Renewed crusade against rape … Surmounting the obstacles

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There has been a spike in the incidences of rape in the country lately. Within a period of 152 days, precisely from January 1 to May 31, 2020, Nigeria recorded 717 rape cases. The Inspector-General of Police, Mohammed Adamu, who made the disclosure recently while briefing journalists on the menace, said 799 suspects were arrested in connection with the crimes, 631 cases conclusively investigated and charged to court while 52 cases were still being investigated.  
  
Nevertheless, the arrests and prosecutions seem not to have served as a deterrent to rapists. Many of them are still on the prowl as a number of cases have been reported this month. Civil society organisations and human rights activists had reacted to the reports by staging peaceful protests especially in Lagos and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja, to compel the authorities to take drastic steps to curb the menace. The Nigeria Governors’ Forum responded to the protests by declaring a state of emergency on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence after a virtual meeting on June 11.  
  
But would that solve the problem? Or is there something fundamental the government is supposed to do that it has not done to curtail the sad stories of young girls and women being assaulted and raped across Nigeria. What role does the family and the entire society have to play to push back the rape surge?  
  
  
  
Presently, there are at least five legal provisions that provide access to justice for rape victims in Nigeria. There is the Criminal Code, applicable in all the southern states; the Penal Code, applicable in all the northern states and the Criminal Laws of Lagos, applicable only in Lagos State. There is equally the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act, (VAPP) applicable only in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) and the Child Rights Act, applicable in the states that have domesticated it. Why have these laws failed to curb the rape menace?  
  
Speaking with The Guardian, Founder of HEIR Women Development, Anuli Aniebo Ola-Olaniyi, blamed the increasing cases of rape partly on non-implementation of existing laws as well as the incompetence of law enforcement agents.  
  
Her words: “Violence against women is increasing daily and while we have laws to help amplify the judicial process, most of them are either under-implemented or those that are supposed to implement them are not aware of how to implement them.  
  
“There are so many barriers on the way to accessing justice for survivors. For example, the VAPP Act has provisions in it that can help process and address Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV), which is why there has been increased advocacy for states that have refused to implement it to domesticate it. Another barrier is that many people don’t know what help is available. A lot of us are not well educated; a lot of people don’t know their rights even amongst the elites. Imagine how worse it could be in rural areas.  
  
“Also, law enforcement agents are another huge barrier to accessing justice. The investigation usually doesn’t follow due process. Our society also presents a barrier with the stigmatisation of survivors; the culture of shame as well as blaming the woman for being beaten/abused. Also, religion is another huge barrier. Women undergoing abuse are advised to pray out the demon and so on. Religious leaders must begin to point survivors in the direction of how to access justice instead of advising them to endure and pray.” She urged the media to help in calling out states and governors that are yet to implement these laws, educate people on their rights and how they can access justice.  
  
“SGBV, as well as femicide and crimes against women, have always been around us but the reason we are seeing it more now is because more women are speaking up and the social media is helping to amplify it far and wide. We need to re-educate men and women because a lot of what is out there is wrong information. Also, we need to ensure our women are financially independent as finance is a major tool abusers use to keep their victims subjugated. The police needs to be totally revamped. We cannot continue with the mindset of our present police force.  
  
“Also, as a family, we need to begin to get rid of stigma and shame. Don’t tell your daughter, ‘as you have married, don’t come back home again, I have turned your room into an office’ and when your daughter comes to complain of SGBV in any form, don’t tell her to bear it in silence,” she added. She also advocated the creation of special courts that would deal exclusively with SGBV matters, fully funded gender desks in every police station and provision of rape kits in every government hospital.  
  
“There has to be a definite referral pathway with trained specialists to deal with these cases. These state actors should be trained, funded and have the right equipment and resources to pursue a case from the start to the end. Without all these factors in place, government is just paying lip service to ending SGBV especially against women,” she noted.  
  
  
  
Director, Lagos State DNA and Forensic Centre, Dr Richard Somiari, while speaking on the role of forensics in curbing SGBV said a thousand laws against rape that are not being implemented properly were useless.  
  
“To improve SGBV response, we must standardise education, equipment, resources and training for responders, establish a dedicated Lagos State Crime Scene Investigation Unit (LA-CSI) and enact laws that will allow the collection of DNA for entry into the Lagos State offender DNA database.  
  
“Rape is a crime that needs evidence to prosecute and without evidence of any kind, a rapist can go scot-free. We need to improve response time, get survivors help and implement existing laws. If we have a thousand laws to deal with SGBV, they are useless if they are not implemented appropriately to deal with offenders. If more offenders, no matter how highly placed are made to face the music, this will serve as deterrent to others,” Somiari said. On her part, a criminal justice psychologist, Dr. Princess Olufemi-Kayode, urged government at all levels in the country to muster the political will to ensure justice for rape victims.  
  
She bemoaned the conviction rate of rapists, saying it was too low. She, however, noted that many advanced countries were also grappling with the same problem but stressed that the affected countries had been improving their legal systems to ensure that rapists do not evade justice. Her words: “Low conviction rate is general across borders. It feels like because we are in Nigeria, we think it is peculiar to us. The advanced worlds have better systems that they are improving upon. But we are not improving on ours and whatever efforts we are making are insignificant compared to the problem we have.  
  
“What we see most times is the lack of information to know that we are not the only ones in this menace. We probably see it as, why is it too loud here? The same way, other countries think they are talking too much about rape. So, it is global. That we are talking about it so much does not mean we are not trying; it just means that we need to get our acts right and be better. All we need is the political will to push forward.”  
  
The child rights activist and executive director, Media Concern Initiative, also stressed that the role of the police was key in achieving justice for rape victims. According to her, the Gender Unit, the Family Support Unit (only in Lagos state) and Human Rights Desks of the police have been sensitised to handle gender-based violence issues.She, however, regretted that the problem of shortage of personnel in the force was affecting the operations of the units.  
  
“When you are sitting on the Traffic Desk, you can be moved to take over the Gender Desk and when you have been trained in gender issues, you can be moved from there to take over the Front Desk.  
  
“Last year, over 3,000 police officers that were sitting on very strategic positions and had been trained, not even by the government, were transferred out of Lagos State. That was a major setback. And it is unlike the military where if you are in the kitchen, medical field, whatever area, whenever you are redeployed, you remain in the same field. That is the problem we have with the police; it hasn’t changed and we hope it will change,” she added. She noted that while there are adequate laws to handle rape cases, the route to getting justice was too demanding.  
  
“A victim will have to go through the police, hospital (either federal or state) and certain places depending on where you are. However, not all Gender Desks in the police stations are trained, so when some situations arise, they mess it up. Generally, the police need to train its personnel. What is however key is having the political will to make things to be faster. If at the federal level they have made rape an issue they are interested in, we will not be here today,” she said.  
  
  
  
‘Why I Told Nobody When I Was Raped At 15’  
  
By Maria Diamond  
  
A 35-year-old lady (name withheld), who was sexually violated when she was 15 years old, has stated that there would be no hiding place for rapists in the country with the current push for justice for rape victims instead of stigmatising them. The rape victim, who shared her story with The Guardian, said she had lived with the agony of the incident for 20 years without telling anyone for the fear of being stigmatised.  
  
The victim however blamed herself for the fate that befell her while she was a secondary school student, revealing that the experience has made her to feel unsafe while alone with any man to the extent that she divorced after only three years in marriage.  
  
Recounting her experience, she said: “I was 15 years old when I was raped. I was then in SS2 class in a secondary school in Surulere, Lagos. On my way to school one morning, this young man walked up to me and started a conversation with me. He identified himself as Tunde and told me that he was a student of the University of Lagos, Akoka (UNILAG).  
  
“I guess I was fascinated by the idea of him being an undergraduate of my dream university. So, I warmed up to him and started asking him questions about the possibility of gaining admission immediately after graduating from secondary school. Although I was well informed about staying away from strangers, especially men, Tunde was not just good looking, he had a calm and decent demeanor that would strike anyone who sees him as responsible. So he walked me all the way to my school and turned back. He promised to look out for me on my way home at the spot he met me and I was happy.  
  
“For me, it meant another good talk about UNILAG, especially after he had promised to help me to secure admission into the university. I didn’t know better; I just believed that as a student of UNILAG he could get me in.  
  
“After school that day I looked forward to seeing him. I looked out for him and there he was at the same spot around Pako Aguda bus stop. He asked if I wanted to know where he lived so we can talk better on my admission. I agreed on the condition that I wouldn’t go in with him. HHHHe agreed and took me to his house. On getting there, he pointed to where he lived and I turned back and left for home immediately. He promised to see me on my way to school the next day. He did, and repeated the routine for days while assuring me every single time that he would help me gain admission into the university immediately after my secondary school and I was happy  
  
“But on a Friday morning he met me at the same spot and persuaded me to come to his house after school since we were going to close earlier than the other school days. He said he wanted to show me some of the documents he would use to start my admission process and that I needed to fill a form. He said something about being related to some professors in the school and that the earlier he started the processing, the better since I only had one year left before graduation. He advised that I should go home first after school that day to change my uniform to mufti and then come over to his house. I was overwhelmed with joy. He read my mood and saw that he had got me with the UNILAG deal.  
  
“He also asked me not to tell anyone, even my parents about him or his admission plans for me until everything works out and I naively agreed. That day, I barely waited for school to be over to rush home and take off my uniform.  
  
“My parents were not always around. They went out in the morning and came back very late at night. I had siblings who were also caught up in their own world, so no one really checked the other. So I didn’t have any difficulty going to his place.  
  
“However, on my way to his house I became uncomfortable with the entire idea of going there. So, I decided to insist on staying outside his house without going in with him. As a matter of fact something in me kept telling me to go back home on my way. But my desire to gain admission into the great UNILAG was stronger than my cold feet. I had big dreams for my life and I was so eager to start achieving them early enough without setbacks or delay.  
  
“On getting there I didn’t see him outside as he had promised. I asked after him from a young man I met outside his house and he pointed to his apartment. I requested that the young man help call him out, but he said I should go and knock. He muttered something about being in a haste to get somewhere. Well, I didn’t have a mobile phone then, so I went to knock and Tunde opened and asked me to come in. I refused and insisted that we stay outside. But he persuaded me and said it wouldn’t be appropriate to bring all the documents outside. Well, I was already at his door and I just entered, and that was it.  
  
“He shut the door immediately, locked it and pulled out the key. I sensed danger but it was too late to take any action as he pounced on me immediately. He started touching me while I was still standing. I rushed to the door and tried to open it but it was locked.  
  
“I knew I was in trouble and started hitting the door and shouting for help. I had thought that the guy who showed me his door would come to my rescue but no one did. Surprisingly, he allowed me to hit the door for a while before telling me that no one would dare come to his door to rescue me.  
  
“He then shoved me off the door, hit me so hard and asked me to take off my clothes myself before he tore them off and I would go home naked. I refused and kept shouting for help and he hit me harder that I fell flat on the ground. At some point while I was screaming for help, I heard a male voice calling out for him to open the door. I suspected it was the same guy who showed me his apartment, but he shouted at the guy to go away. It then struck me that sexual abuse was something he does regularly and there was no way out for me.  
  
  
  
“He started to tear my clothes. At that point I stopped shouting and begged him to stop tearing my clothes apart but to allow me to take them off myself. It was an Ankara long skirt and top. I intentionally picked the native outfit to cover me up completely to avoid showing off any part of my body but that was a futile effort.  
  
“I took off the clothes myself and kept begging him to have mercy on me that I am a virgin and didn’t want to lose my virginity unmarried. He laughed at me, dragged me to the bed, hit me so hard on my face till everything became blurry. He then brought out a knife and told me that he would hurt me if I didn’t keep quiet. That made me to give up my struggle with him. I kept quiet and watched him pin me down and took my virginity with brutality. His demeanor and energy was so terrifying that I was almost certain I wouldn’t leave the place alive.  
  
“When he decided he was done, he started to push me out of the house without my clothes and I knelt down to beg him to let me put on my clothes. I rushed to wear them and ran out of the house. I couldn’t go home straight; I was in excruciating pain all over, in and out. So, I looked for a quiet corner to breathe. That was when I realised my clothes were worn upside down. I quickly went to a face-me-I-face-you house nearby and requested to use their bathroom. A lady who noticed the bruises on my face and body took me to their bathroom where I wore my clothes correctly. She asked me what happened and I just fell into her arms and started crying. I couldn’t utter a word. I just cried, and I think she understood. She asked all the questions and I nodded without a word. She advised me to take antibiotics immediately to avoid getting pregnant and recommended one for me. She gave me N100 to buy the drug. The thought of pregnancy terrified me and I left the place to a nearby chemist for the drug. I asked for water and took the drug there. I hung around the street till it was a bit dark before going home. That was 20-years ago.  
  
“When I got home, had my bath and went straight to bed before my parents got back home. I cried all night. The next day was Saturday, so I stayed back in bed until my parents left for work; they worked every day. My siblings saw my bruises and wanted to know what happened to me. I lied to them that I slipped and fell on my face. They didn’t care so much and I took care of myself with the drug and hid my bruises from my parents until it started to fade.”  
  
She continued: “The Tunde who abused me was a demon, completely different from the calm Tunde that walked me to school every day. There is nothing normal about forcefully having carnal knowledge of someone. Most of the men who rape girls and women have dual personality. The human version you see, and the evil version that engulfs them to be inhuman.  
  
  
  
“Anytime they crave a girl or woman, the demon in them takes over and it doesn’t matter who the girl or woman is, how old she is or the relationship they have with her. They would do anything and everything, even if they have to harm her, just to violate her body.”  
  
On how she felt after the incident, the victim said she became depressed and withdrawn. “I started hating men and up till now, I still can’t pull myself to a safe place with any man. I got married briefly and divorced after three years,” she added.  
  
Asked why she didn’t tell her parents or teachers then, she said she was afraid of being blamed and consequently punished. “They would have blamed me. They were extreme disciplinarians. I blamed myself for a long time too. I felt responsible for what happened to me. So telling anyone would have brought shame to me and my family, and the stigma would have been worse than the abuse itself,” she said. According to her, she decided to share the story now because of the worsening cases of rape in the country.  
  
“Sharing this experience is the most difficult thing I have had to do my whole life, but with the rape stories all over the place lately, I just couldn’t shake off the urge. I want people to know that rape is not just happening now; it has been there for ages. But back then we had a more conservative society where societal stigmatisation rather than demand for justice was the fate of rape victims. So rape victims who survived the brutality usually kept quiet to minimise the damage with the hope that God avenges them. I can’t tell how many times I bitterly placed curses on Tunde. I never took that route to school again, I never wore that dress again and I never saw him again,” she said.