Female travellers’ tales of sexual assault on Lagos bridges

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Under bridges and near transit terminals in Lagos State, female passersby navigate a perilous setting marred by the presence of miscreants, whose fiery looks and menacing behaviour create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. BABATUNDE TITILOLA reports that these public spaces, meant to serve as channels for transportation and movement, have become hotspots for sexual harassment, bullying and theft  
  
In Lagos, where the vibrant energy of the city is evident, dark shadows lurk in the corners of its busy streets and transit hubs. These transportation spots are not only notable for the number of commercial vehicles they harbor, but also for the incessant attacks by miscreants on hapless, unsuspecting passersby.  
  
Between August 13 and 21, this reporter surveyed some spots under popular bridges and around terminals in Lagos.  
  
Across these locations, the reverberating noises of vehicles competed with the voices of roadside sellers and hawkers, who employ various tactics to compel commuters to purchase their merchandise.  
  
However, the charm of these bustling spots was overshadowed by numerous reports of harassment and attacks on innocent people, who fell prey to the fiery-looking youths lurking around.  
  
On August 15, this reporter’s first stop was the Oshodi terminals. Oshodi, a major transportation hub, is a place where thousands of commuters converge daily, navigating through a maze of vehicles, hawkers, and the relentless pace of urban life.  
  
Oshodi, once a bustling nerve centre of Lagos, has now become a haunting ground where danger lurks at every corner.  
  
Sadly, the vibrant energy that once defined this major transit hub is now overshadowed by the ominous presence of miscreants who prowl, preying on the vulnerable with a chilling sense of impunity.  
  
Reports on the alarming rise in harassment and intimidation of innocent female passersby can send chills down the spine.  
  
As night falls, and the sun dips below the horizon, the once-lively Oshodi terminals transform into eerie spots, where dimly lit corners and secluded bridges become hotspots for miscreants seeking to exploit the vulnerability of unsuspecting females.  
  
Female travellers, once confident in their daily commutes, now find themselves navigating a gauntlet of terror.  
  
These women, who simply seek to make their way home, are instead met with fiery eyes and menacing grins—harbingers of the harassment and humiliation that await them.  
  
In the dimly lit corners of this once-bustling hub, these daredevils strike with ruthless precision, harassing and intimidating with lewd comments.  
  
They grab at their victims with unbridled aggression, leaving them feeling powerless and violated.  
  
What was once a simple journey home has become a harrowing experience, where every step is accompanied by the fear of being accosted, robbed, or worse, raped.  
  
Over the months, reports of aggressive encounters, theft, and harassment have surged, leaving many residents and commuters on edge.  
  
The fear of becoming a victim looms large, creating a chilling atmosphere that stifles the spirit of community and safety that should prevail in such a vibrant city.  
  
Oshodi, a place that once embodied the relentless spirit of Lagos, now wears a mask of fear.  
  
Left cold, empty in Oshodi  
  
28-year-old Olamide works at a beauty shop in Orile-Agege in the Agege Local Government Area of the state but lives in Isolo. Many times, her work schedule requires her to work late. Despite surviving the daily rough commute, nothing prepared her for the hostile experience she had with some menacing male figures.  
  
“I had heard different stories of guys ‘obtaining’ ladies in those areas,” Olamide said with a worried expression.  
  
“I go home in the evening and sometimes, late at night if there is traffic or a lack of buses. On the day I was harassed, I was coming home from work and wanted to get a few personal items in the market area near the Oshodi bus stop. Some areas around that place are usually dark.  
  
“Maybe I went to the part I wasn’t supposed to, but all of a sudden, a guy called me from behind. I turned around and saw him walking towards me. Since I didn’t know him, I wanted to continue walking. The moment I started to walk away, another guy jumped in front of me. I was so afraid because it was dark.  
  
“The guy in front pushed me and said I should stop. Though the place was a bit dark, people around could still hear someone scream, so I was prepared to do that until one of them said I should settle them.  
  
“That was when I knew they wanted to rob me. I was shivering at the way they spoke. They must have been drunk. After they took my bag, the one behind me slapped my buttocks as walked away.”  
  
Stranded by the actions of the miscreants, Olamide approached some good Samaritans who contributed money for her to return home. As she sat in a bus headed her destination goosebumps covered her brown skin as replayed the scary experience in her mind.  
  
Over 1,000 arrests in five months  
  
Findings indicated a sharp rise in reported cases of harassment under bridges across various garages and terminals in the state.  
  
On August 13, the state Commissioner for Environment and Water Resources, Tokunbo Wahab, announced that operatives of the Lagos State Environmental Sanitation Corps arrested 16 miscreants in Oshodi Terminal 3.  
  
Between August 1 and 13, the Corps arrested 71 miscreants across Terminals 1, 2, and 3, suspected of harassing women.  
  
These exercises followed complaints from pedestrians about fierce-looking louts seizing control of the bridges.  
  
The Lagos State Police Command disclosed that its Rapid Response Squad arrested 1,019 miscreants in various areas of the state between April 8 and 14, with 43 apprehended in Oshodi alone.  
  
The command said weapons were recovered from the suspects, adding that they would be charged in court.  
  
Similarly, on July 28, 2023, the Lagos State Taskforce apprehended 31 individuals in the Oshodi, Mushin, and Ilupeju areas of the state for lurking around garages and bus stops to terrorise unsuspecting passersby.  
  
More disturbing tales  
  
In Oshodi, where countless commuters navigate their way home, one woman’s harrowing ordeal encapsulates the pervasive fear that now clouds the area.  
  
Boluwatife Ajayi, a customer service representative at a popular bank headquarters in Victoria Island, Lagos, was on her way home from work on Thursday, June 20, 2024.  
  
She planned to alight at Oshodi, hoping to catch another bus that will drop her close home but due to gridlock, darkness crept in faster than anticipated and she got to her destination in the dark.  
  
As Ajayi would later recount her terrifying encounter, she got surrounded by louts in a twinkle of an eye.  
  
“They almost took my phone that evening,” Ajayi said. “There are usually many guys hanging around a curved corner not far from where I usually wait for a small shuttle bus to take me into Oshodi, towards the area where I live.  
  
“While standing there, the guys started teasing me. One came closer and asked for my contact. I refused and tried to walk away, but he grabbed my hand and forcefully took my phone.  
  
“They were all laughing. I had no choice but to start begging them. Then, he said he only wanted my number. He used my phone to call his phone before giving it back. I walked away feeling ashamed because I was helpless, but these guys were just laughing and making jokes.”  
  
For the next few weeks, Ajayi changed her route home. She could not bear the sight of the fiery-looking guys or risk another encounter with them.  
  
“I would go around that area. I didn’t mind the extra time and money it cost me. Better safe than sorry,” she blurted.  
  
However, despite the deep-seated fears, she could not continue with the new arrangement because it was costing her more time on the road and increased expenses.  
  
She is not the only victim of such harassment, as on 18 August, an industrial training student, Olaoluwa Akinola, told this reporter how miscreants called her a sex object among other derogatory terms, while returning home from work one evening.  
  
Findings by Sunday PUNCH revealed that the miscreants are also often stationed under the popular Agege Bridge or Oju Irin (the old railway lines).  
  
24-year-old Akinola was walking along the rail lines around 8 p.m. on that very night when she noticed a group of men lingering around the area. They seemed to be watching her every move, and she felt a sense of unease.  
  
Soon after she got close to them, one of them, out of nowhere, grabbed her arm, holding her in place, while the others made lewd comments and catcalls.  
  
Feeling powerless and isolated, Akinola felt a wave of fear sweep through her, but she tried to stay calm, pretending to receive a call on her phone and started talking loudly, trying to attract attention from passersby.  
  
“The guy who grabbed me was touching my body. It was a very embarrassing moment for me,” she said.  
  
The guys, realising they might get caught, started to back off. Akinola took advantage of the distraction to break free and ran towards the nearest bus stop. As she looked back, she saw them laughing and jeering at her.  
  
The young lady said she felt humiliated and angry, noting that the fear of having a worse repeat of such an ugly experience, or worse, made her change her route.  
  
Experts advocate for improved security  
  
Amid the harrowing tales of victims harassed by miscreants and the anxiety that comes with passing dangerous hotspots in Lagos under bridges and terminals, security experts call on the police to be proactive in securing the lives and property of passersby.  
  
They agreed that the state’s security system should be improved to prevent crime rather than punish it.  
  
A community security advocate, James Joel, said there should be more policing around terminals and other transit hubs in the state.  
  
He noted that unreported cases outnumber reported ones, as victims may either be unable to identify their assailants or the suspects would have left by the time the police arrive.  
  
Joel said, “The police should make surveillance and patrols around bus stops and terminals a necessity. A lot of things go on in those bus stops that may even be worse than harassment. But if the police are not readily available to apprehend these miscreants, they will continue to disturb passersby without fear of being caught.  
  
“There may be an emergency number, but how can you call when they’ve taken your phone or are forcefully restraining you? However, if there are regular patrols, it will be difficult for these boys to carry out their crimes.”  
  
Joel further suggested that the government should illuminate hotspots where miscreants lurk to commit their atrocities, noting that providing street lights in dark areas would allow for free movement without the fear of being ambushed.  
  
“Even if you are being assaulted, it would be easier for people to spot what is going on,” he added.  
  
We cannot deport miscreants – Environment Ministry  
  
Meanwhile, the Director of Public Affairs, Ministry for Environment and Water Resources, Kunle Adesina, said the increasing cases of harassment by miscreants under bridges and at terminals is due to the influx of people into the state.  
  
He noted that many of these individuals often have no place to stay or means of earning a living, leading them to engage in criminal activities.  
  
Adesina said, “People from all over come to Lagos to survive. While this is generally positive, it can also create problems as many of them may not have relatives here. They are not concerned about where they will stay or how they will earn a living. Many of them sleep under bridges and defecate in the area, and turn to crime for survival. Some of these miscreants take advantage of innocent people.”  
  
He said the state government is not considering deportation to address the situation, adding that there are policies in place to reform arrested miscreants, whether they are Lagos residents or from elsewhere.  
  
The director said, “While it might seem desirable to send them back to their states, we’ve found that many of them have no place to stay or means of earning a living here. They just come here and do whatever they can to survive. However, deporting them has caused unnecessary tensions in the past.  
  
“People hide under the umbrella of human rights. Before you know it, people start giving it an ethnic colouration. Now, we believe in alternative dispute resolution. It’s not always necessary to throw people in jail. Even the jails are full. Some of these miscreants are reformed without going to prison.  
  
“The Ministry of Youth and Social Development has introduced programmes for these people but some are not interested. Those who were imprisoned have been rearrested after being released. Some, after being released, move to another area and start misbehaving again, while some have shown remorse.”  
  
Taskforce pledges more enforcement  
  
The Lagos State Taskforce Director of Press and Public Affairs, Abdulraheem Gbadeyanka, while speaking with our correspondent, confirmed that the agency is aware of harassment-related incidents of female passersby in some areas of the state.  
  
He noted that certain black spots where miscreants carry out their criminal acts have been identified.  
  
Gbadeyanka said, “We have conducted a series of raids across various parts of the state known for breeding hoodlums and miscreants and have also thwarted their activities.  
  
“In the past month, we raided Ikeja, Ikorodu, Ikoyi, and Mile 2, where the activities of drug users and criminal elements were prevalent. We have also targeted all black spots in Oshodi, and we will continue these activities until their nefarious acts are completely stamped out.”  
  
He said members of the public can collaborate with the agency by reporting black spots and criminal hideouts where miscreants operate.  
  
“This mechanism has paid off, as it led to the raiding of some specific areas where significant discoveries and arrests were made. For instance, during a raid on Glover Road, we recovered over 200 litres of diesel improperly stored in a building close to residential houses in an enclosed neighbourhood. Disaster was averted in this situation, and all thanks go to members of the public who provided us with this information.  
  
“We have sister agencies that run joint operations with the task force. We are all working together to ensure the environment is protected and criminality is reduced to a minimum in the state,” Gbadeyanka said.  
  
We will improve security in black spots – Commissioner  
  
The Commissioner for Information, Gbenga Omotoso, told Sunday PUNCH that security agencies would be deployed to monitor areas where miscreants are known to gather, such as terminals and under bridges in the state.  
  
He said it is a criminal offence to assault anyone, adding that those who experience such incidents should report to the nearest police station.  
  
Omotoso said, “It is a criminal offence to harass people on the streets. No one has the right to harass anybody. Whoever experiences such an incident can inform us or the nearest police station, and the matter will be taken up. If we identify those spots, we will also inform the neighbourhood watch and other security agencies to keep an eye on them.  
  
“Also, when people are harassed, they should go to the police to have it resolved, instead of turning to social media.”