Breaking the culture of silence: How social media is giving Nigerian women

Date: 2020-06-27

Source: https://guardian.ng/guardian-woman/breaking-the-culture-of-silence-how-social-media-is-giving-nigerian-women-a-voice-in-the-fight-against-sexual-harassment-assault/

On Wednesday, June 18, at about 3pm in New York, I spoke with Kelechi Udoagwu, the young woman, who reported being sexually assaulted by Kendall Ananyi, co-founder of a Y-combinator-backed tech startup, Tizeti. Udoagwu wrote of Ananyi, “he was supposed to be mentoring me. He visited MEST as a guest speaker. My friendship (with Kendall Ananyi) had been purely platonic and professional until that afternoon. I could barely assimilate and react that this was happening because I had put the guy on a pedestal.”  
  
In my conversation with Udoagwu, she told me that she was moved to speak up about her sexual assault after hearing the news about the brutal rape and murder of Uwaila Vera Omozuwa. Omozuwa, a 22-year-old student at the University of Benin had gone to her local church to study when her life was cut short in a brutal attack, which took place this month. In addition, Udoagwu also watched a video of an assault posted to social media.  
  
The video, which was shared by the twitter user @danielfaitharts, showed his sister being sexually harassed for four hours in a public transportation bus as she traveled from Abuja to Akure by road. The predator in the video can be seen touching the young woman’s thigh throughout the entire commute. The survivor of this sexual harassment informed other passengers about what she was experiencing and they told her to keep quiet. Daniel wrote: “This man molested my sister all the way from Abuja to Akure, she screamed and the people in the bus said she was overreacting, so she made this video.”  
  
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This young woman suffered the harassment in silence and for four hours. Her brother posted the video to twitter to ask the public’s help in finding the predator however to date, there is no known record of the predator being arrested. The Nigerian police force has also refused to follow up on the case. These two traumatic incidences led Udoagwu to speak out about her own abuse.  
  
Udoagwu points to the increasing number of sexual harassment and assault cases within Nigeria’s tech and business ecosystem and how this is partly responsible for why many women choose not to remain in tech or in the workforce.  
  
While women like Udoagwu have spoken out against the culture of silence, and while abuse in Nigeria remains rampant and justice remains elusive, a growing number of women in Nigeria are using social media to share experiences of their traumatic sexual assault and abuse.  
  
One of such stories is that of Seyitan Babatayo. On June 3, Babatayo using her twitter account reported being invited to a party on December 30, 2018. After the party, Dapo Daniel Oyebanjo, a popular musician known as Dbanj, without her permission, gained access to her hotel room where he allegedly sexually assaulted her.  
  
Babatayo wrote: “I woke up and found Dbanj in my room. I asked him what he was doing in my room and he did not say a word. I went ahead to threaten him that I was going to shout and he said that if I screamed, I would leave the hotel naked; Dbanj raped me.” Oyebanjo allegedly gained access to her hotel room and raped her.  
  
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On the same day, my conversation with Udoagwu took place, I found out through twitter that Dbanj and his team had kidnapped, arrested, and unlawfully detained Seyitan Babatayo. Her phones were seized and her tweets about her sexual assault deleted; Dbanj and his team had taken over her twitter and instagram pages. I informed Udoagwu about Babatayo’s arrest and she said, “I am lucky that I am currently in Ghana and Kendall Ananyi is in Nigeria. Plus, there is the coronavirus. He is not coming to harm me here.”  
  
Those with power and influence often use bullying tactics and intimidation to further traumatize their victims. This sadly has become the norm in Nigerian society. Women like Udoagwu and Babatayo are able to use social media platforms like twitter to tell their stories.  
  
In Seyitan Babatayo’s case, a group of her peers, young Nigerian women on twitter, were able to raise over 1.6 million naira (about 4 thousand dollars) for her legal defense fund against D’Banj. Social media has played an important role in helping more women to break the silence that has long engulfed this patriarchal society women find themselves in.  
  
Indeed, certain incidences on social media trigger traumatic memories for survivors of sexual harassment and assault. It is important that survivors continue to seek psychosocial support and therapy. Also, there’s a price to pay when young Nigerian women speak out against their oppressors.  
  
For instance, Monica Osagie, the bold young woman, who recorded her abuser, Obafemi Awolowo University Professor, Richard Akindele stated: “The last job interview I went for the guy asked if I was ‘the Monica Osagie’ and the next thing he said was ‘sorry ma, we do not need a whistle-blower!”  
  
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When empowered young women like Osagie, Babatayo and Udoagwu speak out against their abusers, they are often bullied, called names, kidnapped, arrested, and illegally detained by the Nigerian police force. These types of harsh responses to women who tell their stories are unacceptable. Those with power and influence use resources meant to help victims, like the police force, to further traumatize them. The voices of our women however, cannot be silenced. The voices of survivors must not be silenced. Women, regardless of their socioeconomic status, must continually be encouraged to speak up.  
  
In my conversation with Udoagwu, she said to me, “Many men think that because they do not kill and maim, or commit physical and visible acts of violence towards women, they believe that they have done nothing wrong or that they are still good people. But touching a woman without her consent, men publicly exposing themselves, making sexually suggestive jokes, excluding women from important conversations, are all forms of violence against women.”  
  
Let us continue to encourage each other to speak up and speak out. Let us stop cherry-picking the type of sexual assault victims to believe. Organisations like the Mirabel Rape Crisis Center, the Legislative Advocacy Coalition on Violence Against Women, the Dorothy Njemanze foundation, Women Advocates, Women at Risk International Foundation, Lolo Inc. Talks, North Normal, the Consent Workshop, Project Alert are focused on conversations and education around consent.  
  
These organisations also work with the legal system to seek justice for survivors of sexual assault and harassment. It has become even more imperative that we continue to support these women-led organizations. We must not relent in advocating for the rights of Nigerian women and girls. Let us continue to work together to end the crisis of violence against women and girls in Nigeria and throughout the world.  
  
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