COVID-19 fallout: Stakeholders bemoan rising SGBV, assault cases, unplanned pregnancies

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Just as Nigerians are trying to cope with the raging Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown measure announced by the Federal Government to curtail the spread, some stakeholders and gender activists have decried the rising cases of sexual assault, domestic violence meted against women and children as well as the increasing rate of conception and unplanned pregnancies.  
  
Coordinator of the Lagos State Domestic and Sexual Violence Response Team (DSVRT), Titilola Vivour-Adeniyi, revealed that since the lockdown started, the number of domestic violence cases they typically get in a day has shot up. “We are keeping data through our USSD channels, social media and dedicated numbers where people can report. Typically, we get about eight cases daily but just two days into the lockdown, it has gone up to almost 15 cases daily. What you have to understand is that victims are literally locked down with their abusers so it is not strange to see an increase in reporting. Ordinarily, victims would have had the escape of work, school, market and so on but now, there is nowhere for them to go; they are trapped.”  
  
Adeniyi revealed that though some of the cases were sexual assault, most were victims of domestic violence. “Asides people that report to us directly, we get some cases from doctors at the Family Health Centre who are mandated to report such cases to us. For survivors that need someone to talk to, we provide over-the-phone counseling and support. For those that need further intervention, we refer them to the Family Unit (FU) of the nearest police station.  
  
  
  
“We also provide online and phone legal advice and counseling seeing as the survivors cannot come in. We’re also employing conference calling to speak with couples together if one reports the other for abuse, so they can reach an agreement. If the abuser refuses to speak with us or see reason, we persuade the victim to leave the house and escalate to the police. We have also partnered with shelters now at this time that can house these women temporarily,” she divulged.  
  
Speaking on behalf of Development Communications (DevComs Network) and the Nigerian Urban Reproductive Health Initiative (NURHI II), Ajani Bless-me Oluwatobi pointed out that though it might look like Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) is the least of our worries in light of the Covid-19 outbreak, she said the Ebola experience showed that disease outbreaks increases the risk of women and girls to teenage and unplanned pregnancy, Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI), rape, gender-based and domestic violence.  
  
“The social distancing policy has made a lot of people including young people idle, lonely and vulnerable. Consequently, adolescent girls and vulnerable women end up in various compromising situations. For instance, a young girl that finds school as her safe space is trapped at home with her abusive uncle, neighbour or stepfather; that woman who intentionally spends most of her time in the market to avoid engaging in sexual activities with her husband especially for fear of pregnancy is now stuck with him at home, while young people in relationships are more likely to engage in consensual sexual activities this period. We should be concerned about high rate of conception and in turn, unplanned pregnancies at this period.  
  
  
  
“This is also a reminder to us that social distancing or staying at home is not license to perpetuate gender-based violence, rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment and domestic violence.  
  
Married and co-habiting couples that are not on a long-acting contraceptive or family planning method should take precaution. Young people should endeavour to abstain at this time and if you can’t, get emergency contraceptives. This is not a good time for unplanned pregnancies because the pressure of the pandemic on the health system will affect routine SRH services such as family planning, ante-natal, post-abortion care, immunization services and so on.”  
  
“In addition, government agencies should continue reiterating to the public the implications of perpetrating sexual, domestic and gender-based violence at this time. In addition, they should ensure availability of non-prescriptive SRH commodities such as condoms, emergency contraceptives pills (ECPs) and post-exposure prophylaxis at pharmacies across the country; so these services can easily be accessible to people in their neighborhood hence mitigating the possibilities of increased SRH issues after the pandemic. Finally but most importantly, we should endeavour to make good use of this period by engaging in productive self-development activities,” she added.