Let’s talk about the difference between sexual violence, sexual assault, rape and sexual harassment

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The “ASK WARIF” Column is a monthly interactive section that will educate, motivate and encourage as we discuss all issues surrounding gender based violence and share some of our experiences working at the WARIF Rape Crisis Centre. All questions submitted will be answered by our team of experts and qualified personnel which include physicians, counsellors, lawyers, law enforcement and everyday women who have had personal encounters with rape and sexual violence and are willing to share their stories in the hope that it helps prevent the next woman from experiencing the same.  
  
Sexual Violence is the general term used to describe any kind of unwanted sexual act or attempt directed towards an individual, irrespective of the relationship to the victim. It includes activities such as rape, child sexual abuse, sexual assault, sexual harassment, female genital mutilation and others.  
  
Sexual Assault is a form of sexual violence. It is an act in which a person purposefully touches another in a sexual way without the person’s consent. It usually involves the use of coercion or physical force in which the victim is engaged in sexual acts against their will.  
  
Rape is a form of sexual assault. It can be described as forced sexual intercourse without consent. It involves penetration which could be vaginal, anal or oral. This penetration may be with a body part or an object. It is an act of physical, psychological and emotional violation in the form of a sexual act, inflicted on someone without their consent.  
  
Sexual Harassment is any kind of unwelcome or inappropriate sexual behaviour in form sexual remarks, physical advances or request for sexual favours. This could be carried out in any social situation, inclusive of the workplace. Sexual harassment can be subtle and easily undermined.  
  
Here are some examples of acts of sexual harassment:  
  
• Unwanted deliberate touching as well as making inappropriate sexual innuendos and comments  
  
• Unwanted pressure for sexual favours in school or the work place  
  
• Exposing body parts that make others feel uncomfortable  
  
• Sexually suggestive sounds or gestures such as sucking noises, winks or pelvic thrusts or ogling or leering at a woman’s breasts or a the groin area of a man or woman.  
  
• Sending letters, notes, texts, telephone calls or materials of sexual nature  
  
• Stalking a person  
  
If at any point in time someone acted in a way that came across as inappropriate or made you feel uncomfortable, you were most likely sexually harassed. It’s not so much about the other person’s intentions, but more about how their actions make you feel.  
  
It’s important also to note that all the described various acts are not typically perpetrated by a stranger, more often trusted individuals such as a family member, family friend or a teacher is the identified perpetrator. Survivors and perpetrators can be both male and female and areas considered safe spaces such as your home or school is usually place of abuse.  
  
Sexual violence has become prevalent in our society, today and unfortunately a lot of survivors are afraid to speak up because of the stigma attached to it. Society would rather blame the survivor than blame the perpetrator who is supposed to take the sole responsibility of the decision made to violate another.  
  
This silence can take a toll on the survivor and negatively affect their mental health and overall well-being. This may linger on for as long as nothing is done about it. It is in response to this challenge that Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs) like the WARIF Centre are established to help survivors find their voices and offer them medical, psychosocial, shelter and legal support as they embark on their healing journey.  
  
You may have found yourself in situations either in the past or currently that you were or are not sure counted or count as a form of sexual violence. It’s okay to ask questions if you need to and it is never too late to seek professional help from organizations like WARIF.  
  
If you have been raped or you know someone who has, please visit us at The WARIF Centre – 6, Turton Street, off Thorburn Avenue, Sabo, Yaba or call our 24-hour confidential helpline on 08092100009.