

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Young girl prostitution and risks in Maroua town (Far North Cameroon)

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**In developed and under developed countries, the phenomenon of prostitution is getting widespread. Cameroon does make an exception with respect to this trend, which goes increasing in the big towns of this country. This phenomenon is recurrent in highly populated neighborhoods of sub-division headquarters and regions where young girls give themselves to the oldest trade of the world. The latter are often compelled by social structures, individual agents and companies to practice prostitution. Poverty, social problems, corruption and criminality contribute to the widespread of this phenomenon among young girls in the town of Maroua. The aim of this study is to show the itineraries taken by young prostitutes and envisage a study of health risks (sexually transmitted diseases and HIV-AIDS) which these ladies undergo in the practice of this trade. The methodology will consist in mapping popular pleasure spaces in Maroua town from the city current town map. A field survey and a questionnaire were carried out with free women or “femme de joie”, i.e., pleasure ladies on the origin and awareness of health risks these ladies expose themselves to.**

**Keywords:** Prostitution, popular neighborhoods, Maroua, health risks and young girls

## Introduction

Prostitution is a practice which consists of exchanging sexual relations for a pay. It is a social fact characterized by the existence of prostitutes. This phenomenon is present in big towns in both developed and underdeveloped countries. The town of Maroua is a regional headquarter as the other nine regional headquarters of Cameroon; in the image of a metropolis in developing countries with suburbs, places where the oldest job of the world is carried out. This town has witnessed an increase with respect to this phenomenon for the last three decades because of poverty and violence that goes on in families. These practices have been diversified, people targets have widened, the places of this activity have increased in the regional city where pleasure women live. In a number of suburbs-quarters where free women live, family and social life becomes difficult for young girls who are expected to struggle on their own to earn a living. They are compelled to give their bodies to people. Poverty in less fortunate quarters is one of the factors that lead young women to indulge into such a practice. The quest for money among these ladies, encouraged by some family members as a means

of survival in town, is the main reason. The young girl is compelled to sell her body to others for money and provide food for her family.

As a result, the conditions often difficult in which prostitutes exercise their activities weaken their access to prevention and cure. This further exposes them to health risks. This exposure is a very preoccupying fact even as the rate of sexually transmitted diseases is higher among the inhabitants of these places. This state of affairs raised questions in our mind as to know the health risks that can be brought about by sex trade in the town of Maroua. In other words, what are the dangers visitors of prostitutes expose their lives to? What are the diseases they expose themselves to in hot or merry places? The review of literature will give us a better understanding of the scope of the phenomenon in this town.

## Methodology

This study is anchored on two major sources of information: documentary analysis and questionnaires.

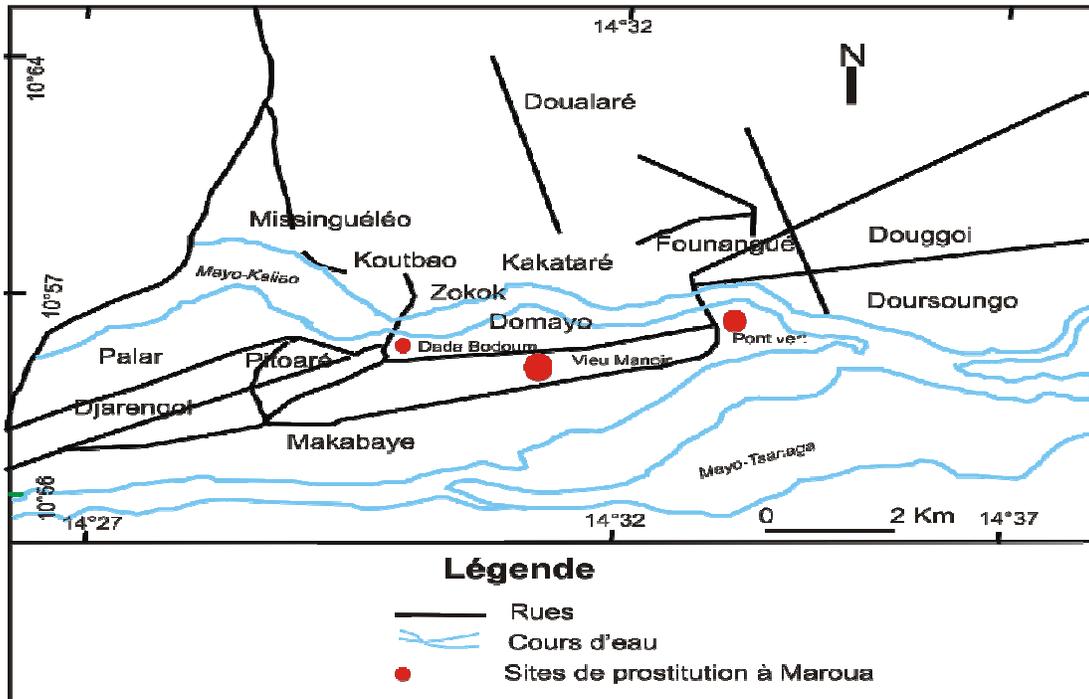


Figure 1 Source : Field survey June 2014

The documentary analysis is especially based on a synthesis of previous studies including dissertations and related surveys. A survey by questionnaires was carried out for a year in the city of Maroua. The questionnaire was administered to ladies at odd hours. During the survey, we realized that the most important age range was situated between 14 and 20. The names of the informants have been changed for the sake of confidentiality and discretion of information collected on the field.

## Results

### Localization of prostitution zones in Maroua

This map shows prostitution zones in the open in Maroua. This is the oldest base of the city, in Domayo where most prostitutes are found. It is an old neighborhood with very old buildings and tight up compounds on small surfaces. The bulk of the buildings are of "banco", which gives this old neighborhood the aspect of a village in an urban zone. Figure 1 situates prostitution in Maroua.

### Young ladies approach techniques

The city of Maroua has many streets, but the most famous one is the "Renouveau" Domayo streets, where most night clubs, hiding places are located that make the

neighborhood an important place own the night has fallen. From Monday to Sunday with a climax on Saturday, sex workers sell pleasure. The activity starts around 7 p.m where these girls take their position to "attack". Most of them get to this place on foot for a better show off. Generally well dressed, they hold a purse in their hand. They move in front of bars and dance places to give people a chance to call them. In case nobody sees them, they get closer to the "Vieux Manoir Bar" to value themselves. This is the place where these sex workers display their body forms putting on mini-skirts and shorts. They assail the front of the bar and the night club roundabouts whereby a dark alley is situated, by the way the access to pleasure. Neighboring music players raise the volume to the top. Cafes, roasted fish sellers, and sellers of roasted meat display their goods after cleaning up the place. Customers can then undertake buying. Sex workers also start their activity. They call or shout to customers using coded words. Those who know French talk of "pass" or "can we go and do". These are words that call for a sexual act. Others, unable to speak French, use gestures to cause customers to cooperate. Some passers-by feel compelled to reject the offers from a good distance away from the ladies. Others use violence to rid themselves of these ladies. Prices are given to customers depending on the duration of the sexual act. An act is at 2000 CFAF. If the customer wants the act to be a lasting one, he will be required to pay 3000 CFAF or 5000 CFAF after Amina, a sex worker. In her opinion, a good act is one where the agents are stark naked; its cost is 3000 CFAF. A sexual relief costs 2000

Table 1 : Socio-demographic elements about prostitute girls

Home country	Number	Percentage
Cameroon	250	100%
<b>Home region</b>		
Far North	195	78%
North	48	19,2%
East	7	2,8%
Total	250	100%

Source: Field survey (2013-2014)

CFAF. A whole night spent with a prostitute is priced at 5000 CFAF in difficult times and 10000 CFAF in better periods like the pay period. Young girls enter with customers and come out alone. Such a fashion march pass is witnessed hot areas where sex trade is carried out. Other girls carry out sex activities in a place called "dada boddoum". They enter into an alley with customers and take to what they will consider as rooms. No attractive decoration can be found in these places. On the floor lie an old mattress barely covered with a dirty cloth. In the corner of the, there some preservatives, handkerchiefs, and at the back of the room there is a small bucket used as a dustbin. Well to do prostitutes use a fan in their rooms.

There is another category of prostitutes in the city of Maroua. They dress well, walk on the sidewalk removing their loincloth from time to time. It takes just a sign for these ladies to join the solicitor at a bar and talks start immediately as though they had known each other. Other prostitutes move along the road with no specific destination looking for anyone who would eventually call them. Other sex workers go and settle in a snack, order a drink then make their choice among the men who enter that snack. At times, they behave as if they wanted to be served another bottle. This is a way of making themselves noticed by the men opposite them.

### **Socio-demographic characteristics of young female prostitutes in Maroua**

Table 1 shows the socio-demographic situation of 250 girls interviewed during our survey. The identities of these girls were withheld only information related to their intimacy is used. Table 1 shows that all 250 girls are Cameroonians. They come from three different regions where sex trade is widely reported. The Far-North region carries the largest number, i.e., 78% of the ladies who willingly filled out the questionnaire. The North takes 19.2% because these two regions are neighbor regions and share almost the same cultures. The East region is credited with 2.8%. This is due to the distance that separates these regions. What can be noticed is that the majority of teenage prostitute are of the Far-North region.

The lack economic activities and poverty of the families cause these girls to practice street prostitution day in day out. Prostitutes teenagers surveyed in the study have different levels of schooling. In the city of Maroua, from the findings, 90% of the girls have never attended a school while 6% have had an access to primary school and 4% had reached secondary school. This shows that girls are weak enough to fall victims to prostitution. Our sample is made up of 250 young girls who were interviewed in three different prostitution centers in Maroua. It was noticed that 45,2% were hawkers in the city of Maroua. Girls of this type are permanently in contact with men who reach out to them with the objective of getting them. Laundry doers represent 18.8% in this activity they came to learn from their mother who were laundry doers in their neighborhoods and who used to go round to collect dirty clothes from neighbors and even from people who live far from them in order to earn little money. Student hairdressers are those who are more in contact with prostitution places since girls learn to make themselves beautiful. In order to draw the attention of people who can offer them huge amounts of money for sexual intercourse. Once they start enjoying it, the young girl prefers to take up prostitutions than doing something else as she gets money easily on a daily basis. Hence the declaration of one the prostitute: "I acquired this bike thanks to the strength of my buttocks" She said it without shame.

These girls are reported to exercise different trades before they enter prostitution. These are trades that incline them to prostitution. They remain essentially rural as 63% of the parents are farmers, 26.2% are either task workers or craft workers with low income which does not allow them to provide for their needs and those of their children. They are in contact with men every day, especially the hawkers. They are exposed to temptations of men who actually want to take advantage of them sexually by giving them money or offering to buy all their goods, and they themselves for part of pleasure. Our field survey observation confirms Bambara (2012) that this situation expose people to sex hunters who never hesitate to give considerable bribes, raising in these girls thirst for easy gain. This weakens the will in resisting the sexual touches of their benefactors and lead them

Table 2 : Level of instruction, occupation and age of entry into prostitution

<b>Level of instruction</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Unschoolled	225	90%
Primary school level	15	6%
Secondary school level	10	4%
<b>Trade before prostitution</b>		
Hawkers	113	45,2%
Household women	35	14%
Laundry doers	47	18,8%
Hair doers	55	22%
<b>Age range at entrance into prostitution</b>		
14- 15	63	25,2%
15-16	97	38,8%
16-17	57	22,8%
17-18	9	3,6%
18-19	14	5,6%
20 and more	10	4%

Source : Field survey (2013- 2014)

unfailingly to priced sexual relations. Not only do they discover sex but also the possibility to make money without any effort. Entry age of prostitution in Table 2 shows that 38.8% got in when they were between 15-16. These are teenagers who are disturbed by the puberty period. It is at this age range that most prostitutes are situated. It is also at this age that young girls try to assert themselves socially and sexually. They seek to acquire their independence with parents. It is also at this delicate age that girls start having their menstrual periods. The ignorant nature of these 15-16 years old girls, their inexperience and their immaturity favor their exploitation which is noticed in the low prices whose consequences are measured with the amount of carnal solicitations they are liable to.

### **Factors promoting entry into prostitution**

The general economic crisis with its bad effects, the impoverishment of soils due to climate change, demographic pressure and rural exodus have contributed in creating a negative economic situation in the Far-North region. During our field survey, we realized that a rapid growth of the town compel the families settled in town to conglomerate in precarious and promiscuous living conditions. Young girls become targets or victims in these geographical areas. The precarious condition in which the families of these girls live is the first factor that leads them to prostitution. These difficult conditions of life in town are due to the unfortunate status of the parents and constant poverty, which keep them in a circle of misery. According to Bambara (2012), the availability of

electronic material on the market (mobile phones, and those tactile screens, nowadays telephones with the internet, MP3, DVD readers and other appliances) raise covetousness even among the poorest ones. The abandonment of villages without some basic infrastructural facilities by the State to the profit of towns leads to massive rural exodus towards these big cities. This leads to an increase of poverty in town and junkyards also come into existence. From a similar perspective, Coppieters't Wallant (1990) cited by Bambara (2012), notes that some customs, due to their severe nature are factors that lead young girls to prostitution. As a proof, early marriages in Maroua and its surroundings environment are an obligation for young girls thus scarifying their future to the detriment of tradition. This one concludes without his agreement that it will last for a short period and she will find herself in Domayo after her husband would have put an end to his love relationship with her. This recurrent phenomenon noticed is that marriages are entered into much more during the Ramadan period and after that month of pious behavior; there comes a wind of dislocation of unions. Hence the creation of the market of divorced women in Maroua, where these women come to sell fabrics, kitchen goods and even jewels with the objective of making some money. Society being hierarchical and patriarchal, males have a greater weight over females in a majority of families. From observation made in our daily living, a girl must not bear children while living with her parents. Young girls who become pregnant while with their parents are simply classified and cast out. This is seen as a curse in the family. In some traditional families, girls have no right to education; a woman is thought to stay

with her mother to learn how to cook and take care of her household. That is why parents refuse paying school fees to girls to the profit of boys. For Ayari de Souza (1992), the education of girls is commonly considered to be an unproductive investment from all angles in the sense that parents think they are giving up unproductive forces, since the instructed girl acquires new values that separates her from her milieu and favor independence. After Mike D. (2004), homes where domestic violence is recurrent and most specifically children physical abuse whether it is sexual abuse or body abuse and trashing, these are liable to others of their own willing. The corporal punishment which is applied on some of these girls makes them abandon their homes and find themselves in the street to embrace prostitution as a means for survival in town. The unemployment of young girls and the wild envy for fashion dressing are other factors that encourage entry into prostitution. The fashion effect and desire to imitate others among teenagers are other factors that lead to such a debasing job. Because these ladies live in material financial poverty, they seek to be updated like their mates who come from well to do parents. They must go through some gymnastics to have money and feel "at the top" like others.

The problems young girls have with their teachers regarding sexual matters lead to school drop outs. Once they stop going to school, they head for Domayo bars in search of a masculine customer. Marriages with old people are also caused by these early school drop outs. Her husband marries her only to abuse her sexually after he must have had a child with her. Then the adventure will end and the girl will be pushed out of wedlock though the wedding was celebrated with a lot of festivity. A number of studies have shown that poverty is one of the major factors that prop teenagers into prostitution. Those young girls who abandon their homes without resources, prostitution can be a means of survival for them according to Bagley and Young (2004). The company of other prostitutes and solicitation of prospective prostitute customers may also lead young girls to set into prostitution.

### **Risks related to the practice of prostitution in the urban area**

Women and young girls who practice this job run a number of risks. Authorities and even the people living with them in the same family or neighborhood tend to minimize or look down on the threats prostitutes undergo. Violence is the common lot of those who live as prostitutes. The surveys carried out in the city of Maroua tell a lot about the situation of violence towards young girls in prostitution milieu. Those who street prostitute are liable to violence, these are women who are more exposed. After the survey carried out in Maroua, close to 40% of street girls declare that they have been assaulted

physically or verbally by drunkards people. Others claim they were looted of their gain by their customers or unknown oppressors who leave with few coins enough for their motorbike fare. Some street girls acknowledge to have been raped at least thrice or four times since they entered prostitution. Most people involved in prostitution are fragile health wise. This comes as a result of the risks they undergo. It is in this prostitution environment that the majority of young girls start taking drugs, alcohol and addictive drugs that make them courageous to face men and receive many people without getting tired. Others use traditional products such as salt and white stones to reduce their vagina; all these ingredients have long term consequences as cancer of the uterus.

### **Health risks for street prostitutes**

This trade presents a lot of health risks. Despite the fact that these young girls use their bodies as articles to be purchased; these ladies expose themselves to many sexually transmitted diseases. This study shows a worry enhanced by AIDS with respect to the role of the prostitute person as carrier of diseases. In spite of the advantages this trade offers them, the prostitutes we met seem to be conscious of the fact that they expose themselves to sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS, syphilis, gonorrhea, cervical and uterine cancer, premature ageing, dialysis Encyclopedia, hepatitis B, hepatitis C, chlamydia, gonorrhea, human papilloma virus (genital warts), pelvic inflammatory disease, trichomoniasis, cytomegalovirus, genital mycosis, nongonococcal gonorrhea, chancroid, soft chancroid, warts (HPV or cockscomb), cystitis, scabies, gonorrhea (gonorrhea gonococcal), genital herpes, yaws. Those who care for their health, especially those with bikes and who go to luxurious hotels in Maroua, do a medical checkup. They take some drugs prior to the sexual act. There are precaution measures these ladies take. But the treatment society offers them (despise) does not mean anything to them. For them, there is a life conception that guides them and encourages them in this sense. What is more regretful is that the most affected layer is that of poor people. The survey carried out in Maroua showed us that the 250 young ladies at one point in time had contracted one of the sexually transmitted diseases mentioned above. This situation brings about a risk for our society, since these prostitutes have friends outside the prostitution sphere. This can extend the list of sick people. The field survey showed that the ethnic distribution of health situation in the town is as follows. See Figure 2.

There different ethnic groups involved in prostitution in the city of Maroua. This is due to the cosmopolitan character of the Far North region. In addition, there are some ethnic groups from neighboring regions. The Fulbe girls are the most representative in the city in the two hot

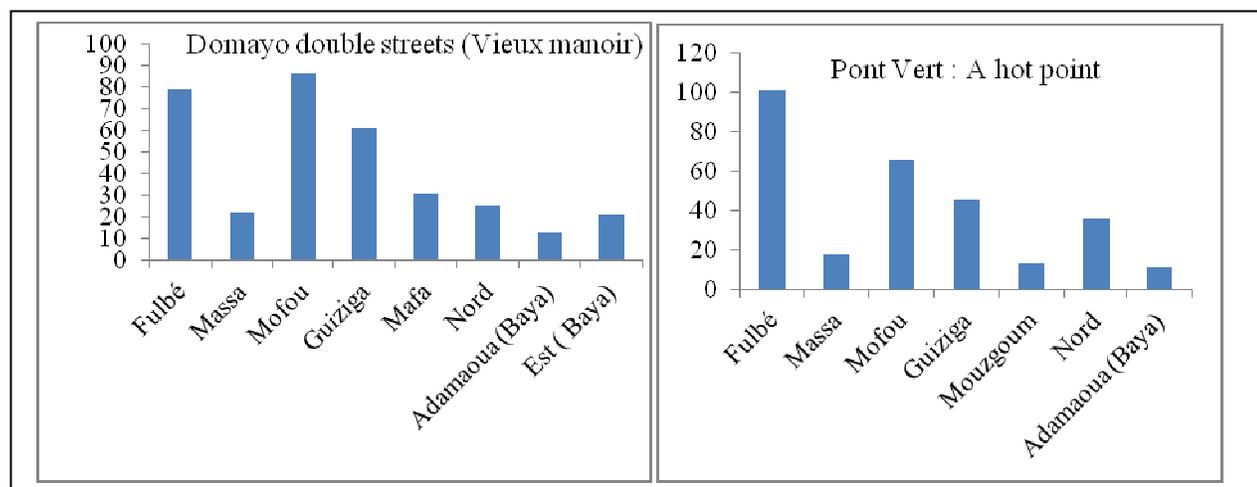


Figure: 2 Distribution of prostitution per ethnic group in Maroua. Source: Field survey

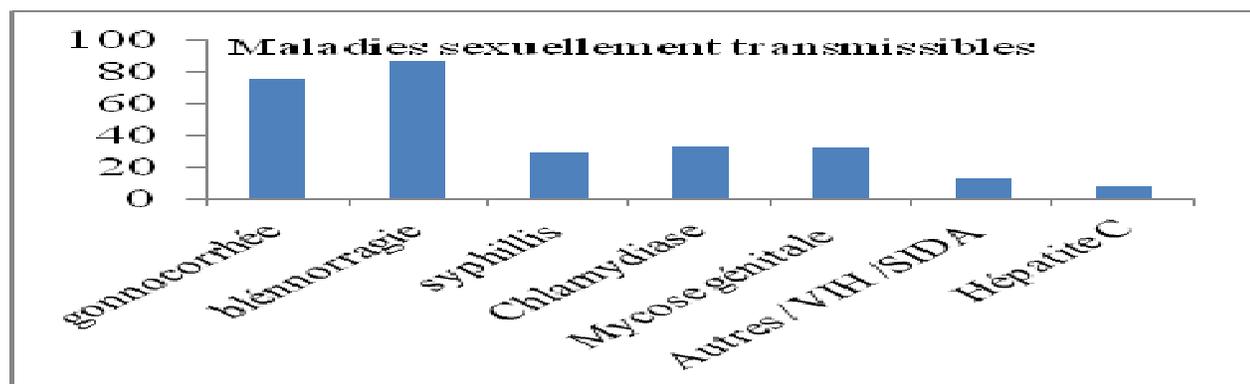


Figure 3. Sexually transmitted diseases from the prostitution sites. Source: Field survey, 2013-2014

places namely Domayo and Pont vert. After these ones are the Mofou the Guiziga, Mafa, youths who are natives of the Far North, the Adamawa and the Eastern Region. The latter are fewer in number because of the distance between the two regions, which is about 900km. Most of these girls live in suburbs-quarters where promiscuity and prostitution are developed, and as a result of this HIV / AIDS gets developed in the city of Maroua. As shown previously, most of these girls come from households with very low cash incomes and who are unable to satisfy their basic needs. These girls, in quest of financial independence, engage on daily basis in prostitution, ie, sex trade in defiance of the law that prohibits and punishes this practice.

Among other personal factors identified by Hankins and Gendron (2009), we can list immediate survival conditions. In a context of high economic difficulty, the urgent need of money can lead people to taking risks including acceptance of a higher pay in exchange for unprotected sex. Drug addiction and alcohol can lead to

loosening or even indifference to the risk one is exposed to, what matters is gain. After the survey carried out among prostitutes in Domayo, it appears that among the respondents each had been victim of a sexually transmitted disease. The figure above presents the diseases contracted by prostitutes in the city of Maroua. Figure 3 presents diseases identified during the survey carried out on the hot sites of prostitution (Domayo double streets and Pont Vert). Gonorrhoea is the most representative because 79 out of 250 girls surveyed were reported to have contracted the disease while 76 girls have been victims of gonorrhoea and other sexually transmitted diseases. Some of these night girls told us that they had already contracted some of these diseases many times. What is surprising, these girls do not get discouraged, they are ready to leave their homes at day break. The risk is high, many of them have boyfriends in neighborhoods outside customers they encounter in the night, which may increase the number of infected people among youths.

## Conclusion

In Maroua, the phenomenon of prostitution among girls is fully expanding because of factors related to poverty that we tried to expose previously in our study. Early sexual relations, parental abandonment regarding education, parental abuse and economic insecurity of parents do not allow them to hope for traditional integration circuits. The selected exploratory approach has enabled us to discover and by the voice of the victims, sexual abuse in childhood and even during their entry into prostitution, inadequate education or total absence and lack of professional training. The fact that girls venture into prostitution does not go without consequences. The majority of these girls say they had already contracted a venereal disease, which is the category of sexually transmitted diseases. Here, the use of the condom is still unknown and even a taboo for families of this part of the country. This study suggests other possible openings for research on topics like pregnancy among young girls in prostitution and abortion among female teenagers who are involved in prostitution.

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