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A colleague of mine asked on Facebook if rape is an African problem. The question generated an interesting discussion characteristic of social media ‘intellectuals’. Expectedly, many of the discussants only directed their indignation at the symptom, leaving the cause unruffled. Others devoted their outrage to flogging the wrong causes. Away from their positions, I am not afraid to answer that question emphatically that rape is an African problem. However, that does not tell the whole story: rape is an African problem the same way it is a European or an Asian problem. It is a human problem, although different human societies have made varying degrees of progress in solving the problem.  
  
Some African countries are sadly just attaining, in the process of their sociocultural evolution, the consciousness of rape as a problem. Nigeria is one of those countries.  
  
All along rape has been an acceptable way of asserting masculinity in different African societies, though to varying degrees. Given the current reality of gender relations on the continent, can African countries find an enduring solution to rape?  
  
My two-part hypothesis is that (a) the value society places on women/the female gender is directly proportional to its recognition of women’s agency, and (b) a society’s recognition of women’s agency is directly proportional to its attitude to rape as a crime against it (the society), not just against women. If society places a great value on women, it will recognise women as free, independent moral agents who can make a decision about their bodies and criminalises any violation of the woman’s body. Conversely, if society places little or no value on women, it will consider women as appendages to men, nudes them of their power of agency (or rather, socializes them into unconscious acceptance of lack of agency), and legitimate violation of their bodies.  
  
If the hypothesis holds, no amount of campaign can end the menace of rape. Even social media outrage will achieve little.  
  
Making new laws on rape or increasing the weight of punishment for rape will do little to change the conditions of the generations of men who are socialized to rape as a right and of women socialised to being raped as a duty, or even as an honour. The reason is that rape is an outcome of the value (or lack of it) a society places on women/the female gender.  
  
Rape is not just an act, it is a way of life that enjoys that tacit approval of the society. That is why solving the problem of rape requires reviewing the value our cultures place on women. This is not a pet project for apologists of some ideologies or for some propagandist politicians. It is beyond individual and group outrages no matter how honest. It cannot be outsourced to NGOs or social media influencers.  
  
Looking to the government and its agencies will be but a misplaced optimism. Ending rape is an endeavour that will question our treasured ways of life and histories and expose some of our heroes as villains that they truly are/were. As a result, it will not happen until a critical mass of society is on board.  
  
To end rape, we need to evolve a culture which accepts the complete and unconditional humanness of women. This does not mean putting women on the pedestal where men have always stood. In our history men have never really occupied any truly enviable or dignifying position. It means reconceptualising what being human means to us. If we do this, we will not only free women from the sub-human position the society places them, we will also rescue men from the indignity of being the abuser and oppressor, the inhuman status the society confers on them.  
  
  
  
To achieve this, we will have to take the matter to the privacy of our homes and to the public squares of our societies. We have to decriminalise and democratise the inconvenient discussions about sex and gender. The deliberation must take place in every unit of the society, be it home, school, religious centres, or the parliament.  
  
It is only out of such deliberations that a truly human position on gender relations can emerge. That truly human position will require that we accept for a creed the equality of all genders and live by it without compromising the uniqueness of each gender and the respect the uniqueness deserves.  
  
To truly live by the creed, we will have to discard aspects of our personal and societal lives that demean women and make a monster of men. It will require also that we raise our children to place on others, irrespective of gender, the values we want them to place on themselves to ensure that they grow up not only gender literate but also rape literate.  
  
When the revolution begins to happen, we will see evidence in our arts and performances, and in our literature and the media, among others. We will see meaningful new laws made to reflect the heartbeats of the awakened society. We will see emerge in our societies new traditions and conventions, those that treat as objectionable objectification and dehumanisation of women. It will be evident even in the most mundane aspects of our lives. Our language use will bear visible imprints of the value shift in our societal (re)positioning of the female gender. Then, our societies will outgrow all lazy excuses for perpetuating beastly ways of gratifying human instinct for sexual satisfaction, apologies to some animals that are decent in negotiating sex.  
  
Isn’t it shocking that the incidence of rape in some developed countries is extremely high? Rape statistics are just a click away. Countries that glorify rape in their media, arts, and literature cannot, in reality, solve the problem of rape. That is why this revolution must not confuse civilization with development as the world now understands it.  
  
At the centre of the revolution that will end rape must be a civilization that is characterised by new ways of life which allow everyone to thrive, irrespective of gender.  
  
Although poverty of data casts a grim shadow over the true situation of rape in many African countries, we cannot for solution look to countries that have the best of rape laws and yet yearly record outrageous rape statistics. Going their way may mean multiplying laws and scapegoating the few rapists caught while leaving intact the systems and the structures that feed rape into a monster. The battle against rape is a battle against ourselves and it will be led by no one other than us.  
  
Finally, the cost of ending rape is very high. Any meaningful solution to the problem of rape will hurt our religions as we practise them. It will wound the sense of pride we have in our history and heritage. It will nude women of the privileges of societal disempowerment and drag men off their illusion of gender superiority.  
  
Some of our wise sayings will become outright foolish and our comedy and sense of humour will become largely impoverished. It will no longer be business as usual for soft sells. Most importantly, what is meant to love and be loved will metamorphose beyond recognition. Who we have always been will have to give way to who we need to be, for rape is a problem of being, deeply rooted in who we are. In view of its staggering cost, is ending rape a change for which we are ready? How thoughtfully Africans answer the question will determine how hopeful we should be that any African country will end rape any time soon and ditto for all peoples and nations.  
  
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