Will #ChurchToo Erode Rape Culture In Nigeria?

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A year ago, The Guardian Life published a cover story titled Countering Rape Culture In Nigeria. This article was a result of the normalised rape culture in Nigeria and the #MeToo campaign which would inspire the #ArewaToo campaign and cause the conversation to be on the lips of many in the coming months.  
  
Citing the Lagos State Domestic and Sexual Violence Response Team (DSVRT), we wrote that 1,274 children between the ages of 2-9 have been raped. In addition, those between the ages 18-45 rank as the second-highest with 1,224.  
  
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The DSVRT also recorded 306 rape cases of women and 33 for men between the months of January to March 16 in 2018.  
  
A year later, Busola Dakolo would tell RED Media’s Chude Jideonwo that she was raped by the controversial pastor of Commonwealth of Zion Assembly (COZA), Biodun Fatoyinbo. Her confession would give rise to a #ChurchToo hashtag and an uprising in states where the branches of the church are located. As if waiting for an outlet, Nigerians in their numbers have recounted tales of how they were sexually assaulted when there were only children, with some making arrests and parents asking their children “questions that are unAfrican” on sexuality and rape.  
  
Her story has also revealed many’s disposition towards sexual assault, a term not found in the public lexicon until the late 19th century. Unlike when the #MeToo hashtag forcibly opened the ground for the conversation, it appears that the focus of Nigerians has shifted slightly from victim-blaming to rapist-shaming. Those who attempt to question the authenticity of the story are shut down with criticism and accusations of being a rape apologist. Religious bodies who remain mute are not left out.  
  
Even those who push religion and its message of repentance have also faced the brunt of anger from the public. “Go to jail and ask for forgiveness from there,” some scream.  
  
And there is a new significant development. The terms, ‘toxic masculinity’, ‘enabling behaviour’ and ‘consent’ are being understood with every action.  
  
More men and women have suddenly turned online and offline activists calling for the heads of anyone accused, while rape victims are finding courage and closure. It is this heightened and sensitive activism that engineered the protest against Idris Ebiloma, a man who raped a 4-year-old and was likely to be released from Kuje prison on Friday after spending less than three years there. Against this backdrop, the NOI Polls has revealed that 33% of victims admitted that the perpetrators were family relatives and neighbours, 49% knew children between the ages of seven and 12 who were raped, while 78% reported the case to the Police, but the cases were not acted upon.  
  
That the accused might be innocent is an inconceivable thought. “When two or three are gathered, the truth is established” has, instead, become the new justification.  
  
In spite of all of these arguments, there is a problem:  
  
Some of these recounted stories are a matter of “his word versus her word.” Following up closely are the false accusations and rape jokes that some have made during this period to garner attention to themselves.  
  
And those who hope that their cases will be taken up are quick to forget that Nigerians are a forgetful people. We have seen this film before. Screaming headlines and hashtags remind you that you must join to fight, an opinion against the general opinion and you are labelled an apologist to the average Nigerian. Another distracting story and headlines turn to whispers and as one of the accused recently told his victim, “even if you drag me on social media, within a week, everyone would forget,” leading up to the final stage: the “E-Go-Better” stage.  
  
Yet, we must count the pros as the right step in the right direction. Authorities who were once thought to be “touch not” are having their history stripped in the public domain and victims are finding their voices. The fierce protection of the girl-child is on the rise. Millennials and Generation Z are fighting for the protection of their bodies. Parents are finding it necessary to educate their children on sex education. Leaving children in the hands of supposed trusted ones is fast eroding. Those who thought that they were going to get away with it finally have their hearts in their mouths.