Rape in the house of God

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Rape in the house of God  
  
Often, they scream, cry and fight to free themselves from what they consider an absurdity from their religious leaders; at other times, they just lay at the receiving end, believing somehow that what they’re being put through may just be right. After all, these are men of God; they know it all and can do no wrong. Medinat Kanabe and Dorcas Egede appraise the rising cases of sexual abuse and rape being perpetrated by pastors and Muslim clerics against young people in the society.  
  
Although they teach the ‘proper’ human conduct and respect for God, and enjoy societal respect for their ‘piety;’ clergymen, whether of the Muslim faith or Christian – by the actions of a few – are increasingly casting doubts in the mind of their followers and diminishing their value in society.  
  
A recent report emanating from the Lagos State government revealed that over 700 rape, sexual abuse, assault and defilement cases are pending across courts in Lagos State. Of this figure, 80 per cent were abused in their infant stage. The report also revealed that the majority of these cases were perpetrated by people in trust positions, with families and religious leaders occupying polar positions.  
  
With cases and news assaulting the public sensibility almost on a daily basis, from newspaper headlines in recent times, this might not be an outlandish claim. Lagos Police PRO, Ms Dolapo Badmos may have put it succinctly, when she said, “The concern the command is having at the moment is of people, who claim to be religious leaders. They hide under the fact that they are religious leaders to perpetrate domestic violence in the state.”  
  
To underline its concern, the Lagos State Government, led by no other person than the number one citizen of the state, Gov. Akinwunmi Ambode, recently led an ‘All Male Walk’ campaign to sensitise the public on the need to tackle the unwholesome trend in the society.  
  
But why religious leaders? Are the cases really on the increase?  
  
Reported cases involving pastors  
  
One example is of 31-year-old pastor Olabode Sunday, who allegedly raped a job seeker on a church altar during vigil, only to tell her that by the act, her prayers had been answered by God.  
  
The incident which happened in Ilorin, Kwara State, shocked residents of Tanke area, where the church is located. The victim, Funke (other names withheld), 25, who had just concluded her National youth’s service went to the pastor for prayers to pave the way for her to get a job, but midway into the vigil, the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) pastor allegedly forced himself on the hapless girl and raped her.  
  
Sunday, who was remorseful afterwards, blamed the devil for his action. His outraged church members said the incident was unfortunate, saying by choosing the altar of all places to perpetrate his satanic act, he had dented the image of the church.  
  
In Edo State, another pastor, of the Pentecostal sect, allegedly raped a 12-year-old choir member of his church at Afuda-Uromi, Esan North East Local Government Area.  
  
The little girl (name withheld) had gone to church for choir rehearsals, but while awaiting other choir members, the pastor, who is also founder of the church, called her into his office and carried her on his laps. Thereafter, she said, he began to suck her breast and dip his finger into her private part before raping her. The incident caused her to bleed from her private part, as a result of injuries sustained. But when accosted, the pastor told her father that he was only carrying out deliverance on the victim.  
  
In Ibadan, Pastor Isaiah Ojo, founder Dayspring Family Chapel, Egbeda area, Ibadan, allegedly took a seven-year-old daughter of his friend and fellow pastor, Bidemi (not real name), laid her on the church altar, and proceeded to have carnal knowledge of her.  
  
According to the report published by a national newspaper (not The Nation), the incident took place on Monday, May 9, 2016, but the little girl bled for almost a week, as she was said to still be bleeding by the 13th day of that month.  
  
In a bizarre attempt to defend himself, the pastor said “On Monday May 9, I was in my church premises when she came with her brother. The girl went to lie on the rug on the altar and told her brother that her private part was itching, asking him to come and lay on her. They used to play on the rug before then.  
  
“I went near them to ask what was wrong with her. I had to use my hand to help her scratch her private part. After that, the girl said: “Daddy Dayspring, come and lay on me also. When I moved nearer, I could not do anything with her; I did not insert my penis in her vagina.  
  
“What happened next was that I brought my penis out but I could not penetrate her because her vagina was tight. My intention was to touch her, not to damage her. When I saw that her vagina was very tight, I withdrew my penis and left. There was no blood at that time. I don’t know how blood came out of her.”  
  
In Akwa Ibom State, a 60-year-old pastor, who doubled as a traditional healer, Udo Job was arrested for raping a 14-year-old daughter of one of his patients.  
  
The girl had gone to visit her sick father in Job’s care, when he lured her into his inner chamber and forcibly defiled her, after sending her mother to the market.  
  
In Awka, Anambra State, yet another pastor, of a Pentecostal church, Jesus Miracle Ministries, is on the run after he sexually assaulted a 13-year-old boy, allegedly.  
  
According to a source, the pastor, who is said to be gay, was told by a native doctor that he would be cured of his homosexuality, if he slept with a male teen.  
  
Narrating his ordeal, the victim (Abuchi) said the incident took place after a vigil service. The boy who hails from Ebonyi State said, “The pastor approached me after the vigil and asked me to stay back. I told the pastor that I wanted to go home since the church activities had ended but he said I must wait till dawn.  
  
“When I insisted, he rubbed a substance on my eyes which made me sleep. When I woke up, I noticed that my trousers were torn, and my anus was damp. I began to cry, as I was feeling pains in my anus. The pastor said I should stop crying, that he would give me money. I rejected the money offer and went home and told my people what happened,” he said.  
  
In Anambra State, another pastor was nabbed for raping a 13-year-old girl during the church’s night vigil.  
  
The pastor, with a new generation Pentecostal church, was identified as Nzube Ohuama. The young victim had gone with her parents to the church for the monthly vigil, when the pastor lured her into a private room attached to the church and raped her.  
  
It was also reported that Ohuama had earlier prophesied to the girl’s parents three days before the incident that she was being tormented by an evil spirit, hence the need for a special deliverance prayer.  
  
Muslim Clerics not left out  
  
40-year-old Islamic cleric, Abdullah Omobolaji reportedly took advantage of a teenager, Idowu (not real name), having sex with her several times between November 2014 and March 2015, when the act was discovered by the girl’s mother.  
  
The cleric, who has since been arrested, was said to have raped her in his consultation house on Bakare Lane, Agege.  
  
According to a newspaper report, the cleric lived in Abule Egba, but had a room apartment on Bakare Lane, where he received clients for spiritual help.  
  
Report said that Omobolaji also beat the girl’s mother up, when she confronted him.  
  
Speaking of her ordeal to the Punch, the victim said she could not muster the courage to tell anyone about her experience because Alfa had threatened that she would die if she did.  
  
According to the victim, “It started in November, 2014 when Alfa Abdullahi called me and said I should always come to meet him if I needed anything, since my dad was dead and my mum was unable to cater for all my needs.  
  
“Later, he told me that he had seen a vision, adding that a man had placed an evil mark on me. He asked me to rinse my hand with cold water, which he put on fire. When the water finally boiled and I brought it down, I saw two cowries and a ring in the water. Alfa said that was what the man put inside my body and he (Alfa) was the only man that could remove the evil mark from me. He said he must sleep with me three times; and that was how he slept with me.  
  
“He said I must never tell anyone what happened between us, and that if I did, I would die like my father did a few years back.”  
  
Idowu said a few days afterwards, the suspect called her and asked her to buy an egg. He was alleged to have instructed the victim to rub her body with the egg.  
  
“Then he said I should break it. I found seven needles in the egg. Alfa then said he would have to sleep with me seven times. I pleaded with him not to since he only recently slept with me three times, but he insisted,” she added.  
  
The teenage girl told newsmen that the Islamic cleric after sleeping with her seven more times, continued to pressure her for more sex.  
  
However, a relative of the suspect, who did not reveal his name, said there was no truth in the allegation, adding that Alfa and the victim were dating.  
  
In Ogun State, a 24-year-old Dubai returnee was rescued from the custody of an Islamic cleric five months after he allegedly abducted her from the Murtala Muhammed Airport, Lagos.  
  
The suspect, Olalekan Anifowoshe, aka Alfa, was said to have kept the victim, Simbiat (not real name), in his rented apartment in the Atan-Ota area of Ogun State and allegedly had repeated sex with her during the period.  
  
The suspect, who is said to be married with three children, resided in Surulere but kept Simbiat in Atan.  
  
The woman was said to have consulted him in 2013 for help over a spiritual attack before travelling to Dubai, United Arab Emirates. She explained that after receiving a call from Alfa on January 11, 2016, instructing her to come back to Nigeria, she lost her senses and returned to the country immediately.  
  
Simbiat told journalists that Alfa had slept with her for at least 10 times, adding that anytime she demanded to see her parents, he would beat her up and boast that she had reached her “final destination.”  
  
Explaining how she met ‘Alfa,’ She said, “Sometime in 2013, I had a dream that a man made love to me. A friend introduced me to him and he gave me a piece of white cloth with Arabic inscriptions to cover my body whenever I wanted to sleep, which I used. Some months later, I travelled to Dubai.  
  
“On January 11, he called me on the telephone to come home. It was like a spell. I packed my things and arrived in Lagos the following day without telling my parents. He picked me at the airport and took me to his apartment in the Aboru. After some time, he relocated me to Atan-Ota, where he was eventually arrested. He beat me anyhow and slept with me.”  
  
The suspect allegedly owned up to the allegations in his statement to the police, promising to refund the money. He said “It is true I cast a spell on her to come back to Nigeria. She was living with me and I slept with her occasionally….”  
  
Another case involving an Islamic cleric is that of a 42-year-old man, Wasiu Lawal, who raped a 38-year-old woman on the pretext of helping her spiritually.  
  
The accused, who claimed to be a pastor, native doctor and a Muslim cleric (alfa), forcefully had sexual intercourse with the woman under the guise of “praying” for her.  
  
On her part, the woman said she did not know how she ended up sleeping in the man’s house till the next day. She said the next day, she narrated the story to her husband, who reported the matter at Ikorodu police station, which led to Lawal’s arrest.  
  
It was discovered that the accused used one room for pastoral work, the second room to consult as an herbalist and the third one for Islamic consultations.  
  
Human Rights Activists speak  
  
Reacting to the trend, Itoro Eze-Anaba, founder, Mirabel Sexual Assault and Referral Centre, in a chat with The Nation, said “I think pastors, imams and all those religious persons are also part of the society, and they wield certain level of influence on these worshippers, so they tend to exploit them.”  
  
She noted that this exploitation is further fuelled by the peculiarity of our society, “where we are taught not to challenge authority. For instance, a clergy man tells you that God has ordained his sperm to make you pregnant, and you believe it? It’s crazy!”  
  
Eze-Anaba said “rape is rape, whether it is perpetrated by a gang of robbers, an older sibling, uncle, neighbour, street urchin, imam or pastor. Someone once shared with me how she was raped by a bishop. She did not even know how to go about the matter. How was she to say that this ‘respected man of God’ raped her?”  
  
Eze-Anaba said it is difficult for rape victims of spiritual leaders to report their violations, adding that the reason is not far-fetched. “She might even get victimised just for talking about it. Like I said, these are also a reflection of what goes on in the larger society. It is easier not to believe such stories, and much easier to keep quiet and not talk about it, especially when an adult is involved. But if it’s a child, there’s this outrage, and everybody is horrified.”  
  
Asked if the centre has handled any such case in recent times, Eze-Anaba’s response was an emphatic “Yes.”  
  
She continued, “We have had such cases where the choirmasters, pastors, those people in charge of the church building, like the Catholic Church, abused female members of the church. Actually, in a recent incident, it was the Catholic Church that took the step to report. We have a lot of them that are being abused.”  
  
But are the cases really of manipulations or consensus? Eze-Anaba said: “They know what they are doing. A rapist grooms his victims and knows the best time to carry out his evil deed. That’s why 90 percent of survivors know their rapists. They make the plan over time and look for the opportunity to do it. Rape doesn’t just happen overnight.”  
  
Speaking on the increased cases of rape in the media in recent times, she said it is now more in the news because more victims are now coming forward and reporters are doing their job. “For us, we’d rather say there is an increase in reporting rape cases. And then there’s also more awareness and more people are beginning to speak up. People are beginning to have confidence in the system, and are therefore talking more about it.”  
  
On how the tide can be stemmed, the rights activist said, “Rape flourishes in silence. A rapist would often threaten his victims. For instance, he can tell a child, ‘If you say anything to anybody, your mother or father will die.’ The child then keeps quiet because she’s afraid for her parents. But the minute that child speaks up, the abuse ends. So, we need to break the silence, we need to begin to talk about it, we need to shout at the top of our voices. If you shout, the rapist runs. You see, a rapist will go after a child that is quiet, vulnerable. He will hardly go after a child that talks because he is afraid she will tell it to the whole world. But he’s comfortable going after the one that is quiet, the bookworm, the nice girl, the one that is withdrawn and keeps to herself; the one that just does what she’s asked to do by an adult without asking questions. That kind of child is easily silenced.”  
  
Apart from breaking the silence, Eze-Anaba said “Parents need to teach their children, both boys and girls, about sexuality, sexual abuse and rape. They need to teach the girl child to know that there are people out there that can bring harm to them, including their brother or his friends. They also need to teach their male children to respect women, that they are human beings with rights, and this, beginning with his sister.  
  
The Mirabel Foundation works with the police in ensuring the prosecution of perpetrators; but Eze-Anaba laments the slow prosecution process. “Prosecution is slow actually because it takes some time for the police to complete their investigation, before sending it to the EPP for advice. The people will now respond, it will now go to court. But by and large, we also have clients whose cases have been successfully heard within six months.  
  
Speaking on the huge following of these pastors even after they have been convicted of sexual offences, the Mirabel founder said, “If a pastor that’s supposed to teach you about God now turns to a rapist, I don’t need to teach you what to do. It’s obvious that that man is a criminal, and I see no reason why you should listen to a criminal. If you know your pastor is raping members of the church, and you don’t report the matter to the appropriate authorities, then you become an accomplice to the man. A lot of worshippers are in denial. They are ready to defend their clergy men to the last. They accuse the rape victims of being the ones who manipulated or seduced those so called men of God.”  
  
Bose Ironsi of Women Rights and Health Project (WRAHP) on her part, believes that clergymen who take advantage of their followers, lack spirituality. She said if they are truly spiritual, they would not be involved in such crimes. She also believes that people place too much trust in fellow men.  
  
“In a sane world, we should trust our clergy men, but unfortunately happenings around us are dictating otherwise. People should not trust easily especially when it comes to issues of that nature. But it’s becoming so disheartening. If a mother can be raped, what happens to innocent children?”  
  
Speaking with so much disgust in her voice and expression, Ironsi said, “Unfortunately, we have so many people who wear the garb of religion, look pious on the outside, but are all rotten within.”  
  
To the parents, Ironsi said, “We need to raise our children to understand some of these things that are happening. Some mothers still feel very shy to discuss these things with their children, both male and female. Many parents know how to tell the girls not to have sex and get pregnant, but find it very difficult to tell the boy not to have sex or get the girls pregnant. And there’s something about a girl being a virgin, but the boy can be wayward.”  
  
Ironsi strongly believes that adults who sexually assault young people or even female adults do so because of what she termed, power control. “It’s also about power control. It is the desire to control people. It’s just like you see a policeman with a gun. He has power and wants to intimidate you. So also is this pastor or religious person, who has been given that power to preside over a particular number of people, so he wants to influence them. These are the issues.”  
  
Ironsi has a word for mothers; “I think mothers should be vigilant. Some of us are weak because of certain circumstances we find ourselves. Some of us are even coming from abuse, we were raped by our cousins, brothers, and so sometimes when some things are happening you just discover that you cannot really deal with it. But thank God people are now coming out to speak up. Pastors will tell you they will pray for you so that you can have a child. How can you pray for me? Is it by having sex with me?”  
  
Asked how clergymen who have not had their hands soiled can help the society, Ironsi said, “I think first of all, let the congregation be alert to what these bad clergy men are involved in; and let them not cover them up. Again, let those who are still responsible among them speak up against what the act. They shouldn’t keep quiet. They shouldn’t say because he’s an imam or a pastor, then they won’t speak against their fellow clergymen. That’s stupidity because it will rub off on all of them. Look at it, they’re talking about corruption now, and what they say is that Nigerians are corrupt. But is it every Nigerian that is corrupt? Is it not rubbing on every one?  
  
Should there be stiffer punishment? Ironsi sounded a little sceptical at first, but then said unequivocally that such ‘holy’ perpetrators of rape should be made to face the music. “People are doing all sorts in the name of God because they know that Nigerians are religious people. But when such cases are reported, the law should be allowed to take its course, no matter the calibre of the person involved, be he a pastor or an imam. If they are guilty, let them face the law.”  
  
Asked if the recent increase in sexual assaults on minors may not be a result of mental inbalance in the perpetrators, Ironsi responded rather irritated: “There’s no mental illness anything. Let anybody not try to hide under the cover of mental illness. It is not even the devil, because he’s sitting down quietly somewhere and they go and invite him. Like I told you earlier, it’s a show of power. They play on the vulnerability of these children because they know the children can’t resist them. If those children could resist them, then they won’t try it. You will discover that sometimes when they want to rape a child who can resist them, they are often more than one.”  
  
Ironsi finished off with a pointed message: “People should speak out against all that is wrong.”