to prevent various forms of violence or promote togetherness.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Elie K.N. Letourneur: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Ada Pouye:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology. **Malika Mansouri:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

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The original dataset for this research is available at https://osf.io/ukf68/?view_only=1a267abd7a9c450b9df3b03480e86740

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