DSVA tasks media in reporting SGBV, others

Date: 2024-04-16

Source: https://thenationonlineng.net/dsva-tasks-media-in-reporting-sgbv-others/

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As part of efforts towards curbing the menace of sexual and gender-based violence in the state, the Lagos State Domestic and Sexual Violence Agency (DSVA), has advocated a change in mindset and reportage of domestic and sexual violence crimes in the media. Anne Agbi and Elizabeth Eze report.  
  
Domestic and sexual violence, along with child abuse, are harrowing realities that plague societies worldwide, cutting across all demographics and leaving a trail of devastation in their wake. These forms of violence, often hidden behind closed doors, thrive in silence and secrecy, perpetuated by a culture of fear, shame, and impunity.  
  
The media plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions, influencing attitudes, and driving societal change. The power of the media to amplify voices, expose truths, and hold perpetrators accountable cannot be overstated.  
  
However, with this power comes a profound responsibility to report ethically, sensitively, and accurately.  
  
Change in mindset required  
  
It is against this backdrop that the Lagos State Domestic and Sexual Violence Agency (DSVA) has been advocating for a change in mindset and reportage of domestic and sexual violence and child abuse in the media in order to drive societal change.  
  
As part of the initiatives, a one-day training of media practitioners on Investigating and Reporting Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, held at the Lagos Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI), Ikeja, the DSVA is working to equip media practitioners with the tools and knowledge necessary to report on these issues in a more responsible and empathetic manner.  
  
Introduction to Sexual and Gender Based Violence by Atinuke Odukoya, Exploring Existing State Structures and Services for Survivors of Rape, Domestic Violence and Child Abuse by Damilare Adewusi and Best Practices for Reporting Sexual and Gender-Based Violence by Adejoke Ladenegan-Oginni were sessions delivered to the media practitioners at the event.  
  
Executive Secretary DSVA, Titilola Vivour-Adeniyi, in her opening remarks, emphasised the importance of a more gender-sensitive approach in reporting these crimes. She highlighted the need for responsible language use in headlines to convey deterrence rather than sensationalism.  
  
According to her, “There is a need to build the ability of the media to report Sexual and Gender-Based violence cases in a more gender-sensitive approach.  
  
“Emphasising the right choice of words used whilst reporting, especially for headlines, is of utmost importance in sending a deterrence message and not overly sensationalising the reporting of Domestic and Sexual violence cases in the press.”  
  
Vivour-Adeniyi reiterated the fact that the media serves as a powerful disseminator of information, and therefore, holds a crucial role in shaping perceptions, influencing attitudes, and catalysing societal change.  
  
She stressed the media’s pivotal role in shaping perceptions and catalysing societal change, emphasising the need for ethical journalism to uphold the dignity of survivors and foster empathy and accountability.  
  
“Media practitioners serve as the conduits through which stories are told, truths are uncovered, and voices are amplified. Yet, with this profound influence comes a weighty responsibility—a responsibility to uphold the principles of ethical journalism, to safeguard the dignity of survivors, and to foster a culture of empathy, understanding, and accountability.”  
  
Gender-sensitive and survivor-centered approach  
  
Central to this approach is the need for a more gender-sensitive and survivor-centered approach to reporting. This involves using the right choice of words, avoiding sensationalism, and respecting the dignity and privacy of survivors.  
  
By doing so, the media can help break the silence surrounding these issues, challenge harmful attitudes and stereotypes, and contribute to creating a culture of empathy, understanding, and accountability.  
  
The training also highlighted the need for media practitioners to choose their words carefully, especially in headlines, to avoid sensationalizing or trivialising these serious issues. Instead, they were encouraged to use language that conveys the gravity of the situation while respecting the dignity of those involved.  
  
It emphasised the need for ethical journalism practices to protect the dignity of survivors and promote empathy and accountability. Media professionals were urged to use their platforms responsibly, ensuring that reporting on such sensitive issues is done in a manner that is both factual and sensitive to the experiences of survivors.  
  
In addition to ethical reporting practices, the participants were taught to focus on the role of the media in driving societal change. By shining a light on these issues, the media can help raise awareness, challenge harmful stereotypes, and ultimately contribute to a culture of respect and equality.  
  
Furthermore, the speakers delved into the complexities of gender-based violence, shedding light on the various forms of abuse and the challenges faced by victims. Participants were equipped with a deeper understanding of these issues, enabling them to report more accurately and effectively.  
  
The training also served as a reminder of the media’s duty to society. As the primary source of information for many, the media has the power to influence attitudes and perceptions. By reporting on domestic and sexual violence and child abuse in a responsible.  
  
One of the key messages of the training was the importance of empathy in reporting. Media professionals were reminded that behind every story of abuse is a survivor who has experienced trauma. By approaching their reporting with empathy and sensitivity, journalists can help break the cycle of silence and stigma that often surrounds these issues.  
  
6,389 SGBV cases reported in 2023  
  
Head, Empowerment Unit of the DSVA, Tope Oyedija who spoke on the topic, “Understanding the relevant laws” disclosed that a total of 6,389 cases of domestic and sexual violence, as well as child abuse, were reported in 2023. Oyedjia, while shedding more light on the pervasive nature of these crimes in the society said 3,813 persons were involved sexual and domestic violence against adults, while 2,576 were related to defilement and child abuse.  
  
“The data reveals a stark gender disparity, with 90 per cent of adult victims being female and 10 per cent male. Among children, 54 per cent of the victims were female, while 46 per cent were male.  
  
“Specifically, the reported cases included 99 instances of rape, 2,649 cases of domestic violence, and three attempted assaults. Other reported cases included 263 instances of defilement, 136 cases of neglect, 20 cases of child labor, 35 cases of molestation, 153 cases of penetrative assault, and 1,953 cases of emotional maltreatment.  
  
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“Furthermore, the data highlights regional disparities, with five Local Government Areas (LGAs) standing out for their high number of reported cases. Alimosho recorded the highest number of cases, followed by Ikorodu (230), Kosofe (228), Oshodi (225), and Eti Osa (173).”  
  
Oyedija explained that the statistics paint a concerning picture of the prevalence of domestic and sexual violence, as well as child abuse, in our communities. According to her, the data, highlighting the disproportionate impact on women and children, underscores the urgent need for comprehensive measures to address these issues.  
  
She said the findings also emphasize the importance of ethical journalism in raising awareness and fostering accountability. By shining a spotlight on these issues, the media can play a crucial role in advocating for change and supporting survivors.  
  
Understanding relevant laws  
  
Oyedija emphasized the urgent need to eradicate sexual and domestic violence from the society as she stressed the importance of understanding relevant laws.  
  
“Sexual and Domestic Violence has to be totally rid off in our society and there are laws that are available for responding to these crimes with measures that await offenders which the media ought to highlight for the public to know.”  
  
Oyedija outlined some of the severe punishments for these offenses citing the laws of Lagos state she said: “As you know, section 260 of the Criminal Law of Lagos State, provides for life imprisonment for rape, and section 137 for defilement.”  
  
She highlighted the Lagos State government’s efforts in ensuring such cases are reported and advocated for, enabling people to seek the justice they deserve through existing laws while urging the public to report any incidents of domestic violence, as they are trying as an agency of the government to ensure that they get rid of any form of con-sectional domestic violence in the state.  
  
In underlining the government’s commitment to eliminating such crimes, she further emphasized its dedication to ensuring perpetrators of sexual and gender-based violence are held accountable.  
  
Media, a powerful shaper of society  
  
The Founder, Centre for Women’s Health and Information (CEWIN), Mrs. Atinuke Odukoya said in investigating and reporting on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV), journalist must choose their words carefully, because they are the primary socializers shaping people’s perceptions.  
  
Mrs. Odukoya stressed that journalists, beyond merely narrating stories, should actively promote and focus on preventive measures in their narratives.  
  
“The way we think shows in what we write. As a journalist, don’t make excuses for a crime but rather create prevention in the minds of the people out there”  
  
She encouraged the media to play a role in reshaping society and outlining a vision for a safer society where individuals can live freely, with minimal instances of violence, particularly SGBV.  
  
She emphasized the media’s power to influence norms, mindsets, and behaviors, stressing the importance of crafting messages that educate on prevention, identify unacceptable behavior, and recognize potential offenders.  
  
“What do we want the society to be? We want it to be safe for people to be able to live freely and reduce to the barest minimum, the rate of violence within our society particularly sexual and gender based violence.  
  
“I feel the media is very powerful to the extent that our message can change the norm, the mindset and attitude of the people but these messages need to be crafted in a way that people see the message of how to prevent, what they should not be doing, what is not acceptable, what is evil and how to identify evil potentials.”  
  
Recognizing the broad reach of the media, including social platforms that engage people of all ages, Mrs. Odukoya emphasized the media’s responsibility in shaping how SGBV issues are perceived. She stressed the dual purpose of prevention and enforcement of laws against such offenses.  
  
“I believe that the onus lies on us to bring to shape the way we relate to issues of sexual and gender based violence in such a way that we are not just preventing but we are also helping people see that it is punishable under the law.  
  
“The goal is to redefine societal norms, ensuring that youth, children, and adults alike learn to respect one another and view victims in a dignified light”, she said.  
  
Best Practices for Reporting SGBV  
  
DSVA Director of Public Affairs Mrs. Adejoke Ladenegan-Oginni said a man has no justification for committing sexual offenses such as rape or defilement.  
  
According to her, some may argue, ‘He raped her because she wore a skimpy dress,’ but why would a man defile a 6-month-old baby in diapers? Or why are men not raping all the naked, insane women on the streets?”  
  
Mrs. Ladenegan-Oginni who spoke on the topic, “Best Practices for Reporting Sexual Gender-Based Violence”, emphasized the importance of language in reporting on rape and sexual assault, noting that using inappropriate or vague language leads to inaccurate journalism that misleads the audience.  
  
She stated that the choice of words is crucial, as it can lead to victim-blaming and reverse criminalization, where victims are blamed for the attacks.  
  
“The use of language is very important while writing a report around rape and sexual assault. A journalist shouldn’t use Inappropriate language. Using vague or euphemistic language results in inaccurate journalism which is misleading for the audience.  
  
“The choice of vocabulary is particularly important when covering this topic because it can lead to reverse criminalization, where the women who are victims end up being blamed for the attacks. Focusing on how a woman, or even an 8-year-old girl dresses, can lead people to blame the victims instead of the perpetrators.  
  
She also stressed that journalist’s duty is to inform, stating that reporting should prioritize factual, primary responsibility, and duty.  
  
“When reporting on gender-based violence, it is crucial to differentiate between what is ‘in the public interest’ and what is merely of interest to the public. Some stories may focus on high-profile figures and contain excessive personal details, sensationalizing the subject without providing useful information for survivors of gender-based violence”, she said.  
  
Support services for survivors  
  
Head of Community Engagement Department, DSVA, Damilare Adewusi informed the participants of the various support services the State Government provides freely for , ranging survivors including medical, legal services, empowerment, psycho-social support, and law enforcement.  
  
Adewusi stated that Government’s response to the increase in formal and informal reporting of rape, defilement, domestic Violence, child abuse, maltreatment and neglect is to improve upon the level of cooperation and collaboration among the professionals.  
  
He further noted that the zero-tolerance stance by the State government is hewn to ensure that all crimes must be subjugated, and survivors get Justice for crimes perpetrated against them.  
  
Exploring state structure in response to SGBV cases  
  
Adewusi in his explanation on how survivors can explore existing state structure for responding to SGBV cases in Lagos State, listed the Domestic and Sexual Violence Response Team (DSVRT)’s key players where survivors can get help.  
  
“There is a composition of direct key players, they include The Lagos State Judiciary, the Police Force, Office of the Public Defender, Directorate of Citizen’s Rights, Ministry of Health, Directorate of Public Prosecution, Ministry of Women Affairs and Poverty Alleviation, Primary Healthcare Board, amongst others.  
  
DSVA Survivor Advocate’s Protocol for Responding to Sexual Assault Cases  
  
Adewusi detailed the procedural steps undertaken by DSVA in response to sexual assault cases.  
  
Upon receiving a report from a survivor via phone, email, office visit, or social media, DSVA conducts an interview with the survivor. This interview is conducted in the presence of a witness, ensuring that the survivor is able to provide their account voluntarily and with consent.  
  
Following the interview, the survivor is referred or accompanied to a comprehensive Primary Health Care/Sexual Assault Referral Center (PHC/SARC) and the Police Station (Family Support Unit). DSVA also collaborates with the Family Support Unit officer to facilitate the arrest of the perpetrator and ensure that the case is charged in court.  
  
Subsequently, DSVA prepares a request for a Letter of Duplicate case file from the Director of Public Prosecution (DPP) and accompanies the survivor to court, providing ongoing monitoring of the case’s progress.  
  
Services offered for survivors of DSV  
  
The services provided to survivors of domestic and sexual violence, as outlined by Adewusi, encompass a comprehensive range of crucial support mechanisms.  
  
From immediate medical and rescue operations to long-term legal and psychological assistance, these services are designed to address the multifaceted needs of survivors. This holistic approach not only offers critical aid in times of crisis but also seeks to empower survivors towards healing and justice.  
  
Medical Assistance: Survivors receive thorough medical examinations, particularly crucial in cases of sexual abuse, with a strong emphasis on reporting within 72 hours to preserve evidential integrity.  
  
Rescue Operations: Immediate mobilization to extract survivors from dangerous situations or emergencies.  
  
Legal Assistance: Legal representation is provided, including the pursuit of restraining orders against perpetrators, with legal support available directly from the DSVA office.  
  
Law Enforcement Coordination: DSVA liaises with law enforcement agencies to ensure they are informed and can take necessary actions.  
  
Psychological Support: Survivors are enrolled in counseling sessions to aid their emotional recovery and personal growth.  
  
Emergency Aid: Prompt response to emergencies, including late-night rescue operations.  
  
Empowerment Programs: Recognizing that some survivors remain in abusive situations due to financial dependency, DSVA offers housing support and vocational training to empower survivors towards economic independence.  
  
This holistic approach aims not only to provide immediate aid during crises but also to support survivors in rebuilding their lives and preventing future abuse.  
  
Media Role in ending SGBV  
  
The training is instrumental in highlighting the critical role of the media in addressing these issues. Through insightful discussions and practical guidance, participants gained a deeper understanding of the complexities of gender-based violence and the importance of ethical reporting.  
  
It also emphasized the need for responsible journalism that respects the dignity of survivors and fosters empathy and accountability. Participants were urged to use their platforms to raise awareness, challenge stereotypes, and contribute to a culture of respect and equality.  
  
Moving forward, it is essential that media practitioners apply the knowledge and skills gained from this training in their reporting. By doing so, they can help break the silence surrounding sexual and gender-based violence, support survivors, and drive positive change in our society.  
  
The training also highlighted the importance of collaboration between the media, government agencies, and civil society organizations in addressing these issues. This will in turn promote a working society and by working together, we can create a safer and more supportive environment for survivors and help prevent future cases of abuse.