Activists rise against Nigeria’s rape epidemic

Date: 2020-06-08

Source: https://punchng.com/activists-rise-against-nigerias-rape-epidemic/

TOBI AWORINDE writes on the clamour for justice amid avalanche of sexual assault cases and gender-based violence  
  
Her voice was resonant with indignation as she recalled the recent rape cases in the country.  
  
“It’s getting out of hand! We are dealing with an epidemic within a pandemic. Why is there so much hatred for girls by young and old men?” the Executive Director, Project Alert on Violence Against Women, Mrs Josephine Effah-Chukwuma, asked audibly, trying her best to contain her vexation.  
  
A series of sexual assault cases have lately made headlines nationwide, sparking outrage, even as the battle against the coronavirus pandemic rages on.  
  
In Kaduna State, an 18-year-old woman was reportedly raped by five men on April 27, as her family bemoaned the lull in investigation. It appeared to be the catalyst for impassioned calls for justice for rape victims.  
  
A viral video, posted to Twitter on May 10, 2020, showed the victim, in a seemingly comatose state, being cradled by a female relative. Individuals and civil society organisations have called for action.  
  
According to the tweeter, the young woman was invited on Facebook by a male friend to his house in Narayi, Kaduna. There, she was reportedly assaulted by her host and four others, leading to the victim being hospitalised. Two of the suspects were later said to have confessed to drugging her with a local drink, ‘Tombo’.  
  
Likewise, the police in Jigawa State, on May 30, arrested 11 suspects for allegedly raping a 12-year-old girl. The Police Public Relations Officer, Abdu Jinjiri, said the suspects were apprehended after a complaint that one of the suspects, a 57-year-old man, was seen at the Limawa Market in the Dutse Local Government Area of the state trying to lure the victim.  
  
In a third incident, on May 27, 2020, a 22-year-old undergraduate of the University of Benin, Uwaila Omozuwa, was killed after being raped inside a parish of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Benin City, provoking widespread disgust on social media.  
  
Uwaila was said to have visited the RCCG, Edo Province 10, Ikpoba Hill, Benin, for a routine study session, but some men were reported to have made their way into the church auditorium, struck her in the head with a fire extinguisher, raped her and left her for dead.  
  
A security guard at the church, who resumed for duty later in the day, reportedly found her in a pool of blood and informed his superiors at the church.  
  
The victim, who was unconscious, was rushed to the University of Benin Teaching Hospital, where she battled for survival. She, however, succumbed to her injuries three days later.  
  
Similarly, an 18-year-old Science Laboratory Technology student of the Federal College of Animal Health and Production, Barakat Bello, was raped and stabbed to death by hoodlums in her father’s home in the Kara, Akinyele area of Ibadan, Oyo State, last Monday. The incident added to the growing furore across country.  
  
Several prominent Nigerians have since taken to social media to express their grievances with the hashtag, #JusticeForUwa, among others, trending.  
  
Popular actress, Kate Henshaw, tweeted, “How easy it is to take a life you had no hand in creating? What heartlessness dwells in the hearts of these rapists and killers?”  
  
Actress and filmmaker, Genevieve Nnaji, tweeted, “They either abuse their power, or have the power to abuse. In or out of uniform, we live in constant fear of men. Tina Ezekwe (who was shot dead by a trigger-happy policeman, while trying to arrest a commercial driver) and Vera Omozuwa. Rest in peace, my darlings. We will get justice.”  
  
Actress, Nse Ikpe-Etim, added her voice, “She had just been admitted to the University of Benin to study microbiology. She was 22. Uwa’s dream of becoming a nurse has now been dashed by rapists and murders. All she wanted to do was read. When will girls feel safe again?”  
  
Singer, Tiwa Savage, wrote, “#WeAreTired of senseless killings, lorries falling on roads and killing passengers, ACs catching fire and burning houses, young girls getting raped, young boys killed by SARS, no jobs for graduates, please add your own frustration because my list is long.”  
  
On Instagram, actress, Rita Dominic, said, “There is nothing that these three girls have done to deserve the atrocities that have befallen them. What are we doing wrong that boys and men think that it is okay to continue violating girls and women in this manner?”  
  
Actress, Mercy Johnson-Okojie, posted, “Coming online to see what has been happening these past few days has been truly heartbreaking. Where do we start? What can we do from wherever we are? We need to know how to come together to help fight it; help heal those who have been hurt.”  
  
Women’s advocate, Effah-Chukwuma, lamented the culture of silence in rape cases, telling The PUNCH that it was unfortunate that there was condemnation of sexual predation primarily when high-profile cases occurred.  
  
Expressing intense frustration, she said, “In Uwa’s case — I’m sorry I am speaking this way but I am angry — I am not sad, I am angry. And when somebody is angry, the person can do anything and we are getting to that stage now. This is getting out of hand. Our daughters should be safe. Where is a safe place for a girl in this country?  
  
“Is it in the home? Don’t they get sexually abused in the home? People are saying, ‘Why would she go to church to read? Which school is in session during this COVID-19 pandemic?’ May God forgive each and everyone of them and anyone who justifies Uwa’s rape and killing.  
  
“May God forgive anyone who is a rape apologist because, as a Christian, I will not pray that it happens to their daughters because their daughters are innocent; if I pray that kind of prayer, I am asking for a vicious cycle. What did that girl do? Nothing! Her only offence is that she was a girl born in Nigeria.”  
  
The activist added that there was little hope for the underprivileged seeking justice.  
  
Related News  
  
She said, “The justice system has failed and continues to fail. The police have been failing; they don’t do thorough investigation. I run a non-governmental organisation. When we give cases to the police, we have to foot the bill. Anyone seeking justice in Nigeria must have money. If you don’t have money, right from the police station, the officers have to buy recharge card for them to make calls.  
  
Similarly, the Executive Director, Braveheart Initiative, Ms Priscilla Usiobaifo, expressed disapproval of the series of rape in the country.  
  
She stated, “My major worry is the fact that Uwa was even unable to, at least, give a clue as to who the suspect was before she died. But one thing the civil society in Edo State has begun to do that I’m impressed with is community intervention. There is a lot of discussion engaging community influencers.  
  
“We should support the effort of the police, because a little gap can be like a lead in a criminal case. Investigations can be complex, so while we allow the police to do their part, as citizens, we can also do our part.”  
  
Usobiafor expressed concern about the peculiar challenges of investigating and prosecuting rape cases, such as the failure to protect witnesses from attacks.  
  
She said, “I’ve handled so many cases where someone heard the survivors screaming, and later we go back to the environment and they say, ‘We heard her shouting, but we didn’t know it was that sort of thing that was happening’. Community policing is very essential if we’re able to strategically get the community to give information.  
  
The President, Women Arise, Dr Joe Okei-Odumakin, also condemned the assault on Uwaila and called on members of the public to seek the criminalisation of rape.  
  
Okie-Odumakin said, “The rape and killing of Uwaila Omozuwa is not only barbaric, but it is a major crime against humanity and every human being with blood in their veins must openly condemn it. It introduced another dimension into the level of audacity with which perpetrators of rape carry out their nefarious actions, not minding the consequences on the victims, their families and the society at large.  
  
Similarly, the Executive Director, Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre, Dr Abiola Akiyode-Afolabi, decried the institutional failures that lead to the proliferation of sexual violence.  
  
Akiyode-Afolabi told The PUNCH, “One of the things that this tells me is that there is a system failure. Nigeria has not been able to respond to sexual and gender-based violence despite the laws that have been passed in some places and also the laws on violence against women: the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act.  
  
“It is an indication that the institutions are not even there. We don’t have effective institutions that can adequately deal with the issue of violence against women and rape. By implication, rape and other forms of sexual assault are being connected with institutional failure, because people believe that nobody is going to hold them responsible for it.  
  
“When people want to attempt to report, they are also not sure whether the police or the justice system will be able to support them to the end.”  
  
According to her, though reports of rape cases have been minuscule, the social media have created a platform for the exposure of rape and other sexual assault cases that may have otherwise gone unnoticed.  
  
The WARDC ED added, “That’s why we are asking the government to declare a state of emergency and come up with clear guidelines on how to deal with the issue of gender-based violence in Nigeria.  
  
“The National Assembly should invite all the agencies that are involved in responding to issues of gender-based violence to find out from them what exactly is not working and why.”  
  
She also lamented the dearth of public enlightenment, political will by elected public office holders and funding to investigate rape claims.  
  
The CEO, Women Radio 91.7, Toun Okewale-Sonaiya, in her remarks, addressed the wave of high-profile rape accusations in the public domain, calling on survivors and whistle-blowers to be emboldened to expose perpetrators.  
  
Okewale-Sonaiya stated, “The narrative of the silence culture has changed as we have more survivors and families of victims of rape and violence speaking up. This is commendable and we must encourage more to come out and speak up, irrespective of who the perpetrator is. The time of speaking out is always the right time, whether it happened 50 years ago or yesterday.  
  
“When perpetrators are held responsible and accountable for their actions, these horrendous acts will stop or reduce. Women Radio will make her platform available to anyone ready to speak out. Please, reach out and, together, we will expose the perpetrators.  
  
“As individuals and a society, we need to stop the stigmatisation and shaming culture of survivors and victims. We must support anyone who is willing and ready to speak and, together, demand that perpetrators be brought to justice, irrespective of status. This is s fight for all of us to win. We must engage men, the government, religious and traditional leaders.”  
  
Copyright PUNCH.  
  
All rights reserved. This material, and other digital content on this website, may not be reproduced, published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed in whole or in part without prior express written permission from PUNCH.  
  
Contact: [email protected]