Rape… A scourge refusing to abate

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Rape… A scourge refusing to abate  
  
From time to time, the country erupts in protests against the incidence of rape. The crime, which increased during the Coronavirus lockdown, seems to be defying efforts to nip it in the bud, write MIKE ODIEGWU, FAITH YAHAYA and YINKA ADENIRAN  
  
She is just three. He is 70. Under normal circumstances, she should be like a great-granddaughter to him. But, he saw nothing of such and pounced on her to satisfy his sexual urge. Her mother, Mama Esther, was at her business place in Abuja frying meat-pie when she had an inkling to go back home to check on her daughter.  
  
“I normally do a little business to survive with my children. I left my daughter at home with a neighbour. Around 11 am, I was at my business place but one thing kept telling me to go back home to go and check on Esther. I argued within myself that I was not done selling my wares but I later heeded and went home. When I got home, I asked for Esther but nobody seemed to know her whereabouts. One of our neighbours later said they saw Esther with one man we call Pape in our compound playing. They, however, said they did not know if Esther was still with him.  
  
“I went straight to Pape’s door to ask about Esther and as God would have it, I found her trouser and other clothes on top of the container in front of his house. I checked Pape’s door and luckily for me, he didn’t lock his door but his shoes were not at the entrance. I opened the door and I saw him sleeping with my daughter. I shouted because it was an unbelievable sight for me. I saw a 70year old man on top of my three-year-old daughter. After much shouts and dragging, my neighbours agreed that we should take Pape to the police station but when we got there, the police officers we met said I must go and treat my daughter first but I felt the medical bills were supposed to be handled by Pape. We went to Police hospital in Area 1 and they kept demanding for money for one treatment or the other.”  
  
The three-year-old has joined the unenviable league of children who have been sexually abused. A non-governmental organisation, Women at Risk International Foundation (WARIF), puts Africa’s prevalence rate of child sexual abuse around 34.4 per cent. This represents the highest prevalence rate globally.  
  
Statistics from the NBS state that 2,279 cases of rape and indecent assault were reported to the police in 2017. The Nigerian Correctional Service said 4,436 people were jailed for sex-related crimes in 2014.  
  
Her experience with the police  
  
Mama Esther reported the case at the Mabushi police station. From there, the case was transferred to headquarters in Area 11.  
  
She said: “We have been going there but they keep telling us to come back and they demand money for file and other things. I usually give them what they demand even though it is not easy for me. The last time I went there, I went to complain that they were wasting time on the case and it might end up dying but the police officer who was attending to me said: ‘You are like my daughter and Esther is also like my grandchild. I cannot leave this case to go’ but I reminded her that the incident occurred in November and that we were already in January then but she told me that there were many cases before hers and that I am so much in a hurry. That was when she informed me that Pape had been sent to remand. I demanded to see Pape and she requested the transport money they would use in conveying Pape to where we were. I felt they should let me know where Pape is being kept but she argued that she knows her job and I should not teach her how to do her job. She said they know what they are doing and that the matter would not be buried. I called her again to get an update on the case but she asked why I was faster than my shadow. I kept quiet because I didn’t know what to say at that point.”  
  
On how Esther feels right now, she said: “There is a time that she used to remember what happened to her every Friday. As small as she is, every Friday, she was always saying: ‘God will punish Pape. Pape will not see peace’. I talked to Dorothy about it and she suggested that I should be trying to play with her for her to forget it.  
  
“We have taken her to three different hospitals. We first took her to police hospital but we didn’t understand what they were doing there and she was reacting to the treatment they gave her there. We went to Maitama hospital where we did different types of tests. We were asked to come back again for another round of tests. I thank God that the test done so far did not show that she had been infected with any disease but she is always crying whenever I try to bath her and clean her private part.”  
  
Read Also: Rising cases of rape in Nigeria  
  
The founder of the Dorothy Foundation, Dorothy Njamenze, is helping Mama Esther to ensure the matter is not swept under the carpet.  
  
The Rivers scenario  
  
The police in Rivers arrested a 31-year-old man identified simply as Justice for allegedly defiling his neighbour’s nine-year-old daughter at Aluu community, Ikwere Local Government Area.  
  
The suspect was nabbed on Saturday by police operatives attached to the Choba Divisional Headquarters.  
  
The suspect was said to have raped the victim twice before he was arrested after her mother discovered blood stains while washing her underpants.  
  
A source said: “The mother of the nine-year-old girl was washing her daughter’s underwear on Saturday when she noticed a bloodstain on it and immediately called the victim and grilled her to know what brought about the bloodstain on her undies since she is not up to the age of menstruation.  
  
“After asking her daughter what happened, the nine-year-old disclosed to her mother that it was their neighbour, Justice in the compound who forced her and slept with her on two occasions and also threatened to kill her if she tells anybody.  
  
“After hearing about the situation, the victim’s uncle reported the matter to the Choba Police Division, who arrested the man on Saturday. We hear that the matter has been transferred to the State Criminal Investigation Department on Tuesday.”  
  
Rivers State Police Public Relations Officer Nnamdi Omoni confirmed the arrest, adding that the suspect was transferred to the State Criminal Investigations Department for further investigation.  
  
He said: “I can confirm to you that the suspect, a 31-year old man had been arrested after a case of defilement was reported to us, we have already conducted a preliminary investigation on the victim.  
  
“The case had been transferred to the State CID for further investigation and once we conclude, the suspect would be charged to court accordingly.”  
  
All over the country  
  
Almost every part of the country is affected. Inspector-General of Police (IGP) Mohammed Adamu recently disclosed that the police arrested 799 suspected rapists and other gender-based violence perpetrators across the country between January and May this year.  
  
Adamu said: “It has come to the public knowledge now that because of the COVID-19 restrictions, we have a surge in cases of rape and gender-based violence. These are cases that are now coming up, but we want to let members of the public know that, rape and gender-based violence has been there. The law enforcement agents have been dealing with these cases, in most cases, members of the public are not aware of the actions that the law enforcement agents have been taking. From January to May 2020, we have recorded about 717 rape incidents that were reported across the country and about 799 suspects have been arrested, 631 cases conclusively investigated and charged to court, and 52 cases are left and under investigation.  
  
“It is a very wicked offence, it is a very serious offence, it is very wicked of an individual to engage in rape or defilement and there are a lot of causes; some are doing it for ritual purposes, some are doing it because they are within the family and they see the victims and have the urge to go into it and do it. But such people should not be allowed to go scot-free.  
  
“The police and other security agencies and other non-governmental organisations have been collaborating, to see to it that these cases of rape and gender-based violence are dealt with. The NGOs and CSOs that can deal with this kind of offences have been cooperating with law enforcement agencies in capacity building, management of victims of rape and similar offences and procedures for collecting evidence, towards successful prosecution”, he said.  
  
The police boss also called on every Nigerian that has or comes across any victim of sexual offences, rape, or gender-based violence, to report to law enforcement agents, noting that keeping it without reporting it will give room for the perpetrators to continue to commit more of the offences.  
  
The craze in Ibadan  
  
Akinyele, a peaceful city in Ibadan, the Oyo State capital, is fast gaining recognition for cases of rape. This is not the best of times for residents and people around Akinyele, Ojoo and Moniya axis of Oyo State because in the last two weeks, three gruesome deaths had been recorded.  
  
The latest of the deaths was that of 21-year-old Grace Oshiagwu, a National Diploma (ND) 1 student of The Oke Ogun Polytechnic, Saki, Oyo State.  
  
She was said to have been raped and killed at her parents’ residence, around Idi-Ori, Sasha in Akinyele Local Government Area.  
  
Also, 18-year-old Barakat Bello and 29-year-old Azeezat Shomuyiwa were murdered in quick successions in different parts of Akinyele community.  
  
Specifically, the Ijefun community in Akinyele Local Government Area was, on Friday morning, thrown into mourning when the dead body of Azeezat was found in her room, with her head smashed with a stone.  
  
Azeezat, a student of the University of Ibadan, got married about three years ago. Her pregnancy, the first since she got married, was seven-months-old. The assailants are yet to be identified at the time this report was filed.  
  
She returned from Kano State a few months ago where she had spent some time with her husband.  
  
The mother-in-law, Mrs. Idiat Hamzat had visited her daughter-in-law, full of expectation that in a matter of weeks, she would welcome her grand-child but never knew that her joy had been truncated.  
  
She said she was shocked on arrival at the daughter-in-law’s apartment that early morning as she saw the expectant mother in her own pool of blood, adding that there was a big stone with bloodstain nearby.  
  
According to her, the big stone must have been used to smash the deceased’s head. She raised an alarm to call draw people’s attention to the incident.  
  
The Chairman, Ijefun Landlords’ Association, Mr. Taiwo Adeyemo said: “I sent one of my boys to get diesel and he ran back saying that mother of Alfa Rilwan was crying because his wife had been killed.  
  
“Her mother-in-law who lives on the other street usually visits her. She visited that morning when she saw the late daughter-in-law. I went there and saw that she had been killed and we immediately went to the police station to report the incident. “The hoodlums used a big stone to smash her head. She was pregnant and would have been delivered of her baby soon.”  
  
A team of high-ranking police officers led by the Commissioner of Police Chuks Enwonwu and a retired Commissioner of Police who is the Special Adviser to Oyo State Governor on Security, Fatai Owoseni, visited the scenes of the crime and families of the victims.  
  
While speaking through the Police Public Relations Officer, Olugbenga Fadeyi, the police boss said he had relocated his office to Akinyele in his determination to nab the suspects  
  
“The police are working on the cases. They are professional and are working on it. You will not expect the police to come out to give details of the process they are using to apprehend the assailants. Nobody is above the law.  
  
“We have to follow due process and the rule of law. Everybody you see is presumed innocent until there is sufficient evidence to apprehend. They are taking detailed steps to get to the root of it and I assure you that at the end of the day, we will come out with success,” Enwonwu said.  
  
Owoseni said: “With the progress of the investigation, by God’s grace, those culprits will be brought to justice. The Commissioner of Police has had interaction with the field officers to ensure that nothing of this happens again.”  
  
A new twist  
  
As the search for the culprits who killed Barakat and Azeezat were ongoing, another death was recorded similarly.  
  
However, a new twist has been added to the level of death in the axis as the traditional ruler of the community and the Chairman of the Caretaker Committee of the council have raised suspicion of ritual killings as against mere rape cases.  
  
The Alakinyele of Akinyele Town, Oba James Odeniran, specifically fingered suspected internet fraudsters otherwise known as Yahoo boys, in the gang-raping and murder of Barakat Bello.  
  
He said: “The news got to me on that day through one of my chiefs who was living in that area, we quickly went to the place with my people where we saw the lifeless body of that lady lying on the ground.  
  
“No one can categorically say if the lady was raped or not because nobody was caught during the deadly act. It is yahoo boys that killed her; when they kill someone, they won’t remove any part of their victim, they will just use their handkerchief to clean the blood of the victim and thereafter give the handkerchiefs to a ritualist.”  
  
Sexual assault referral centres  
  
The Civil Society Engagement for Rule of Law and Anti-Corruption (ROLAC) has set up centres for victims to see redress.  
  
ROLAC Manager and SARC Network Secretary Oluwatoyosi Giwa said: “We set up the sexual assault referral centres so that those who have been sexually assaulted will have a place to go. It was also set up because of the gap in the justice system. The centre is specifically a place of help. We examine the victims when they come and we would have done Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA) but the DNA test is very expensive, so we opted for head to toe examination of the victim because the DNA lab is very expensive. The head to toe examination we don too works very well. We look for injuries that are consistent with the stories we are told by the victim.  
  
“There are over 15 centres right now all over the country and the services we provide at the centre are free of charge. With the centres established, we hope to improve justice for women, girls, and persons with disabilities. We hope that numbers of perpetrators reduce and ensure that people don’t get away with sexual assault-related offences.  
  
On why the issue of rape and other crimes thrive in the country, she said: “The culture of silence, stigmatisation, the weak criminal justice system, poor funding, and so many people don’t know their rights.”  
  
Hotlines to tackle sexual violence as police arrest suspected rapist  
  
The Rivers State government has released hotlines to tackle rape, defilement, sexual and gender-based violence in the state.  
  
The government in a statement signed by the Commissioner for Social Welfare and Rehabilitation, Mrs. Inime Aguma, said the hotlines would ensure immediate response to victims of sexual abuse and other forms of violence.  
  
She said the ministry was working in collaboration with other organisations to provide counselling, medical, psychological and legal help to victims.  
  
The numbers released by the ministry were those of Doctors Without Borders (DWB), International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) and the ministry.  
  
“Please report gender-based violence, sexual abuse, domestic violence and other forms of violence. Let’s end the culture of silence and ensure our fundamental right to dignity,” she said.