Hold politicians accountable on women and girls’ matters – Rights activists

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‘Women and Girls Life Matter’ was the theme recently, as women rights activists gathered in Lagos to discuss encumbrances in the battle against domestic abuse and sexual offences and the way forward. Gboyega Alaka writes.  
  
In what could be described as a coalition of women and girl-child rights forces, Josephine Effah-Chukwuma’s Project Alert recently held a joint press conference with Favour Benson’s Jashabel Touch A Heart Foundation and Grace Ketefe’s The Cece Tara Foundation, to call on the citizenry, especially the women and men of good conscience, to challenge government officials, especially those running for offices in the coming election on women and child right issues.  
  
According to Effah-Chukwuma, domestic abuses and sexual violence offences have reached a crescendo, with victims constantly at the mercy of the perpetrators and a system that is anything but protective.  
  
Citing recent cases of the late 13-year-old Ochanya Ogbanje, who died after been serially raped by her guardian and his son; 16-year-old Federal Government Girls College Calabar student, who was allegedly sexually abused and impregnated by her mother’s boyfriend; 17-year-old Miss Alonge Gift, an SS1 student of Ososo Grammar School in Akoko Edo, Edo State, impregnated by her father; and the five-year-old girl defiled by a 43-year-old Islamic cleric, the Project Alert Executive Director said the time to put take decisive action, more than ever before, is now.  
  
Stressing that the NGOs, most times shoulder the responsibility of prosecuting these cases, she said: “We, as NGOs, can no longer keep silent. We cannot keep doing the work of government. Fellow Nigerians, we need to hold our government accountable for the impunity with which domestic and sexual violence offences are being perpetrated against women and girls. As we are currently in elections season, this is the time to raise these issues and make them campaign issues for all political parties. Women constitute 50% of the population and Women & Girls Life matter.”  
  
She therefore called on the government for better funding for Police divisional, with specific funds for domestic and sexual violence response. She decried a situation where a whole police division is given between N45,000 to N60,000 to run its affairs quarterly, saying this is grossly inadequate and will only give room for inefficiency.  
  
She also called for the creation of a Family Support Unit in every police division, to enable it tackle issues of domestic and sexual violence. Officers in this section, she said, will have to be trained and retrained to be able to respond promptly and professionally to issues and offences.  
  
The coalition will also like a situation, where the judiciary waves fees on domestic and sexual violence, to ensure easier access to justice. This is in addition to a call for a section in all court registries to be dedicated to domestic violence cases for speedy adjudication.  
  
They also called on ministries of Women Affairs and Social Welfare in all states of the federation, to, as a matter of urgency, set up shelters for abused women and girls, manned by well trained staff; as well as a good fostering system.  
  
She stressed that a child who has been physically and sexually abused at home by a family member, should, as a matter of urgency, be taken out of that home by the state.  
  
The women also advocated for free medical treatment for victims of domestic and sexual violence in all government hospitals across the country.