Ogun State: Tackling the rape menace

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WHILE Nigerians are grappling with socioeconomic shocks, the country is plagued by another social nightmare. Reports of rape cases have continued to rise despite the guardrails in place. Crucially, states must enact strict laws and ensure enforcement, while undertaking the swift prosecution of sexual offenders.  
  
The menace came to light again recently in Ogun State. The state’s Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development stated that 269 minors and infants were raped between January and December 2023. Of the 269 victims, 52 were below the age of eight years. Alarmingly, only 14 of the criminals were prosecuted and jailed.  
  
Although the Director of Women’s Empowerment in the ministry, Wonuola Kazzim, stated that it has embarked on sensitisation programmes in markets, and schools with guardians, she lamented the absence of forensic instruments that have weakened evidence and prosecution. She pleaded with the state government to emplace special courts to fast-track sexual offence cases.  
  
Also, the state should collaborate with law enforcement agencies, NGOs, and communities to bring criminals to book and shield victims from stigmatisation.  
  
Rape is defined as an unlawful sexual act without the consent of one of the parties involved. Studies show that rape can lead to lifelong psychological traumas, unwanted pregnancies, and sexually transmitted diseases. Apart from physical injuries, it can disrupt the biological and emotional development and education of the victim.  
  
According to the US Bureau of Justice Statistics, most rape cases are perpetrated by relatives, family members, neighbours, or associates. It can also be committed by persons of authority and influence. The varied relationship between the oppressor and the victim often stifles the victim’s voice for fear of intimidation, stigma, love or familiarity with the offender, and implication to family members.  
  
Ogun is not the only state plagued by a surge in sexual offences. The Federal Ministry of Women Affairs reported 27,698 cases of sexual and gender-based violence between 2020 and 2023 across Nigeria.  
  
Therefore, states must activate a robust and publicly accessible sexual offences database to safeguard citizens from prowling sexual deviants. As of March 2022, only 10 out of 36 states had a database of convicted persons; only Lagos, Edo, and Ekiti make public the details. Ogun and other states should borrow a leaf out of the book of the three states.  
  
For instance, in February 2018, Lagos State inaugurated two sexual offences courts to try sexual abuse cases.  
  
Also, harsher sentences, including life imprisonment, should be imposed on perverse members of society.  
  
Elsewhere, Norway, Iceland, Finland, and Canada have comprehensive laws and strict penalties against rape, sexual molestation, and assault. On the continent, South Africa, Rwanda, Botswana, Namibia, and Liberia have extensive laws on sexual violence.  
  
Sweden has one of the most stringent legal frameworks against rape and sexual violence. Its laws cover forms of non-consensual acts, with the severity of punishment dependent on the circumstances of the crime, the age of the victim, and the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim.  
  
In Spain, a former head of the country’s football body is undergoing trial for allegedly kissing a female player in celebration of the country’s win at the FIFA Women’s World Cup in August 2023.  
  
Thus, the Ogun State Government must do all within its power to acquire effective forensic technology to prevent the scuttling of rape and sexual offence trials. Although the trauma of rape might ripple through the victims’ lifetime, they will be assuaged when their attackers receive maximum punishment for their indiscretion.  
  
Parents, guardians, and teachers must teach children to speak out against sexual molestation, abuse, or defilement. The police should create a sexual offences desk comprising trained, and responsive officers. NGOs, faith-based organisations, and communities should take up rape cases as part of their civic responsibilities.