Rape: Men are truly not wood

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Lately, a federal lawmaker from Borno State, Ahmed Jaha, walked back his comments that women who wanted to avoid being raped should learn to dress decently because — and this is according to him — “men are not wood.” The comments were reportedly made during a plenary session while the House of Representatives members deliberated on the domestication of the Violence Against Persons and Prohibition Act. Like several people have pointed out to Jaha, rape is not so much about sex and seduction, as it is about the use and abuse of power. Rapists do not see clothes; they see a potential victim. It is not the prospect of sexual jouissance that entices them but the thrill of breaking somebody’s spirits and discarding such a person afterward.  
  
While it was decent of Jaha to apologise after recognising his error, we should also not overlook the fact that what he insinuated is actually quite popular in the way people think and talk about rape. Some people take the idea of women inviting rape through their clothes as a self-evident truth, and they cut across the demographics of gender, status, age, race, and nationality. In 2019, a UK-based media house, The Independent, conducted a survey that found that 55 per cent of men and 41 per cent of women believed that one’s clothes could invite unwanted sexual advances. There was a similar study in the USA in 2015, where an overwhelming number of people suggested that campus rapes occur because a victim was “asking for it.” I am confident that if a similar study were to be conducted in Nigeria, a preponderant percentage of the responses would say the same thing.  
  
The other day, while the sex-for-grades scandal in the universities raged, a major Nigerian newspaper wrote an editorial on the subject. After making enough right noises about how sexual assaults in higher learning institutions were ethically wrong, the editorial sought to balance the blame. They added that female undergraduates too needed to dress decently because — and this is according to the paper — “the way you dress is the way you are addressed.” First, justifying a biased treatment of people based on their outward appearance is unadulterated nonsense. If we go by that argument, a politician who has fed fat on public resources deserves more courtesy because he appears in well-starched and ironed agbada. His dispossessed victim, who cannot afford to match up to his sartorial tastes, should be addressed shabbily because of the way they dress? No. People should be addressed politely because of the fact of their humanity, not by their physical appearances.  
  
Underlying the counsel people dish out to women about their dressing is the myth of men’s uncontrollable urges. Those newspaper editorialisers are not the only ones that have been wired into an uncritical acceptance of the lie that men weaken at the sight of a woman’s flesh. You hear the same in religious houses where they urge women to cover up every inch of their bodies, so they do not lead poor men astray. Rather than challenge the potential assaulters in their midst to do better, they place the moral weight of every assault situation on a potential female victim. You go to universities in different parts of Nigeria and what welcomes you is a huge billboard prescribing dress codes to students and telling them to dress the way they want to be addressed. Some departments in institutions of higher learning put more emphasis on their students’ appearance than in training them in habits of the mind. Rather than let reality challenge the myth of clothes as protection against sexual assault, we hold on to comforting —and yet hollow— dogmas.  
  
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There are too many people out there—including women— whose beliefs about sexual assault align with what Jaha said. Many of them probably take his apology as a silencing of the truth by the forces of political correctness. It is funny when Africans echo the idea that revealing clothing leads to sexual assault. Up until the time of colonisation, and even well after, many Africans barely wore clothes. They let it all hang out. When you review the archived photos of Africans taken by colonialists, you will find that people who walked around in their birthday suits. Most of them had no use for clothes. Yet, the men in those societies —at least judging from the nostalgic accounts taken from traditional societies— were far more restrained in their conduct than the so-called civilised men who convince themselves they are incapable of self-discipline. Till now, in some rural communities, people still dress in scant clothing. Those that make too much about clothes do so because they have yet to understand the psychology of sexual violence.  
  
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In recent times, there has been an overwhelming report of rape cases. There is the pending case of 13-year-old Elizabeth Ogbaje in Benue State who was allegedly raped by the duo of father and son, eventually resulting in her death. In that same state, a 38-year-old raped his seven-month-old daughter. In Ajah, Lagos, a 12-year-old girl was gang-raped by four masked men at her parent’s residence. In Kaduna State, five men raped an 18-year-old. Another 13-year-old in the same Kaduna was raped. In Ekiti State, a 27-year-old raped his mother. Then, there is a 70-year-old landlady in Ogun State raped by a 25-year-old. A man of the same age also raped an 85-year-old woman in Niger State. In Jigawa State, 11 suspects raped a 12-year-old. In Oyo State, we saw the highly unfortunate case of 18-year-old Barakat Bello who was raped and stabbed to death by hoodlums in her father’s home in Ibadan. On Monday, the Anambra State Ministry of Women’s Affairs, Children and Social Welfare announced there had been about 80 recorded cases of rape during the COVID-19 lockdown (between April and May). Then, the Edo State case of Uwaila Omozuwa, who died after being raped inside a church still remains fresh in mind. For anyone who knows Nigeria enough, you can bet that these cases are, in fact, underreported.  
  
I could go on and on cataloguing the victims and survivors, but you already get the point. The number of cases is unacceptably high. The victims of these rapes range in physical appearances, age, and even the scene where the crimes occurred. An inquiring mind would ask what connects all these victims mentioned above. The answer, for those ready to confront the bitter truth, is simply “men.” Not clothes. The truth is that most assaulters do not look at clothes. They, in fact, look past them. A man who rapes a woman whose body is all hidden behind a burqa does so because he thinks she would be a perfect victim. He surmises that such a woman would be too ashamed that her religious ostention failed her and would, therefore, never speak up. The rapist who picks a woman in revealing clothes also bases his choice on puritan society’s bias against such a woman. He thinks such a woman is pre-judged as morally loose, and so will not be taken seriously.  
  
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Finally, Jaha might have apologised, but he did have a point: Men are NOT wood. I agree with him on that score but on entirely different terms. To say men are not wood is to remind everyone that holds the opinion that men are feeble victims of female seduction that the men are, in fact, rational and intelligent beings. Unlike a log of wood, men are capable of thought. They are well able to let their head overrule their primal instincts. When a man says his body is not wood, we should agree with him but we must also shift the conversation away from claims of helplessness. Those that propagate the myth that men cannot but be seduced when they see the shape of a woman’s body reflected through her clothes are misandrists. They reduce men to the status of lower animals. If men are that weak and incapable of rational behaviour, they would not have built great civilisations. They are not deadwood. They have a conscience. Nobody should insult them with excuses.  
  
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