I feel damaged for life, says 24-year-old lady allegedly defiled at childhood by uncle, dad’s friend

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Child sexual assault survivors are usually hesitant to speak out about alleged violation due to associated pain, degradation and helplessness.  
  
In this report, TESSY IGOMU chronicles the agony and struggles of a traumatised young lady in her pursuit of justice after alleged defilement by two prominent figures in her family, and how society and the justice system seem at odds with her quest  
  
Allegedly defiled by uncle, father’s friend  
  
“I have difficulty getting enough rest. I sleep and wake up drenched in sweat, even when it’s cold. I consistently experience nightmares,” were the words of Hirhyel Hassan, as she curled up on a seat in tears.  
  
She is 24, but claimed to have lived almost 19 years of her life as an emotional wreak after alleged sexual molestation by two elderly people in her family.  
  
Her ordeal, based on reports, is common with women who have gone through traumatic experiences.  
  
According to a 2018 study by Rutgers-New Brunswick, victims of sexual assault experience more vivid memories than women coping with the aftermath of other traumatic, life-altering events not associated with sexual violence.  
  
It noted that 70 per cent of victims experience moderate-to-severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and have a hard time overcoming it.  
  
“The medical condition typically takes the form of nightmares, flashbacks, anger, depression, suicidal thoughts, feelings of guilt, eating disorder and shame that can surface immediately or years after,” the study stated.  
  
The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention noted that child sexual abuse is a significant public health problem and an adverse childhood experience.  
  
According to the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund, abuse in all its forms is a daily reality for many Nigerian children and only a fraction ever receive help.  
  
UNICEF stated that six out of every 10 children experience some form of violence, one in four girls and 10 per cent of boys have been victims of sexual violence, and that one in four boys and one in 10 girls under 18 years are also victims.  
  
For some, these abusers are not strangers but faces they share close ties with. And that seems to be the case of Hirhyel, who alleged that she was sexually molested between the ages of five and 10 by her uncle, Ibrahim Bdliya, and father’s childhood friend, Prof David Bwala.  
  
The young lady tells our correspondent that she is struggling to get closure and justice from a system that continues to deepen her pains.  
  
She laments that like other victims, society seems bent on victim-shaming and subduing her into silence, without referencing the psychological trauma that dogs her path daily.  
  
Hirhyel says she feels violated and scarred, adding that she carries a festering wound allegedly inflicted on her during childhood by close family members she trusted, respected and expected to protect her innocence.  
  
When the young lady contacted our correspondent from Abuja, she revealed that she still suffers from the psychological trauma caused by the alleged acts.  
  
“I am undergoing therapy to salvage what is left of my mental state,” she said.  
  
The pain in her voice was evident, but nothing prepared our correspondent for the degree of hurt evident in the eyes of Hirhyel, when she took an early morning flight to Lagos from Abuja, to share a heartrending story of what she alleged to be betrayed trust and shattered innocence with PUNCH Investigations.  
  
All Hirhyel wants is justice; one that may give her an ounce of closure in the long run. She claims that ironically, the justice system has continued to deny her that, while well-meaning individuals are bent on victim-shaming and silencing her.  
  
“My stolen chastity, shattered childhood”  
  
Hirhyel, the last in a family of three girls, claimed that her chastity was stolen and childhood shattered by men she respected. She alleged that in 2002, Ibrahim, a teacher at the Police Primary School, Dutse, Jigawa State, leveraged on his unfettered access to their home in Kano State to defile her.  
  
She recounted, “In 2002, Ibrahim, my father’s adopted brother, while on transit during official trips to Port Harcourt, would stop over at our home in Kano, and once we were alone, would sexually molest me. I was five.  
  
“My two older sisters were always away at school then, leaving just me, my father and mother. Ibrahim was a familiar face and had access to the house like a senior brother would. So, whenever he came around, he would be allowed to play with me.  
  
“It all started one day during one of his stops. As soon as my father went out and my mother went to the backyard to do some chores, Ibrahim carried and put me on his lap, caressed my then bare chest and forced his finger into my private parts. I screamed and cried for help but he covered my mouth and threatened to kill me if I ever told anyone about what happened.  
  
“On one occasion, he forced his fingers too deep and the pain was really unbearable. I cried and struggled to escape but his grip was too strong. My mother, who was the only one around, was at the backyard.  
  
“I was afraid of him because he was not really the friendliest uncle. On some days, he would command me to perform oral sex on him. I would cry because it was uncomfortable and suffocating, but he didn’t care.  
  
“Each time he came around, I would be scared because the abuse would happen. At a point, I lost count of the number of times he sexually molested me.”  
  
Hirhyel said she got a reprieve after her family moved to Maiduguri.  
  
Father’s trust allegedly betrayed  
  
Hirhyel’s said her ordeal seemed unending, claiming that years after, at the age of nine, her father’s friend of over four decades, Bwala, allegedly started molesting her sexually.  
  
She alleged that the man, a professor at the University of Maiduguri, capitalised on her father’s absence and mother’s ill health to satisfy his paedophilia urge.  
  
“Between 2007 and 2008, my father worked at Damaturu, Yobe State, and only came home at weekends. My mother had two strokes and was paralysed, while my sisters were in school.  
  
“Prof. Bwala would stop by in the house to check on us like any other family member and friends. He always brought colourful biros and rubber bands, which he would give me to share with my friends at school.  
  
“He would tell me to follow him to his car to carry the things he bought for us. Once we got outside, he would tell me to enter the car and dip his finger inside my private parts, rub my chest and tell me to be a good girl. We lived in a big gated compound and nobody could see from outside.  
  
“He molested me sexually several times and I was scared to talk because I felt no one would believe me. He had been a part of my family long before I was born,” Hirheyl alleged.  
  
Living with trauma, struggling with sleep  
  
Growing up, Hirhyel’s alleged encounters with the two men took a heavy toll on her educationally, physically, mentally and emotionally.  
  
The young lady said at a tender age, she started suffering from insomnia (lack of sleep) as images of the alleged abuses kept flashing through her mind.  
  
She recounted, “I had a troubled childhood. The fact that I lost my chastity was killing me. The experiences weighed down my spirit. It became difficult for me to maintain any good, healthy relationship with the opposite sex. I started having trust and anger issues, and became withdrawn. I became suicidal and my grades dropped drastically while in primary and secondary schools, and in the university.”  
  
Defilement statistics, consequences  
  
Statistics of sexual assaults and defilement keep rising and are trailed by horrendous, abominable acts perpetuated by family member, fathers and uncles against hapless young girls.  
  
The World Health Organisation revealed that 35 per cent of women worldwide experience some kind of physical or sexual assault in their lifetime, with adolescent girls are much more likely to be victims of rape, attempted rape or assault.  
  
However, beyond the rising figures and narratives, lives are forever impaired, as victims tend to live one day at a time as they navigate the maze of mental breakdown caused by the acts.  
  
Psychological experts averred that long after sexual defilements and abuses might have been committed, victims face lifelong trauma that sometimes makes them gradually slip into mental health challenges that impact negatively on society at large.  
  
Wounds reopened  
  
Not seeing her alleged abusers for years, Hirhyel claimed, soothed her pains, but that the wounds were reopened when they resurfaced years later.  
  
“My spirit was shattered when Ibrahim returned to victim-shame and mock me with details of his alleged acts,” she added.  
  
“When I turned 11, Ibrahim visited Maiduguri to see my sick grandfather. One of the days he joined me and my father in the car to get groceries from a nearby store, and as soon as my father stepped out of the car, Ibrahim turned to me at the back seat, looked me straight in the eyes and called me a bastard and slut in Hausa language.  
  
“He said I was dirty and naughty, and continued to remind me of the horrible things he did to me as a child. I cried and begged him to stop but he continued.  
  
“Clearly, he was not remorseful or apologetic. He stopped speaking to me when he saw my father coming. When my father asked him why I was crying, he feigned ignorance.”  
  
Hirhyel said years after the encounter, she was in her room and was feeling emotionally down and decided to confront Ibrahim on Facebook over the sexual molestation.  
  
She recalled that in 2018, Ibrahim sent her a Facebook friend request and she sent him a message to know why he contacted her after the alleged defilements.  
  
Hirhyel recounted, “One night in 2019, I was at a tipping point and couldn’t sleep. I thought about what was done to me by the two men. I decided to confront Ibrahim and have him explain why he defiled me. I wanted him to know how miserable his acts made me and how I was suffering emotionally and psychologically. I wanted him to know that I was not comfortable with him faking a normal family relationship with me.  
  
“His response left me feeling more terrible. He told me to forgive and forget as he had forgotten everything. I promised to open up to my family members one day.”  
  
Hirhyel shared the Facebook chat with PUNCH Investigations.  
  
The distraught young lady revealed that years after, she was shattered and started having suicide ideations after a chance meeting with Bwala. She said he accompanied her father (Hassan) to the boarding school she attended in Jos, Plateau State.  
  
“I was filled with rage on seeing him. I always begged my father to spend more time with me. But on that day, he was surprised that I asked him to leave. I felt dirty and useless. My school emphasised on purity and chastity and I saw myself unworthy. Years after, I was told I had post-traumatic stress disorder.  
  
Post-traumatic stress disorder  
  
According to online health portal, Mayo Clinic, PTSD is a mental health condition triggered by a terrifying event—either by experiencing or witnessing it.  
  
The portal explained that symptoms might include flashbacks, nightmares and severe anxiety, as well as uncontrollable thoughts about the event.  
  
“Symptoms may start within one month of a traumatic event, but sometimes, it may not appear until years after the event,” the health portal added.  
  
Rape, sexual assault victims need therapy  
  
A Professor of Clinical Psychology and Personality Assessment at the Lagos State University, Kayode Taiwo, said having been diagnosed with PTSD, Hirhyel, like any other sexual assault survivors, must access professional help to avoid mental breakdown.  
  
“Such experiences never really heal. They remain sad reminders for life because they will always feel violated and stripped of the most sacred part of them.  
  
“It is life-long and can alter the destiny of the person involved. The first step towards healing is to seek professional help (therapy) or confide in a trusted person. The second is coming to terms with the experience.”  
  
Seeking justice  
  
After over a decade of secretly nursing the pains of the alleged sexual defilement, Hirhyel opened up to her family.  
  
“In September 2020, I told my father and he broke down. I later opened up to my sisters in 2021, and they couldn’t deal with the revelation. Everyone was shocked that I could live with such a burden for years,” she added.  
  
With her family’s backing, Hirhyel resolved to seek redress in court.  
  
Chosen time for disclosure  
  
Asked why she chose this time to voice out, she said, “I was so scared of them. I was scared nobody would believe me. Now that I am older, I am less afraid of them and people’s opinion of me. Ibrahim once threatened to kill me, but I don’t think he can hurt me any more than he did in the past.  
  
“I want these men to pay for what they did to me and let it serve as a lesson to others. I don’t think it is right for those who violated me to have access to children or teenagers. There is a need to protect other young, vulnerable girls. I don’t want other children to experience what happened to me.  
  
“Beyond that, I want to give voice to several girls that have been violated, silenced and made to hurt internally by society. I want survivors to speak out, name and shame their abusers.”  
  
What the law says  
  
According to the UN, in Nigeria, sexual abuse against children under 18 is considered a serious offence under Section 218 of the country’s Criminal Code.  
  
“Any person who attempts to have unlawful carnal knowledge of a girl under the age of 13 years is guilty of a felony and is liable to imprisonment for fourteen years, with or without caning,” the law stipulates.  
  
Section 31 of the Child Rights Act of 2003, which has been domesticated in 28 states, criminalised sexual abuse and prescribed a jail term of 14 years for anyone convicted.  
  
Even though the Nigerian authorities’ declared a state of emergency on gender-based violence in 2020, rape and child defilement continues to thrive with most survivors denied justice.  
  
For instance, in June 2020, the Nigeria Police said they recorded 717 incidents of rape between January and May.  
  
The then Inspector-General of Police, Mohammed Adamu, said 799 suspects were arrested, adding that while 631 cases were conclusively investigated and charged, 52 cases were still under investigation.  
  
Ineffective sex offender register  
  
One in four Nigerian women is sexually abused before they turn 18, with the majority of the cases not prosecuted, according to UNICEF.  
  
One reason given for lack of prosecution is unavailability of database on those convicted for sexual offences.  
  
Presently, only 10 out of the 36 states keep databases of convicted sexual offenders, and reports show they are not regularly updated.  
  
Amid concerns by campaigners that the majority of sexual offenders escape prosecution due to failings in the justice system, the first National Sexual Offender Register was launched in 2019.  
  
The electronic-based system was structured to contain the names of those prosecuted for sexual violence since 2015, while suspects cleared will also be recorded in the section accessible to only law enforcement agencies.  
  
Meeting with Ibrahim and Bwala  
  
Following Hirhyel’s confession, her family set up independent meetings with the two accused persons to confirm if the allegations were true.  
  
She recalled that her father never looked forward to the meeting because he dreaded the outcome.  
  
“He couldn’t come to terms with the fact that his bosom friend and a brother could defile a child, whom they all witnessed her birth,” she added.  
  
PUNCH Investigations learnt that during the meeting, Ibrahim admitted to the alleged sexual molestation and appealed for forgiveness.  
  
“He initially denied and kept looking at me straight in the eye, trying to intimidate me. I recorded the meeting, which was held in English, Hausa and Babur languages, because that might be the only evidence I have,” she said.  
  
During the meeting with Bwala, which was brokered by Dr Kujara Ndahi, a mutual family friend, it was learnt that he initially denied but later admitted and apologised. The meeting, Hirhyel revealed, was also recorded.  
  
Civil case instituted  
  
Relying on Bwala’s audio confession as evidence, a civil suit was filed for the enforcement of Hirhyel’s fundamental human right to dignity in August 2021 at the High Court in Maiduguri.  
  
Hirhyel’s elder sister, Zainab, told PUNCH Investigations that the family was emotionally drained by the handling of the case by the court.  
  
Police, justice ministry request out-of-court settlement  
  
Zainab said in October 2021, a petition was written to the police by the International Federation of Female Lawyers, Maiduguri chapter, to commence a criminal case against Bwala.  
  
She said on October 12, her statement and Hirhyel’s were submitted to the Investigating Police Officer, Inspector Apogu Damaas, after which they went with him to drop an invitation letter for Bwala at the office of the Vice-Chancellor, University of Maiduguri.  
  
Zainab said the letter was received by the VC’s Chief Security Officer, who promised to ensure that the professor honoured the invitation.  
  
“The next day, both parties met with the Deputy Commissioner of Police, but we felt unsettled when the lead lawyer to Prof. Bwala stayed back when we were asked to leave.  
  
“Before leaving, we submitted a flash drive containing the audio recording (confession) and a statement from my father to the police,” she said.  
  
FIDA, police unresponsive  
  
Zainab said when there was no feedback as of December, she called the then FIDA chairperson, Amina Mustapha, to find out why it was taking long, only to be told that the Borno State Ministry of Justice advised that the criminal case be terminated for lack of corroboration.  
  
She alleged, “FIDA was unwilling to get feedback from the police for us. I went to the Head of Gender Unit, Mary Stephen, and she confirmed the ministry’s decision.  
  
“I requested to see a copy of the report to know if the audio given to the IPO was mentioned and if the ministry’s decision was despite the audio recording. I was told the documents were classified. I later confirmed that the police didn’t forward the audio confession to the ministry, hence the advice to terminate the matter.”  
  
Zainab said when she requested a copy of the petition written on their behalf by FIDA to the police, her request was turned down.  
  
“I wanted to reference it for re-investigation. The former chairperson, Amina Mustapha, who wrote the petition declined, while the current chairperson, Hafsat Bappah, equally refused, saying that the body didn’t want its letterhead to appear in any appeal because they had a cordial relationship with the police to protect,” she claimed.  
  
Zainab said she had to engage the services of a lawyer to interface with the police.  
  
“Thrice that the lawyer went to re-open the matter, he was either told that the officer-in-charge of the Legal Unit or the IPO was not around.  
  
“On one occasion, the IPO said he was out of town, only for him to appear in court as a witness in the ongoing civil suit to testify that there was no criminal case against Prof. Bwala.”  
  
IPO’s reaction  
  
When the IPO, Inspector Damaas, was contacted to react to the issues raised by Zainab, he asked our correspondent to come to the police headquarters in Maiduguri to get the information needed.  
  
He said, “As a police officer, it won’t be fair to speak with you over the phone on the issues you’re investigating. I don’t have the authority. When you come, I have an officer ahead of me that can tell you better about the outcome of the case.”  
  
Alleged attempts to silence Hirhyel  
  
Zainab decried attempts to silence Hirhyel and compel her to forgive those who allegedly defiled her.  
  
She said, “Some of our immediate family members have been unsupportive as they think my sister has a lot to lose as a female by putting herself out there. They insisted that she must forgive and has been branded disobedient for attempting to seek redress legally.  
  
“The host of the meeting held with Prof. Bwala threw her weight behind him. She was angry that my sister recorded the meeting and took the matter to court. She insisted that the matter be concluded in the Christian way.  
  
“It was sad to see her testify in his favour that the meeting was aimed at an amicable resolution, hence his confession should not be used against him.”  
  
Court’s ruling  
  
Final hearing for the civil suit filed against Bwala came up for hearing on April 19, 2022 at the High Court in Maiduguri before Justice Haruna Mshelia.  
  
However, it was dismissed on the grounds that the evidence tendered, one of which was the audio recording of the meeting, was not admissible based on Section 26 of the Evidence Act, 2011 as amended.  
  
The judge noted that the respondent admitted to the allegation in the spirit of settlement, and so the recording could not be used as evidence against him.  
  
Family, lawyer to appeal ruling  
  
Counsel for Hirheyl, Ibrahim Ngadda and Zainab expressed dissatisfaction with the judgment and promised to appeal it. They noted that Hirheyl never consented to any settlement.  
  
Meanwhile, Zainab said they were re-filing a civil case against Ibrahim at the High Court in Kano as the court in Jigawa State, where it was initially instituted in August 2021, lacked jurisdiction to entertain the matter.  
  
Reacting to the judgment, a legal practitioner and Chief Executive Officer, House of Justice, Gloria Ballason, said the whole regime of evidence for sexual crimes should be reviewed to reflect peculiarities of crimes.  
  
Ballason stated, “If a crime happened behind closed doors and if what you have is just the admission of the perpetrator and the victim is not able to articulate what transpired until the time they are able to work up their mental states, do we then say that the evidence has expired?  
  
“Crimes are not time bound. When it comes to sexual crimes like that, what should come as evidence is a medical report that includes penetration, and if there were lacerations on the body of the victims. All of these are time bound.  
  
“If we don’t report within a specific time, it means that the primary body of evidence will be lost. Meanwhile, the effect of that crime is continuing. That’s a contradiction itself and it doesn’t lead to justice. Substantive justice is if someone has admitted that he committed the crime. The question is, was he under duress when he admitted to it? If he wasn’t under duress, then it should be admissible in evidence for the purpose of prosecution.”  
  
Ibrahim declines comment  
  
When Ibrahim was contacted, he denied knowledge of the matter and claimed not to bear the name. When our correspondent persisted, he replied, “I am not interested in this conversation,” and hung up. He later switched off his telephone.  
  
Bwala mute  
  
On two occasions when Bwala was contacted, he picked the calls but after our correspondent introduced herself and stated the purpose of the call, he hung up after saying ‘hello’ repeatedly. Subsequent calls were never answered.  
  
Two text messages sent to him have yet to be responded to as of the time of filing this report.  
  
FIDA’s reaction  
  
When PUNCH Investigations got across to Mustapha, FIDA’s former chairperson, she admitted writing the petition, but denied refusing to issue the family a copy to further pursue the case.  
  
“I proudly wrote that petition as the chairperson of FIDA, protecting the rights of that lady. I am no longer the chairperson and I cannot speak on that case. I am not acting as an individual but on behalf of the organisation,” she said.  
  
The present FIDA chairperson, Bappah, refused to comment when contacted on the phone. She hung up after a formal introduction was made and the reason for the call stated. Subsequently, her phone was not reachable.  
  
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