ICYMI: Why rape victims shouldn’t rush into marriage – Ijayekunle, anti-rape activist

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Social change advocate and an anti-rape activist, Funke Ijayekunle, tells MOBOLA SADIQ why she forgave the person who raped her, Nigeria’s worrisome rape culture, lack of empathy for victims and other issues  
  
Tell us about your background?  
  
I am a certified neuro-linguistic programming and emotional intelligence practitioner, a behavioural therapist, counsellor and mindfulness coach. I have records in social change advocacy as well as strong business communication. I am also a communicator with over nine years’ experience as a banker in two different banks in Nigeria, where I was a customer service officer and contact centre team lead respectively. I am the third child in a family of eight and we were raised by a strict disciplinarian. I currently run a private counselling business and I have three children.  
  
You have openly spoken about your rape ordeal when you were 16 years old. Are the wounds still fresh?  
  
The wounds are not fresh but I have not forgotten the incident either. I remember everything that happened from the standpoint of a survivor and an advocate, not a victim.  
  
You mentioned that culprit was a close family friend. Have you forgiven him for the dastardly act and did he apologise after the incident?  
  
I forgave him before he apologised because I know forgiving someone does not mean justifying the act or excusing the offence. Forgiveness is a strong medicine, especially in the face of injustice. When life hits one hard, there is nothing as effective as forgiveness for healing deep wounds.  
  
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How beneficial has your non-governmental organisation, Heart Minders Initiative, to rape survivors?  
  
Our records and data speak for us. We run a reliable sensitisation hub for all forms of gender-based violence in Lagos State. We take pride in channelling our energy into sensitisation – a preventive approach― rather than waiting till abuse occurs. We have done a lot, from teaching sex education in secondary schools to our annual walk against rape and organising community sensitisation seminars and training. The Heart Minders societal advancement initiative have been at the forefront of creating a conducive and safe environment for cases of sexual abuse and rape in Nigeria.  
  
Why do you think some people still stigmatise rape victims?  
  
Rape culture and the lack of empathy, as a society, are very worrisome. Sadly, society has normalised victim-shaming. A lot of people do not have enough empathy or awareness about the pain associated with sexual assault and the courage it takes survivors to speak up. Bearing in mind that rape and sexual assault are disgustingly common, one would think that societal views and responses to such horrific crimes would be more empathetic toward the victim. Unfortunately, that is not the case. A lot of people do not often realise that their responses, crude comments and facial expressions could humiliate and discourage the victims. More sensitisation for adults is necessary and we need to begin to consciously raise emotionally intelligent children who understand that we are humans first before our sexuality.  
  
Males are also victims of sexual abuse. Does your NGO cater to them too?  
  
We have an ongoing sensitisation campaign called #mengetrapedtoo. It was designed to shine the spotlight on male rape victims. We rarely receive reports from male victims but we have offered psychosocial and other forms of support to the few we have received.  
  
It seems the public hardly believes stories of males who were raped, compared to that of females. What’s your take on that?  
  
This is true and the reason is not far-fetched― gender norms. Many survivors feel guilt or shame, so they often torture themselves with thoughts that question their manhood. Male rape victims would rather suffer in silence than speak out.  
  
Do female victims totally heal after their horrific experience?  
  
I doubt that female rape victims totally heal after their horrific experience. Sexual violence can have psychological, emotional and physical effects on a survivor. These effects are not always easy to deal with but with the right help, they can be managed.  
  
In recent times, more people have been speaking about their rape experience. Do you think that’s part of the healing process?  
  
Yes, I really think so. Speaking up or breaking the silence is so empowering for these people. One of the tools used by rape perpetrators is silence, so when a survivor finally finds his/her voice, it is the beginning of their healing process. Furthermore, speaking up breaks the circle of repeat offenders.  
  
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Some people have questioned why some rape survivors only speak up many years after the ordeal. Why is it so?  
  
The story belongs to the survivor and the survivor would only speak when they are willing, ready and able.  
  
Some rape victims do not get justice because no physical evidence was produced to nail their assaulters. How can this be helped?  
  
Unfortunately, rape is an evidence-based crime. That is why in saner climes, the police are capable of conducting a systematic search for evidence. But in Nigeria, the story is shameful. However, as one of the NGOs and sexual assault referral centres, especially in Lagos, I can say that we are making efforts to combat this by ensuring emergency intervention within the state so as to get victims to a safe place after the assault and preserve evidence.  
  
Also, during our continuous sensitisation exercise, we always advise on how to preserve evidence and ensure that cases are handled appropriately.  
  
Some people claim that women become nymphomaniacs if they were introduced to sex early. Is that correct?  
  
I have not laid hands on any research report that proves that. Being introduced to sex early is different from rape, so I may need more clarification.  
  
Do rape survivors, sometimes, have problems in marriage?  
  
Rape is a traumatic experience and it takes time to heal. It is important to have a coping strategy for getting through the bad feelings of a traumatic event, including rape but getting married is not one of them. Rape survivors need to give themselves time to process what happened. They need to seek professional help and support before rushing into marriage. After a rape experience, it is advisable to take some time off or one might have a problem.  
  
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Your NGO interfaces with youths about relationships and sex. What advice do you usually give them?  
  
I encourage total abstinence until marriage and it is not for any religious reason. I believe youths can have great and fulfilling relationships without indulging in sex until they are absolutely ready.  
  
There is no such thing as a ‘normal’ age for becoming sexually active. Deciding to have sex is a highly personal decision that could be influenced by a variety of factors such as religion, family and personal values, peer influence, and the status of the relationship.  
  
Teenagers and young adults who get involved in romantic relationships are twice likely to be involved in risky sexual behaviour, compared to those who are not in relationships. So, young people should learn to make wise choices.  
  
There seems to be a rise in drug abuse among youths. What do you think is responsible for that?  
  
I would like to think that these habits stem from peer pressure. I advise parents to be more present in parenting because research has shown that adolescents are more likely to use drugs when they feel neglected by their parents.  
  
At what age would you advise parents to begin talking about sex and relationships with their children?  
  
I would advise parents to begin having those kinds of conversations with their children from age two. This is because, at that age, children would begin to embrace new environments. I would also advise parents to start with the basics, by teaching them the names of all body parts, and the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. These teachings or pep talks should continue as the kids grow.  
  
It is said that Nigerians underestimate the usefulness of therapists and psychologists, hence don’t seek their services. What’s your take on that?  
  
That assertion is very correct but thankfully, things have begun to change. With increasing awareness and advocacy around mental health, more elite are embracing therapy and seeing psychologists.  
  
What do you think should be the punishment for paedophiles, molesters and rapists?  
  
Rape is a monstrous crime and I would love a capital punishment for it.  
  
What are the most memorable moments of your time as the Executive Director of Heart Minders Initiative?  
  
One of the most memorable moments was the day we got a verdict on our first incest case in 2016. It was such an exhilarating time for us.  
  
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What’s the most heartbreaking story you’ve been told in the course of your work as a social advocate?  
  
Every story is heartbreaking and unique. However, I feel more pain when it involves a minor.  
  
Why do you think some fathers become sexually attracted to their children to the extent of molesting them?  
  
It is unexplainable in simple terms and there are deeper mental health issues with perpetrators of incest. It is demonic and a supreme betrayal of trust, and innocence. A father-daughter relationship should be such that it prepares the girl to become confident, better and stronger. It is important for victims of incest to seek emergency medical care as soon as possible as this would help them in coping with the emotional and physical trauma that comes with the dastardly act.  
  
Do you think the government and NGOs are doing enough for rape victims in Nigeria?  
  
No. They have not done enough. Government must be committed to upholding a zero-tolerance policy for sexual abuse and it must be practised every day. They should donate to organisations that empower women, amplify their voices and support survivors. Lagos State and a few other southwest states are making efforts via intervention but they can do more, especially in the areas of prosecution, training of police officers as responders, and improvement of correctional centres. The government needs to be deliberate about it’s policies.  
  
Do you think women are adequately represented in government?  
  
No, I think that women are not sufficiently represented in government. The average of women’s political participation in Nigeria is about 6.7 per cent in elective and appointive positions, and that is ridiculously low in my view.  
  
What are your hobbies?  
  
I like cooking and watching football matches.  
  
What is your beauty routine?  
  
When one is over 40, one would want to pay more attention to what goes inside one. I take lots of water, stay consistent with my regimen and never get too tired of using face cleansers, every night.  
  
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