Nigeria should fiercely fight rape epidemic

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THE recent gruesome death of two female students within a space of days in the hands of murderous rapists has cast a cold light on how badly females are treated in Nigeria. It is an ugly trend depicting the mushrooming cases of sexual assault across the country.  
  
In the first of the two reprehensible acts, Uwaila Omozuwa, a 100-level student of the University of Benin, was callously clobbered to death after she had been sexually violated inside a church, where she had sought sanctuary to carry out her studies undisturbed. Not only was she beaten and gang-raped, her assailants smashed her head with a fire extinguisher before abandoning her to a painful death. Despite a spirited fight to stay alive, she eventually gave up the ghost on May 31.  
  
Barely some days after Omozuwa’s horrific death, Barakat Bello, a National Diploma student of the Federal College of Animal and Production Technology, in Ibadan, the Oyo State capital, met a similar fate in the hands of rapists. The 17-year-old was attacked right inside her home by three men and her remains were picked up at the back of the house “with deep cuts all over her body,” according to her distraught father.  
  
Outrage has continued to grow over these heinous crimes, but beyond public rage, the worrying question is: who is the next victim? Every girl or woman now lives in fear, as nobody knows who the next casualty would be. This is because the government has failed to check the rising cases of violence against women. Taking place at almost the same time as Bello was undergoing her ordeal was another incident in Ado-Ekiti, the Ekiti State capital, where a girl hawking sachet water was violently raped and hospitalised. She was reportedly attacked by hoodlums wielding broken bottles.  
  
As the society tries to deal with one incident, another seems to pop up somewhere else, but the epidemic did not just start with the recent cases. Nigeria’s patriarchal society is partly to blame for the scourge. There is a welter of research linking the handling of rape by the criminal justice system with the gender inequality found in patriarchal communities. Sometime in October 2018, the people of Benue State were roiled by the death of Elizabeth Ogbaje, 13, after she was repeatedly raped by a man she was living with and his son. The girl, who had been serially abused since she was eight, later developed vesico-vaginal fistula, a medical complication that ultimately hastened her premature death.  
  
All over the country, there are bizarre cases of rape of the most monstrous types. The scourge does not spare old women and babies! A particularly macabre incident was the case of a 27-year-old who performed the abominable act of forcibly having carnal knowledge of his own mother in Ado-Ekiti in 2013. There are also cases where fathers have forcibly violated their own daughters, even when they are still minors. Something, therefore, needs to be done to save the country from this epidemic of rape.  
  
Generally, rape is defined as unlawful sexual act without the consent of one of the parties involved. The Metropolitan Police of the United Kingdom defines it as a person’s intentional penetration of “another’s vagina, anus or mouth with a penis, without the other person’s consent.” Although people rarely talk about it, there is also another dimension to rape, which involves male victims.  
  
According to the World Population Review, a website dedicated to global population data and trend, rape is a global problem, with South Africa at the peak of the pack, witnessing 132.4 cases in every 100,000 persons. The WPR contends that, in the United States, for instance — as in many other countries, including Nigeria — 70 per cent of rape is committed by those the victims know.  
  
Rape is grossly underreported, either for fear of reprisal, victim shaming, family getting to know about it or not being taken seriously by law enforcement. This has clearly emboldened others to the crime. “Only nine per cent of rapists in the US get prosecuted and only three per cent of rapists will spend a day in prison,” the WPR said. With 97 per cent evading punishment, therefore, it is difficult to see how the fear of the law could serve as a deterrent to the criminals.  
  
Here in Nigeria, the story is not different. Rape, quite often, is treated with levity. Many victims prefer to suffer the indignity in silence because of the stigmatisation that comes with it and the societal indifference. The few that summon the courage to report rape are soon discouraged when the police that should act decisively in their favour decide to trivialise the issue. This is why it has become so widespread in the country, but action still needs to be taken to stem the tide of the crime. A VOA report last year, quoting a police spokesperson in Kaduna, said most cases of rape were never investigated because parents wanted to protect their children from stigma.  
  
Not all rapes come with physical injury alone. Some leave the victims with life-long emotional and psychological scars. This is the most difficult aspect of coping with rape, as people who could be of help may not even know what the victim is going through. Some end up with sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies. Others find it difficult to enjoy marital life.  
  
The incident in Benin has rightly sparked outrage. Those who have spoken out include the wife of the President, Aisha Buhari, student unions and lawmakers. The President, Major General Muhammadu Buhari (retd.), has also called for the arrest and prosecution of the perpetrators. Usually, this is normal whenever serious crimes are committed in the country, but whether the perpetrators will actually be sought out and made to face the law remains to be seen.  
  
Rape, without mincing words, is condemnable, a crime that shames a society. Nigeria is fast losing the fight to the evil. This should jolt the authorities from their inertia and trigger a greater interest in tackling the heinous crime, which is fast assuming an epidemic proportion.  
  
The Buhari regime should send a clear message that the state takes women’s safety seriously. Many, including the federal lawmakers, are focusing on strengthening the law against rape, but the existing ones have not been painstakingly enforced. If, under the Criminal Code, the penalty for murder is death, that of rape is life imprisonment and attempted rape is 14 years, then nobody would say that these provisions are not stiff enough. The trial court that found four men guilty of murder, rape, kidnapping and other charges and sentenced them to death in March 2020, said the convicts deserved the harshest punishment for having “shocked the collective conscience” of India.  
  
Government must change the way it deals with this crime. There should be public awareness right from primary school to higher institutions on what rape victims can do to get justice. The country’s anti-rape laws should be reshaped to block all legal loopholes in the statute book. Besides, victims should be encouraged to make a report to the police rather than suffer in silence.  
  
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