‘Why rapists must not go unpunished’

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As many continue to condemn the rising cases of rape and other Sexual and Gender-based Violence (SGBV), the National Institute for Cultural Orientation (NICO) has held a webinar to examine rape as anti-cultural trend in Nigeria, Assistant Editor (Arts) OZOLUA UHAKHEME and NAOMI AGHA report.  
  
One of the fallouts of the COVID-19 pandemic since March is the increased incidences of rape and assault in Nigeria. This anti-cultural trend perhaps informed the decision of the management of the National Institute for Cultural Orientation (NICO) to organise its first virtual lecture on: Rape as anti-culture in contemporary Nigeria, to examine the implications of rape on victims.  
  
The lecture held last week was convened by the Director Overseeing the Office of the Executive Secretary (NICO), Mrs. Brigitte Yerima, while Prof Muhammad Ndagi was chairman.  
  
The guest speaker, Prof Mabel Evwierhoma of the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Abuja, described rape as an anti-social act that could push away the nation’s cultural values, adding that checkmating rape should be an agenda for all and must be pursued without fear or favour.  
  
She said the causes of rape could be linked to male hegemony and patriarchal control of women’s bodies and their sphere of operation.  
  
Contexts of socio-political contestations have been known to contribute to the violation of women, like conflict, war and other forms of unrest, insurgency where women are often held captive. These, she said, have claimed women and girls as rape victims.  
  
“A lot of pornographic or sexual content is available on the internet and its exploitation by sundry individuals like paedophiles, uninformed minds, socio-psychologically maladjusted males, is responsible for the high incidents of rape, sexual and gender-based violence.  
  
Most of the contemporary music that is produced and promoted focus on the female genitalia and depicts acts of non-consensual sex,” she said.  
  
To her, rape is a crime notable for placing a woman on trial, particularly for cultural reasons. These cultural reasons, she noted, become burdensome if a woman becomes guilty of causing the assault perpetrated against her.  
  
“And so when we discuss the perpetrators of rape, I say that it is an issue of distress that the main actors in rape cases are often those entrusted in the care of those whom they raped.  
  
Some have been identified as fathers, colleagues, fellow students, the police, custodian officers, staff of detention, and security forces,” she said.  
  
According to her, the tools of rape are but not limited to money, deceit, force, violence, intimidation, threat, addiction, drugs, alcohol and coercion, stating that cultural norms often lead to gender-based violence.  
  
“In some cultures, men rape women and girls during festivals because of what they have been held to believe. In Urhobo, rape is considered an abomination, a dubious offence and anyone guilty of rape is severely punished at the community court and even ostracised from the community.  
  
“Rape is an attack on culture and should be treated as such, and this era whereby rapists would be seen walking about freely without prosecution should be attacked.  
  
One good example of anti-culture is rape and sexual assault of women and girls that are covered. Culture becomes anti culture when it is extremely practised without yielding to community and national dictates, or legal backings that are aimed at making the society a healthy one.  
  
So, that loss of recognition of the inherent value of the meaning of culture is what has resulted to anti-culture. Rape is anti-culture because it is contrary to our way of life.  
  
If the older generations did not condone rape, we should also not accommodate it today. Rape victims are not just stigmatised, but nobody wishes to keep a close relationship with them,” she said.  
  
On the consequences of rape, Prof Evwierhoma stated that rape covers different dimensions and using the Holy Bible as a case study in Genesis 34 when Dinah was violated by Shechem, she noted that the consequences was his death.  
  
According to her, the implications of rape includes the psychological breakdown of the victim, mental disorder, depression, infectious diseases, unwanted pregnancies, derailed morality, low self-esteem, stigma, death etc.  
  
To mitigate rape cases, she identified sensitisation programmes, self-control guides for boys and girls should be given formally and informally, sex offenders should be publicised so that prospective rapists can be deterred.  
  
She also urged roving traders, motor park touts who always touch the bodies of women should be forced to desist from such act and should be curtailed by law.  
  
Rape, she said, is one viable form of transmitting disease and the COVID-19 disease is not left out. “We should not look back, but take it as some leaders are beginning to do and get the appropriate reflection that will reduce sexual and gender-based violence,” she added.  
  
The Professor of Theatre Art described rape as the unlawful sexual intercourse without the woman’s consent or by threat.  
  
Citing the constitution, she said “any person who has unlawful carnal knowledge of a woman or a girl, without her consent or if the consent is obtained by force, threat or intimidation of any kind by a friend, fiancé or even husband is an offence called rape.  
  
The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 as amended states in section 34/1 that every individual is entitled to respect of dignity and accordingly no person shall be subjected to torture or inhuman or degrading treatment. Though this section has been criticised most times because women have been found to rape boys and men,” she added.  
  
According to her, several physical and emotional abuses committed by males were found to either be family members, neighbours and even friends.  
  
She noted that adolescents remain the most vulnerable targets of rape, and even recently, geriatric rape has reoccurred in many communities in Nigeria, further creating the fear of rape as pandemic.  
  
The National Bureau of Statistics reported 2,279 cases of rape and indecent assault in 2017. During the COVID-19 lockdown, incidents of rape increased and further proved that damage could be done when people are limited to enclosed places without option, relaxation or leisure.  
  
Prof Andrew Emelieze sees rape as a part of sub-culture that allows for exploitation. “A system that believes that they have to exploit people and oppress them, as long as there is a system that allows for that, the challenges of fighting rape might be limited except we fight it from that larger culture, which of course, we are seeing in the system of capitalism,” he said.  
  
Mrs Muhammad Lawani, a participant from the civil society stated that to fight rape ‘we have to go down to our societies and communities because the fault comes from the parents. When a child is a victim of rape, most parents refuse to speak out, perhaps because of their culture or shame.  
  
One way to control the culture of violence is that the parents of the victim need to be educated and know the kind of support the victims require. In terms of pushing the case for justice, the parents have a role to play.’  
  
According to Yemi Faboyo Agbede, another factor that fuels the rising cases of rape is the uncontrolled use of alcohol by youths. “In this part of the country, we have a lot of alcohol in small sachets.  
  
There has been too much focus on the female gender. The traditional rulers also have a role to play. They need to make sure that rape is clearly seen as a taboo and they should also try to curb cultural practices that endanger our young adults.  
  
There should also be a capacity building for frontline officers in handling cases of rape as well as access to free medical examination and care to aid investigation process,” she said.  
  
According to Adeola Taiwo, ‘as long as we continue to give excuses for this act (mental, frustrating, victims, dressing among others then rape will continue.  
  
Even a mad man knows how to cross the road. As long as rapists know they will be killed or castrated, they will think twice before indulging in the act. I agree with stiffer punishment.’  
  
Some of the participants included Tosin Apiriola Ajayi, Women Environment and Youth Development Initiative Kwara State, National Chairman, Association for the Survival of Ibo Language and Culture (ASILAC), Chinedume Ofomata, – Director, Network of University Legal Institutions, Nigeria, Odinaka Onye Lagi, Head, Anti-Human Trafficking Unit, Ondo State Command Yemi Faboyo Agbede and Director of Culture and Tourism, NICO, Akure, Ondo State, Mr. Olanrewaju Akarakiri.  
  
Others were Prof. Emmanuel Dandaura, Prof. Sunny Ododo, Prof. Muhammad Ndagi, Prof. Olu Obafemi, Prof. Eddie Iji, Prof. Bamidele Solomon, Prof. C.M Ogbodo, Prof. Omobolaji Gani Oladipo, Prof. Victor Dugga, Ag. D-G, CBAAC, Mrs. Osaro Osayande, (Director, Arts & Culture, Enugu State Eddy Okolo and GM, NTA, Akure Femi Ojalade.