

A  
CASE STUDY  
FROM  
DEMOCRATIC  
REPUBLIC  
OF CONGO

A REPUTATION  
DESTROYED

**Keywords:** sexual harassment; harm to reputation; sharing photos without consent; stealing identity; Facebook; harm to children; abusive comments; abuser is known; emotional harm; survivor's age is under 18

### THE STORY AND THE VIOLENCE

Blandine is a 15-year-old student who lives in a village in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Relations between Blandine and her family were always very good, until one day in November 2013, Blandine returned from a party and was confronted by her angry parents. "You are a terrible child [and] we are not proud of you," they told her. "There are pornographic photographs on your friend Nathalie's Facebook page in which you both feature – what does this mean?"

Blandine did not believe the accusation, but she checked with her friend Nathalie the next day, and to their surprise, they confirmed that such photos did exist. At this point she recalled that in August of the same year, she and her boyfriend Junior had been invited to the birthday party of a boy named Cédric. After a few hours, Junior's friends suggested that a group of them leave for a more discrete location. Blandine recalls, "Nathalie was with me as well as a friend of Junior's who was courting her. When we left the party, the boys – that is, Junior and his friends – suggested that they photograph us. They promised us USD 20 and a Rolex watch if we agreed, so we did it." She goes on to conclude, "The photos taken that day were published on my friend Nathalie's Facebook page without our consent."

Blandine suspected that Cédric was responsible for posting the photos on Facebook, because he had helped Nathalie get a Facebook account, and was

the only one who knew her password. When she confronted Cédric he indicated that the girlfriend of the boy who was courting Nathalie saw the pictures and demanded that he publish them.

After the photos were published, Blandine noticed that she was subject to humiliating and questioning looks from her neighbours. "The news spread throughout the neighbourhood," she says. "But, luckily, it did not reach the school, which is in another village."

Throughout this period Blandine felt angry, because as the rumours spread across the neighbourhood, strangers visibly judged her. Even today, although the incident occurred several months ago, other parents forbid their children from associating with Blandine because of the dishonour associated with having her images circulated.

### SEEKING JUSTICE

In the area where Blandine lives, there are several police posts in the village. There is also a court and a public prosecutor's office in the neighbouring village. On the advice of the neighbourhood police who caught wind of the affair, Blandine's family considered making a complaint; however, once the photographs were removed, Blandine did not try to seek justice. She and her family cited the expectation of *high legal costs*, especially since *none of her family members were familiar with navigating the legal system*.

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If Blandine had pressed charges, she could have made use of the provisions in the law on child protection (Law No. 09/001 of 10 January 2009), which protects children against economic and sexual exploitation. Another relevant piece of legislation is the law on sexual violence, which considers the victim's status as a minor as an aggravating factor. However, it is well known that the legal system is often very costly and has a great deal of *internal corruption*, which serves as a deterrent for people to take cases to court.

Blandine and her family did not approach Facebook, because they were *unaware of a procedure for reporting abuse to an internet intermediary*.

## FINDING AGENCY

Though Blandine did not pursue legal justice, she was very proactive in putting an end to the violation. *She approached the party organiser to learn more about who was behind the publishing of the photographs.* Although Cédric initially denied being involved, soon after Blandine spoke with him, *the photographs were removed from Nathalie's Facebook page.* However, when she asked Cédric to hand over all copies of the images, he said he no longer had any. Since then, the photographs have not resurfaced, but Blandine and Nathalie continue to live with the social stigma generated by the violence.



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