On Helen Paul and stigmatisation

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During her 2019 doctoral degree celebration at Lagos State University, Nigerian comedienne and singer, Helen Paul, surprised many by revealing that she was a product of rape. This disclosure prompted questions about her decision to share such a sensitive part of her life, earning admiration for her courage, considering the societal stigma surrounding children born out of wedlock, especially those resulting from rape.  
  
Fast forward to this year, Helen Paul revisited the circumstances of her birth. She shed light on her mother’s resilient struggles to raise her against all odds. It must be noted that individuals are rarely encouraged to openly discuss sensitive details of their lives on social media or other relatively public platforms, particularly when such details are not flattering at all. But Helen Paul took hers in stride, much to the admiration of many netizens. In revealing this part of her life, she notably maintained a calm and assured poise. Her demeanour basically seemed to direct a message to her doubters, saying, “Do you now see that I have succeeded, despite your belief that I wouldn’t amount to anything in life?”  
  
The society which Helen Paul was raised in is one where individuals born out of wedlock are labelled as “Omo ale,” a derogatory term which can loosely be translated as a bastard child. In the Yoruba community, it is strongly believed that such children may disrupt household peace and ultimately amount to nothing in life. This perspective even extends beyond Yoruba culture to those of other traditional African societies. In such societies, children born out of wedlock are often perceived as potential sources of worry to households, and nuisances to society at large. Unfortunately, Helen Paul faced discrimination from her uncles and aunties, who not only avoided her like a plague but also denied her opportunities, diminishing her chances of surviving life, let alone going on to thrive within it.  
  
Eventually, Helen Paul would prove her doubters wrong. After all, “Man no be God,” as it is often said. But how would those who gave her little chance of ever winning in life feel upon seeing her become a distinguished personality during family reunions? In the midst of Helen’s story is the resilience of her mother who bore the pregnancy, despite the stigma, shame, and humiliation attached to it. On its own, rape is a traumatic experience. There are records of rape victims, mostly women, who have gone on to commit suicide, unable to withstand the trauma and shame of being violated. Others would choose to abort the foetus within them, as if doing so would enable them to move on and to heal.  
  
According to researchers, sexual violence survivors are at a greater risk of committing suicide. This statement has been proven true time and time again, with numerous instances of rape victims ending their lives just because they couldn’t bear the shame and social stigma. One such case is that of 16-year-old Olayemi Agbeloba, who tragically took her own life after being raped by her boss’ husband early this year.  
  
In most cases, the parents of these victims would be too concerned about seeking justice and even vengeance for their children, rather than prioritizing their mental health. As much as justice is important, the well-being of whomever justice is being sought for is doubly important, particularly when considering the psychological damage caused by rape, the sort devastating enough to invite suicide as the only way out. This is all the more reason why parents and relatives of victims, and society at large, should always put the mental health of rape victims first, while ensuring that perpetrators are brought to book.  
  
Although we often encourage victims of sexual abuse to speak up, sometimes, when they do, we unfairly blame them for dressing somewhat or behaving in a particular manner, as if doing otherwise would have saved them from the animalistic urges of a rapist. You would hear statements like, “Why did you dress half-naked?” or “Why did you go to his house at such a time of the night?” It is insensitive statements like these that have emboldened potential rapists by serving as logical justifications for the act itself.  
  
That being said, there are numerous lessons to draw from the story of Helen Paul¼s life and that of her mother. One significant lesson stems from Helen¼s mother, who, when faced with the opportunity to succumb to despair like other victims, chose not to take that path. She could have chosen suicide or abortion to escape her terrible situation, but chose to be resilient. Her determination in the face of adversity should serve as an inspiring example for other victims of sexual violence. It is heartening to see that Helen Paul¼s perseverance has paid off; the once stigmatized “Omo ale” is now celebrated as an “Omo akanda.” This brings to mind the other lesson out of all this, which is that no human being born out of the misfortune of rape should be treated unfairly and denied the normalcy of childhood and growth. Nobody imagined that Helen Paul, a girl-child born from incredible pain and despair, would one day become the cornerstone of her family. This is all the more reason why we should end the senseless stigmatization of people who had no control over the circumstances surrounding their birth, and instead cultivate the art of tolerance, compassion and understanding.  
  
In commemorating this year’s “16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence”, let us not only advocate for justice for victims of gender-based violence, but also sensitize the public concerning the mental health of survivors, in an effort to end once and for all the stigmatization of children who deserve much more from life and society than just being victims.  
  
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