Damaging effects of unreported gender-based violence

Date: 2017-08-25

Source: https://guardian.ng/features/damaging-effects-of-unreported-gender-based-violence/

While volunteering for community development project in South Africa as a young adult, I was super excited to learn of the many facets of the culture and of community building. As the sunset, on one of my walks home to my dormitory on the campus of Stellenbosch University from the local grocery store, I encountered a verbally aggressive individual. Luckily for me the sun was still up, luckily for me it was an open street with other pedestrians walking by and cars busy on the streets, luckily for me there was no way he could have acted on his verbal threat, and luckily for me, I walked away untouched, unscathed and only realized what was said to me after a few more paces. But what if I wasn’t so lucky, and what if this happened on a pitch-dark alley or a low-lit street?  
  
For some, verbal assault can be just as damaging as physical assault. For many gender-based violence victims, the occurrence of physical assault happened despite their attire, their attitude or physical appearance. These three factors are usually inconsistent when analysing survivors of assault. Reporting gender-based violence crimes go a long way (in the form of medical interventions, studies and preventions) in addressing the harmful dangers that could lead to sexual assault or that are caused by sexual assault.  
  
Even as cases go un-reported, the number of violent occurrences persist. Factors associated with increased risk of perpetration of violence include, attitudes accepting of violence and gender inequality, in addition to other factors such as; low education, child maltreatment or exposure to violence in the family, harmful use of alcohol, which are usually associated with domestic cases of violence.  
  
  
  
Poor reportage results in even lesser accountability. It is important to document and measure violence and its consequences as this is central to understanding the magnitude and nature of the problem at a global level, and to initiating action. It is estimated that only 28 per cent of rape cases are reported.  
  
It should also be noted, the alarming rate at which sexual assault is experienced by adolescences. In a five-year study on sexual violence cases in Lagos, adolescents (ages 10–19 years) accounted for the majority (44.6%) of the cases; followed by children less than 10 years accounting for 39% of cases. In this study, girls less than 19 years accounted for 83.6% of cases seen! In Ibadan, a study showed that 15% of young females reported forced penetrative sexual experience, while 13.8% prevalence rate was found in female Maiduguri students. Lagos and Ibadan are Nigeria’s first and third most populated cities respectively.  
  
In spite of this prevalence, and a criminal code that recommends life imprisonment for rape convicts and 14 years for attempted rape, only 18 individuals have been convicted in Nigeria’s legal history. This information was made public by Evans Ufeli, a human rights lawyer. In a country with a population of nearly 180 million citizens, and only 18 convictions since independence, this poses a dangerous risk to Nigeria’s could-be victims.  
  
In the majority of countries where data is available, less than 40 per cent of the women who experience violence seek help of any sort. And of those who do, majority of them look to family and friends while very few involve formal institutions and mechanisms, such as police and health services. In fact, less than 10 per cent of women who seek help for a violent experience approach the police.  
  
Strict consequences including, but not limited to, imprisonment and registration of convicted sex offenders, should be adopted and fully implemented so that the perpetrators are adequately punished.  
  
Also, there must be tougher legislature addressing sexual violence. This may include making rape a capital offence with protracted prison terms as advocated by the African Civil Society against Rape in Nigeria. The whole idea is to make the prospect of sexual assault to a would-be perpetrator, as unattractive as possible.  
  
Because of the socio-cultural subordination of women, gender based violence will and does shatter families, destroys communities through stigma, shame, displacement and rejection. It is therefore imperative that all cases be reported for justice and due process.