Stakeholders proffer solutions to rising cases of rape in Nigeria

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THE figure was very mind-boggling- 764 cases of rape clients, who came out to report in Mirabel Centre, Lagos in the last two years- with 74.9 per cent of them minors. Yet only two convictions were recorded.  
  
It is a new trend of rape pattern in a society that seems to create both societal and legal incentives for perpetrators. This was revealed on Wednesday during a conference on rape and sexual violence organized in Lagos by the Mirabel Centre, an initiative of Partnership For Justice with support from Justice for All Programme (J4A) of the Department For International Development (DFID) opened on July 1, 2013, as a Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) to provide holistic and high quality medical and psychological services to survivors of sexual assault and rape.  
  
It was an avenue to evaluate the rising scourge of rape in the society with a view to nipping the cankerworm to the bud, as well as to commemorate the second anniversary of Mirabel Centre, the first sexual assault referral centre in Nigeria and second in Africa.  
  
Participants drawn from the health, justice, police, media, entertainment and educational sector spoke on the theme: “Are You Man Enough to Say No to Rape?” and came up with cutting-edge solution to tackle the societal malaise.  
  
The managing partner of Partnership for Justice, promoters of Mirabel Centre, Mrs. Itoro Eze-Anaba, said that 764 survivors were attended to by the centre.  
  
To her, this was a big issue since, “for every one case, there were 100 others not reported.” While calling for an integrated and non- institutional approach to fighting the malaise, she noted that the earliest age of the victims was a10-month-old baby and the oldest client, a 70-year-old woman.  
  
The derivable from the cases handled in the last two years, according to Mrs. Eze-Anaba, was that perpetrators are not strangers but acquaintances and people known to survivors, while the society is reluctant to believe that rape can happen to adults.  
  
Other lessons from the centre, Eze-Anaba said, was that persons with disabilities are not only more vulnerable to rape, but could not easily report incidents of rape and that when clients are properly treated, they are better placed to move on with their lives.  
  
But the chair, Governing Council, National Human Rights Commission, Abuja, Prof Chidi Odinkalu was piqued by the percentage of convictions recorded in the last two years and the legal distinction placed on rape and defilement of minors, which he said is now serving as incentives for perpetrators, since they attract different penalties.  
  
While rape attracts a maximum of life imprisonment, defilement, he said, attracts a maximum of seven years imprisonment under our law. Citing the statistics reeled out by Mirabel Centre to buttress his point, Prof Odinkalu wondered why the society is not prosecuting men who feel comfortable raping children.  
  
He lamented that such distinctions suggest that the society is tolerating rape because young people cannot get a future if they are being raped by adults who are not even prosecuted. “A society that creates a distinction between defilement of minors and rape is not ready to say no to rape.” “The system has created legal incentive and we must say no to mass rape of our children as well as stop charging perpetrators with defilement of minor but as rape,” he added.  
  
For the Lagos State governor, Mr. Akinwumi Ambode, who was represented by the State’s Solicitor -General and Permanent Secretary, Lagos State Ministry of Justice, Mr. Lawal Pedro (SAN) the rampancy and increment in degrees of rape and defilement of minors were of great concern to the state.  
  
The state, he said, has evolved several programmes like the Domestic and Sexual Violence Response Team (DSVRT), Mandatory Occurrence Reporting (MOR) Scheme, and social enlightenment programmes to curb the scourge in the state.  
  
While urging Nigerians to vigilant regarding what is happening in the society, the solicitor-general condemned sections of the Sexual Offences Bill recently passed by the National Assembly as being obnoxious and inconsistent, urging President Mohammadu Buhari not to assent the bill as it is capable of providing defence for perpetrators.  
  
According to him: “Section 7(5) of the proposed Bill says, ‘It is a defence to a charge of defilement of children if it is proved that such child deceived the accused person into believing he or she was over the age of 18 at the time of alleged commission of offence’. “This provision is inconsistent with the interest and welfare of children and is contrary to the Child’s Right Act 2003 and Child’s Rights Law of Lagos, 2007,” he said.  
  
For a child protection specialist, Mr. Taiwo Akinlami, the fight against rape should start from personal commitment by building child protection intelligence. Akinlami, a victim of sexual assault as a child, also stressed the need for child protection measures in schools and public places since, according to him, “the impact of sexual assault can be eternal.”