Wanted: A national coalition against rape

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What has become a serious source of worry to many Nigerians is the dehumanising, wicked and heartless cases of rape of minors, girls, ladies and women in the country. Hardly any day passes by without cases of sexual molestation, violence and crime. Rape, the forceful canal knowledge usually of a female, is a serious calamity that can befall any female. Why is there an upsurge in rape cases in the nation?  
  
  
  
A gory statistics, according to the Nigeria Police Force, shows that the nation recorded 1,827 rape cases in 2015; 1,959 cases in 2014; and 1,788 in 2013. Furthermore, NOIPolls, country-specific polling services in the West African region, done in partnership with Gallup, United States of America, revealed that four in 10; that is 36 per cent of adult Nigerians, claimed that most often, the alleged offenders involved in child rape were close family relatives and neighbours; amounting to 33 per cent, as almost half; amounting to 49 per cent of those that personally know a victim alleged that they were usually children between seven and 12 years old; while 78 per cent of the respondents alleged that rape cases were reported without any deliberate effort being made by the police to investigate and prosecute the culprits.  
  
  
  
It is a common occurrence all over the world that girls, ladies and women are raped while boys and men are occasionally raped. Places where children are known to suffer sexual assault include India, South Africa, Zimbabwe, United Kingdom and the United States of America. Nigeria has now assumed a top position among nations with severe cases of rape. There are just too many examples in various parts of the country, to elucidate this ugly trend. What is disheartening is the increasing tide whereby most cases of rape being reported in Nigeria are associated with minors and underage children in their homes, schools and other public places.  
  
  
  
Perpetrators of these heinous acts are known to be directly or indirectly close to their victims, which make the attacks more troubling and agonising. They are usually brothers, uncles, cousins, fathers, step-fathers and even, grandfathers. At times, I terribly feel ashamed of myself when I read of men raping minors, girls, ladies and women! Apart from the physical pain and bodily harm, victims of sexual assault are psychologically tortured, demoralised and traumatised. Not only that, they are vulnerable to unwanted pregnancies, sexually-transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS infection and untimely death.  
  
  
  
The fate of a typical vulnerable African female child – rape, exploitation, cruelty, servitude and misery – in the hands of those who are supposed to be her confidant, role-model, pillar of support and hope is vividly illustrated in the play authored by the Ghanaian celebrated writer, Amma Darko. While no specific reasons can be adduced for this, a review of the literature indicates that females are raped to satisfy sexual urge, to settle personal scores or a form of vendetta, to perform certain traditional rites and as a result of the negative effects of drugs, among others. Some females have been blamed for seducing their male counterparts. Whatever may be the case, there is no rational justification for rape.  
  
  
  
The stigma on rape victims often haunt them for the rest of their lives. It is a sad experience that cannot be forgotten so easily. What makes matters worse is the fact that perpetrators of this crime are not apprehended and if ever caught, they are hardly convicted because the Nigerian criminal justice system places the burden of proof on the prosecutors; which is usually difficult to establish. The case of minors is even more complex because of the usual threat handed down to them by the rapists that they should never divulge what had transpired. This makes it more difficult to deal decisively with the problem. The reality is that if we are ever going to make a head-way in combating this common plague, there is the need to adopt a new strategy since it not possible to get new results while doing things the old way.  
  
  
  
A cursory look at how previous cases of rape were handled indicates that both pro-active and retro-active approaches should wholistically be deployed, to successfully wage war against rape. This time around, a National Coalition Against Rape (NCAR) should be formed with immediate effect that would work together to fight a common enemy, as virtually everyone knows of one raped victim or another. The coalition should be duly registered and be made up of victims of rape, lawyers, journalists, students, non-governmental organisations, wives of top government functionaries and other interested members of the public throughout Nigeria. A double-sword approach should be adopted to curb the rape scourge. A variety of pro-active measures would entail massive public awareness and education on the ills of rape on our daughters, wives and mothers.  
  
  
  
Apart from rallies, protests and demonstrations that often take place in various parts of the country, corporate organisations, individuals and philanthropists should start talking, come together and sponsor a soap opera that would feature prominent Nigerian artistes that would be broadcast on major television and radio stations across the country for a number of weeks. This measure, I am sure would go a long way in touching the hearts of perpetrators, to desist from this evil.  
  
Apart from the moral suasion effect, the play should teach parents on how to prevent their children and wards from being vulnerable, how to properly report cases, how police officers should behave when dealing with rape victims, how to successfully initiate and prosecute the criminal trial of rape allegations.  
  
  
  
Without prejudice, I am aware that some non-governmental organisations are already doing some good work on ending sexual violence against our women. This idea being proposed is different in the following ways from what they have been doing. Firstly, it is a national cause. Hence, no single individual or corporate organisation is taking the sole credit for the initiative. Secondly, it is going to have more impact on the people considering the number of people that would be involved as artistes and officials as well as the huge funding that is going to be involved.  
  
Thirdly, it would have dual functionality by serving as corporate social responsibility project for some organisations, charity work for some individuals while proceeds from advertisements and sponsorships can be used to rehabilitate rape victims, sustain the transmission/broadcast of the soap opera and conduct research on rape. Eminent and trusted personalities, across the country should manage the coalition under whatever nomenclature that is agreed upon.  
  
  
  
Religious institutions should do more and continue to reach out to their adherents during sermons, outreaches and societies on why boys and men should desist from raping minors, girls and women. The national assembly and the various state houses of assembly should ensure the passage of bills that would make it possible to practically conclude rape trials in courts and would ensure that severe punishment are meted out to perpetrators, irrespective of their status. Considering the great turmoil that rape victims go through, arising from their awful experience, convicts deserve stiffer penalties such as life imprisonment. We have to start doing something differently. People that are genuinely passionate about ending this scourge should come out now and make this initiative a reality by forming the national coalition against rape and tame this national embarrassment.  
  
  
  
Kupoluyi wrote from Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta (FUNAAB).