How to stop sexual violence against women

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According to a 2021 report by Amnesty International, efforts by the government to stop the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence in Nigeria have yielded little or no results.  
  
Rape still persists at crisis levels with most survivors denied justice. In many instances, rapists avoid prosecution, and hundreds of rape cases are unreported due to pervasive corruption, stigma, and victim blaming.  
  
Accurate statistics of sexual violence against women in Nigeria are difficult to come by, essentially because in our country, insensitivity, and the fear of stigma (or persecution) discourage targets of sexual violence from formalising the reports of incidents.  
  
This reluctance, however, has only contributed to the rise in a culture of impunity on the part of the perpetrators.  
  
According to the United Nations, there were 11,200 reported rape cases in Nigeria in 2020. The Lagos State Police Command has also confirmed that it recorded 111 sexual assault cases against women between April and June 2023.  
  
Another report by the Women at Risk International Foundation has it that between 2012 and 2013, about 30 per cent of women in Nigeria experienced one form of domestic violence or another. Findings from a national survey carried out in 2014 on violence against children in Nigeria confirmed one in four females reported experiencing sexual violence in childhood with approximately 70% reporting more than one incident of sexual violence.  
  
In the same study, it was found that 24.8% of females ages 18 to 24 years experienced sexual abuse prior to age 18 of which 5% sought help, with only 3.5% receiving any services.  
  
However, many other findings have highlighted the prevalence of sexual violence and the fact that our society seems to be living in denial about the issue.  
  
WARIF founder, Kemi DaSilva-Ibru, said, “33% of women and girls aged between 15 and 49 in Nigeria have experienced physical and or sexual abuse in their lifetime.”  
  
The Amnesty Report titled: Nigeria: A Harrowing Journey; Access to Justice for Women and Girls Survivors of Rape covers traumatic cases of sexual violence against women and girls, including a six-year-old and an 11-year-old who were attacked so viciously they died.  
  
The report reveals how harmful cultural stereotypes, failures of law enforcement to investigate rape cases, toxic misogyny and insufficient support for survivors, have created a culture of silence and impunity which continues to fail hundreds of women and girls every year.  
  
The time to act is now. The culture of silence and tolerance towards the actions of sexual monsters must end now. A lot can be done to stem the tide. Our women should no longer exist for fear of being harassed by deranged psychopaths. Here are a few suggestions on what we can do in Nigeria to make our society safer for our women and the girl child.  
  
Our courts must be more proactive and stringent in applying sanctions, as some of the verdicts, for the few that have been successfully prosecuted appear ridiculous. Almost like a slap in the wrist of perpetrators.  
  
The debate on capital punishment for some classes of crimes in Nigeria has remained inconclusive. To successfully tackle the menace of sexual harassment and rape of women in Nigeria, capital punishment is actually not a bad idea.  
  
Despite Nigeria’s international human rights obligation to enact, implement and monitor legislation addressing all forms of violence against women, women and girls continue to face discrimination in law and practice.  
  
The definition of rape under the Criminal Code, which is applicable in the southern part of Nigeria, and the Penal Code, which is applicable in northern Nigeria, are both obsolete. The Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act expanded the scope and definition of rape but was silent on consent.  
  
Despite expanding the legal scope of the definition of rape the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act and other laws have limited jurisdiction. Even in states where the Act and other laws have been domesticated, there has been no intentional enforcement or implementation of the law. That has to stop.  
  
Our society also needs to be alive to its responsibility. Parents, guardians, schools, community heads and religious leaders must all be involved in the fight against this menace.  
  
Parents should be more cautious about the access they create around their girl child. Women should also be extremely watchful and don’t give any room for sexual prey. A very simple advice to women is to never allow themselves to be caught in an extremely private place with a man that could make them vulnerable. It should be “trust nobody”.  
  
The culture of silence should be eradicated. The girl child and women should be encouraged to speak out. Promotions against the stigmatisation of victims should be encouraged and supported. A point of safe, protective, and comforting recourse must exist for victims of sexual violence to address their immediate needs as well as to enable them to summon the courage to pursue the ends of justice.  
  
…Balikis, a woman and girl child rights activist, writes from Lagos.