Countering Rape Culture in Nigeria

Date: 2018-07-15

Source: https://guardian.ng/life/countering-rape-culture-in-nigeria/

There are only a few things more horrifying than the accusation of rape.  
  
In recent years, social media has been awash with conversations revolving around this divisive topic, from accusations of revered celebrities to victims bravely narrating their experiences. These stories date back decades, revealing that rape is not a new phenomenon in Nigeria.  
  
The Violence Against Persons’ Prohibition (VAPP) Act states, “Rape is non-consensual penetration of a person’s vagina, anus, mouth or body parts with an object, penis or other body part.”  
  
Rape is born out of the deliberate or non-deliberate notion that the victim’s body is that of the perpetrator’s to take whenever they please.  
  
It is often used as a tool to punish, shame, debase, subdue or control the minority who do not conform to a perceived acceptable social norm, from “testing” virginity or “having a share” of an allegedly promiscuous woman to “curing” a homosexual.  
  
When a society fails to protect victims and punish perpetrators, then it iterates this claim. This, thereby, entrenches this form of sexual assault as a norm and pseudo-benefit only available to the perpetrators.  
  
Blurred lines  
  
While there may be a general understanding of the meaning of rape, the issue of consent is often a cause for debate.  
  
A study by Dr Neil Malamuth, a psychologist on sexual aggression at the University of California finds that perpetrators are aware that they engaged in sexual relations without consent but do not agree to the use of the word, rape.  
  
The University of Michigan Policy and Procedures on Student Sexual and Gender-based Misconduct and other Forms of Interpersonal Violence defines consent as “a clear and unambiguous agreement, expressed outwardly through mutually understandable words or actions, to engage in a particular activity.”  
  
Simply put, consent is given when someone agrees, gives permission or clearly says “yes” to sexual activity with another person. It is important to note that consent must be voluntarily given, should not be assumed and can be withdrawn at any point in time, even during sexual intercourse.  
  
In every sexual situation, one should never assume that consent is granted. If you are unsure, ask. Consent should not be assumed by body language, appearance, marriage, previous sexual activity, gender, silence, lack of response or incapacitation. The consumption of alcohol or use of other drugs can render a person incapable of giving consent.  
  
Violation of these rules of consent provide grounds for sexual assault.  
  
However, there seems to be an existing belief that when a woman says no, she really means yes but is playing hard to get. Propagated by both genders, social media has shown that this belief is predominant among the youths.  
  
This begs the questions: is saying no not enough? Does this statement require further justification and explanation?  
  
The culture of rape  
  
“Why did she visit him? What was she wearing? A big man like you got raped?”  
  
There are cultural practices that society engages in that excuse or otherwise tolerate sexual assault. These practices are counterproductive to eliminating sexual violence from our society, begging the questions about what rape culture really entails and how it presents itself.  
  
Emilie Buchwald, the author of Transforming a Rape Culture, notes that when society normalises sexualised violence, it accepts and creates rape culture.  
  
In rape culture, excuses are drawn up to “justify” sexual assault and unwanted advances, but no amount of revealing dressing or past sexual behaviour ever warrants or permits a man to help himself to sexually violating a woman.  
  
Rape culture is all around us, permeating our society at individual levels and in institutionalised, structured ways. This culture is enabled by but not limited to the objectification of women’s bodies, the blurred lines between sexual attraction and assault, the concealment of rape, social indifference to the plight of survivors and their family, victim-shaming, the blind trust towards family members and members of religious bodies and the weak legal framework that fails to deter repeat offenders.  
  
Theory of silence  
  
In a rape-tolerating society like Nigeria, blaming the victims of rape is commonplace, with victims often cast as the enabler of the act.  
  
This inevitably subjects some victims to silence, forcing them to face the burden alone. In some cases, they are simply not believed or threatened into silence.  
  
Social media has become a useful tool of engagement for survivors of different forms of assault to speak up. Hinging on its advantage as a platform for the #MeToo campaign, its advent has seen the heightened movement of people addressing issues that would have remained buried.  
  
[related ids=”965905,969833″]  
  
Following in this line, Nigerians on popular social media platforms have witnessed an outpour of rape allegations. Yet, social media is limited by its own strength. Accusations become their words against the defenders’, turning it into a battle for whose story sounds more convincing and is more empathic.  
  
But this applies to reality as much as social media.  
  
Statistically speaking  
  
In 2013, the Nigeria Police recorded 1,788 cases and 1,827 in 2015, with the numbers still on the rise. Of this number, there have only been 18 convicted rape cases.  
  
Since the establishment of the Lagos State Domestic and Sexual Violence Response Team (DSVRT), 1274 children between the ages of 2-9 have been raped while ages 18-45 ranks as the second highest with 1224. They also recorded 306 raped cases of women and 33 for men between the months of January to March 16. Founder of Mirabel Centre and Managing Partner of Partnership for Justice Itoro Eze-Anaba states that an average of 90 cases a month are reported.  
  
Activists believe that the crime is grossly underreported owing largely to the aforementioned culture of silence and some perpetrators being relatives.  
  
Amaka (alias), a school teacher, told Guardian Life that one of her students, a six-year-old, had revealed that her father was always putting his hands into her “wee-wee”. Amaka thought she was doing a good job when she informed the mother of the student. Her fight came to an end when the mother of the child shut her up for attempting to destroy her marriage and withdrew her child.  
  
The NOI Polls reveal that 33% of victims admitted that the perpetrators were family relatives and neighbours, 49% knew children between the ages of seven and 12 who were raped, 78% reported the case to the Police, but the cases were not acted upon.  
  
Yet the law is clear on rape.  
  
[ad]  
  
Facing the Law  
  
Under the Criminal Code, the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPPA) of 2015, and Child Right Act, rapists are sentenced to life imprisonment, attempted rape gets up to 14 years imprisonment and gang rape, a minimum of 20 years. Moreso, the Penal code sentences rape perpetrators to up to 14 years and seven years for gross indecency.  
  
VAPPA also states that a 12-year-old found guilty of rape can be sentenced to 14 years imprisonment.  
  
Although the law gives room for justice for victims of rape, it is clear about what it doesn’t consider to be rape, like marital rape. According to the Lagos State Criminal Law, a legally married man cannot rape his wife unless she has proof of violence.  
  
“The justice system places the burden of proving rape on the survivor and the police refusing to take action, instead give suggestions that the parties should settle,” said Eze-Anaba.  
  
In Africa, five to 15 percent of females report a forced or coerced sexual experience. Statistics have it that 1 in 5 women and 1 in 71 men have reported experiencing rape.  
  
Dr Habeebah Lawan, a medical doctor in the AIDS Prevention Initiative (APIN), noted that rape cases are reported to tertiary hospitals about 2-3 times a week. But she states that there are no rape kits readily available in public health centres forcing personnel to makeshift kits.  
  
Only three in every 1,000 sexual assaults worldwide result in a conviction and, of that number, only three percent of rapists ever serve a day in jail. These numbers do not take into account the cases that go unreported and lead to other damaging assaults like rape or even murder. No one can rationally call this an acceptable level of service to sexual assault survivors. It is instead a profound failing.  
  
Getting help  
  
Sexual violence negatively affects a victim’s physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health. A 2013 analysis by the World Health Organisation reported that “women who had been physically or sexually abused were 1.5 times more likely to have a sexually transmitted infection.” In Lagos, 429 of 652 women with HIV are sexual violence victims.  
  
These forms of violence can lead to depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, sleep difficulties, eating disorders, emotional distress and suicide attempts.  
  
Tunde (alias) was in JSS 1 when the family’s help raped him for the first time. He claims not to know what he was doing but it became a routine and soon he was an expert. A secret he has never told his family, he argues that it might be the reason he is addicted to sex.  
  
Sexual violence will and does shatter families, destroy communities through stigma, shame, displacement and rejection.  
  
Now what?  
  
It is time for activists to take the conversations out of conference rooms and billboards into homes, schools, offices, churches, hospitals and markets. These are the places where we will find survivors, parents, potential victims, potential perpetrators and perpetrators of rape.  
  
Dr Itoro asserts that the Lagos State is committed to addressing rape cases with its establishment of Domestic and Sexual Violence Response Team (DSVRT) via \*08137960048 or \*6820#\*  
  
We need to do away with this system that espouses the idea of woman as a possession and develop instead a society where ethical sexuality is promoted and supported.  
  
Take a cue from the Kenyan No Means No Worldwide initiative, which worked to provide empowerment-defence training to citizens to reduce and prohibit sexual harassment, recording a 51% decrease in the incidence of rape among trainees.  
  
According to Lawan, “Setting aside a unit or body to handle victims of rape, domestic violence and the like will improve waiting time, privacy and overall care. Seeing a psychologist should also be mandatory for these patients.”  
  
Social leaders must also be conscious and deliberate in order to avoid perpetuating rape culture but rather enforce equality measures and anti-sexual harassment language, actions and environments in the workplace, via mediums and society.  
  
Rape, in any form, is a serious matter that should neither be joked about nor treated lightly.  
  
But what happens to those wrongly accused of rape?  
  
[ad unit=2]