The amazons behind #ArewaMeToo, the hashtag against sexual abuse in North Nigeria

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Amongst the dust hazy skies and rolling green hills of Northern Nigeria lies a dark secret. This secret is shrouded in a lifetime’s worth of silence, that, thanks to social media may finally be coming to an end.  
  
Violence against women is a traditional long standing practice in the North. According to Relief Web reported incidents of violence against women in Northern Nigeria rose by over 30% in 2014 rising from 2013. In Kano and Kaduna intra-communal violence remained prevalent in November and December, including ten reports of incidents relating to child sex abuse, murder, domestic violence and forced child marriages. Kano has consistently witnessed high levels of gender-based violence.  
  
“It started as a hashtag I coined in support for Khadijah Lawal, but it wasn’t until after a week that the rest of Nigeria picked up on it,” said Fakhriyyah Hashim, an Abuja-based entrepreneur and development worker.  
  
  
  
#ArewaMeToo, a branch off #MeToo, a movement that encourages sexual assault victims to speak out that’s sweeping through the world, began with Khadijah Lawal tweeting about the abuse she’d endured in a relationship. Fakhriyyah Hashim tweeted back in support using the hashtag.  
  
In less then a month, it gained traction with young women and men sharing their experiences. It took a life of its own a few months later as local chapters were set up in the cities of Kano, Maiduguri, Niger, Sokoto, and Zamfara. With a team made up of lawyers, PR agents and radio personalities, the movement is only bound to grow.  
  
“I read horrific narrations of victims and a few people reached out to me through my direct message, narrating their ordeals with sexual violence,” said Hassana Maina, a spoken word poet and advocate against sexual abuse in the North.  
  
  
  
Maina currently runs the Maiduguri chapter of #ArewaMeToo. She first encountered the #ArewaMeToo Movement on her Twitter timeline in February 2019. She was inspired to join and in less than a few weeks she was actively campaigning in Maiduguri and visiting schools.  
  
Northern Nigeria is known for its conservative norms, some of which studies have shown to be retrogressive. For victims of sexual assault, maintaining silence in the face possibly being shamed by a society with a pretentious air about sex seemed a good option.  
  
“This culture of shame and silence we have in the North is killing us,” Maina said. “Pretending these things do not happen will not make it disappear. I wanted people to talk about this, to talk about sex, about consent, about rape.”  
  
  
  
“A whole lot of people that want to pretend that the North is a place filled with morals and thus devoid of these ills,and when you decide to speak up, they silence you with shame.”  
  
While the main topic of #ArewaMeToo surround sexual assault and rape, another topic, that’s centre stage of the movement is causing growing concern, the use of Arewa as a brand has stirred controversy, the biggest complaint being it casts Northern Nigeria in a disturbing light but Hassana believes it’s a good thing.  
  
But Maryam Awaisu insisted the momentum gathered by #ArewaMeToo is justified. Herself a victim of sexual as a child, Awaisu said the prevailing silence about the sexual predatory behaviours, sometimes perpetrated by religious leaders, in the conservative region cannot be justified.  
  
  
  
“I was repeatedly abused as a kid, between the ages of 4 and 6 by two different soulless men; one was an Islamic teacher and the other, a relative,” Awaisu told The Guardian.  
  
  
  
“Abuse happens everywhere but the silence surrounding it in the North defies logic. In the North, you find that your family, friends, the police, society, and the courts will go out of their way to shut the victim up. It’s phenomenal that we are finally waking and speaking up.”  
  
Awaisu, a radio personality and a novelist, is considered the face of the movement. Her advocacy recently pitted her against the agents of the state. She was arrested in February by men of the notorious Special Anti-Robbery Squad of the Nigerian police.  
  
Her arrest, Amnesty International in Nigeria said, was in connection “to her involvement in seeking justice for victims of sexual abuse.”  
  
“This is clearly an effort to access the sensitive evidence she and other human rights defenders have been gathering to seek justice for victims of sexual violence,” said AI.  
  
While the #MeToo movement is mostly propagated by women, a male celebrity has been campaigning actively not only as a supporter but as a victim. Terry Crews, the Brooklyn 99 actor, came out publicly as a rape survivor to much derision and was blasted on Twitter, most notably by 50 Cent. Terry Crews’s experience shows the double standard society imposes on men and how toxic masculinity forces silence on male victims. Maryam is adamant that #ArewaMeToo includes both sexes.  
  
“I remember people asking us if #ArewaMeToo is for girls only and we said a resounding no. ‘Arewa’ means ‘North’ and the hashtag shares stories of abuse in the North that happened to basically anyone. The ripple effect of courage and the pain of holding on to devastating secrets are why some brave men found the strength to share their horrific encounters too.”  
  
But while men specifically face discrimination, most rape victims, in general, have a hard time being believed. Nigeria only has 18 recorded cases of rape resulting in imprisonment since its founding. With rape being so difficult to prove, debates around rape often turn into pageants, with whoever has public favour gaining support. Maryam argues that there are legal ways to prove rape, even without evidence of the incident.  
  
“For victims, I think the level of proof needed for these accusations to be ‘proven’ are extreme and unfair, since no abuser ever tells you,” Awaisu said. “Hey, heads up, I’ll rape you at this location and time, please prepare to gather evidence and a few witnesses. There should be other considerations like motive. If a judge cannot establish that many different ladies who have never met had a motive to just pick one person and lie about him being an abuser, knowing the damage that does to the reputation of the victim (more than the abuser), then the accused should NOT be released to the world.”  
  
  
  
How can we be so unfazed about our daughters being ‘collateral’ damage while we seek impossible proof? What kind of nation does that make us? False accusations are rare even in the West, let alone in Nigeria, where the victims stand to lose everything for just being victims.”  
  
In the face of her arrest, Maryam stands tall. She plans to continue sweeping change through Northern society and raise women from second class citizens to fully fledged human beings.  
  
Maina agrees that gender equality in the region will improve the wellbeing of Northern women, she insists naming and shaming perpetrators of sexual violence may serve as a potential deterrent.  
  
“We need to have a register where the names of perpetrators will be entered,” she said.  
  
While Hashim believes perpetrators should be punished severely, for her the movement’s priority is it’s victims.  
  
“Our greatest priority is providing psychosocial support to victims of abuse that have broken the silence on their stories. In doing this, we have partnered with Stand to End Rape (S.T.E.R) and we are establishing a line of support from other prominent NGOs.  
  
Beyond helping the victims, Hashim said the movement will be working with different organisations to push for the implementation of laws and policies that can reduce instances of sexual violence, particularly rape.  
  
“We also aim to push the Nigerian Government to implement policies already embedded in the child right act and also ensure the domestication of the law in the majority of the Northern Nigerian states that have refused to implement it. We are also working on creating a synergy between Nigeria’s educational institutions to embed child protection studies in their curriculum and establish a mechanism to prevent sexual violence on school grounds.”  
  
But while the movement is gaining followers on Twitter, the reality is more difficult. With Maryam’s arrest in February, the campaigners know they are on a dangerous path and in conflict against those who want the impunity to continue to fester. But Hashim insists that they are unafraid.  
  
“#ArewaMeToo is just the beginning,” Awaisu says.