Rape pandemic: Wheel of justice turns slowly as cases rise

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Godfrey George on seeking justice for Akwa Ibom jobseeker, Iniubong Umoren, and other women who have been victims of rape and others who have been killed in the process  
  
Recently, 26-year-old Iniubong Umoren was brutally murdered after she was allegedly raped by a fake employer she met online, Akpan Uduak.  
  
Umoren, who was an orphan, had posted a message on her Instagram that she wanted a job and Uduak, who posed to be an employer, told her to meet him in Uruan, near Uyo, Akwa Ibom State.  
  
However, she gave her friend, Uduak Umoh, every detail about the ‘office’ and that of the fake recruiter, who allegedly later killed her.  
  
Unfortunately, when she got to Uduak, he allegedly raped, murdered and later buried her corpse in a shallow grave.  
  
When she could no longer get in touch with her through the phone, Umoh raised the alarm on social media that Umoren was missing. Her bright destiny was cut short.  
  
A recent report had it that Umoren, who was a graduate of Philosophy, University of Uyo, emerged the best in her class and would have been employed by the school as a lecturer.  
  
Her story once again brought to the fore issues of rape and other violations of women.  
  
Exactly one year ago during the coronavirus lockdown, a student of Microbiology at the University of Benin, Vera Omozuwa, who decided to go and study in an empty Redeemed Christian Church of God parish on Ikpoba Hill, Edo State, was raped and hit with a fire extinguisher by her assailants. She bled to death.  
  
In the year 2020, 18-year-old Jennifer, was allegedly gang-raped by five boys in Kaduna, who were reported to be her friends.  
  
It was also in the news that another 13-year-old girl, Ada, was repeatedly raped and impregnated by a 33-year-old man in Enugu State.  
  
In the same vein, Elizabeth Ochanja, was allegedly raped multiple times since she was nine years old till age 13 by a man and his son, with whom she lived and worked as a maid. She eventually developed Vesico Vaginal Fistula and in October 2018 died at the Benue State University Teaching Hospital.  
  
Also, a 100-level student of Animal Health and Production, Barakat Bello, was raped by a gang of boys, who invaded her family house in Ibadan. She was also stabbed and bled to death.  
  
Several cases as described above abound in the country.  
  
The controversy involving the rape allegation involving a Yoruba Nollywood actor, Olanrewaju Omiyinka, aka Baba Ijesha is still raging.  
  
In Nigeria, rape cases are not usually reported due to stigmatisation, while some do not have the resources to seek justice. Investigations also revealed that some of these cases even when reported were either thrown out by the enforcement agents (the police) and the judiciary.  
  
In 2019, the Minister of Women Affairs, Pauline Tallen, through the Director of Press, said that over two million Nigerians were raped every year.  
  
Findings from a national survey carried out in 2016 by Women at Risk International Foundation showed that 24.8 per cent of females from ages 18 to 24 experienced sexual abuse prior to the age of 18. According to a recent World Population Review, Nigeria ranks the seventh most dangerous country for women to live in.  
  
But last year, the Vice-President, Prof Yemi Osibajo, said sexual assault and rape were unacceptable and dishonourable behaviours.  
  
“Gender-based violence, rape and sexual assault have no place in our society. It is an unacceptable behaviour and a blemish on our collective humanity as a people and as a nation,” he stated.  
  
Umoren’s friends seek justice  
  
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Friends and well-wishers of the late Iniobong Umoren took to the social media to express their grievances, while a physical protest was also held on May 2, 2021 at the police headquarters, Uyo.  
  
A close relative of the victim, who spoke on condition of anonymity, expressed displeasure at the manner in which the police were handling Umoren’s death, saying it had been a terrible experience.  
  
He stated, “It has been very terrible. We reported the case to the police and they investigated it and did not communicate the findings to us. It took a protest to make them talk. They kept telling me to wait until I got impatient and went live on Facebook.  
  
“I beg the whole country; I need justice. We don’t have anyone to speak for us. We don’t have anybody. We are orphans. I don’t have any money to fight anyone, but I believe that God will fight for us with the help of everyone. From the look of things, this case is deeper than what we can see and there’s more to it than meets the eye.”  
  
An Uyo-based fashion designer, Bobby Bassey, said there was every possibility that Umoren was hypnotised by his assailant.  
  
He stated, “It seems they used juju on Ini. That is how these people operate. Once they get your phone number, they can control you. This thing looks like a family business. The suspect, Uduak, said that he indeed kidnapped her and raped her, but when he heard that he was being haunted by the police, he gave her to his father, who claims to have given her to his cousin.  
  
“The deed has been done; all we want is justice for Ini Umoren, because from the look of things, it is not just Ini, other bodies were found when the grave was exhumed.”  
  
Another friend, simply identified as Lady Comfort, said she was shocked over the criminal act.  
  
“Ini Umoren was such a charming and sweet girl. We both attended lectures together and all she ever wanted was a better life. I am still in shock. I need justice to be served and served quickly,” she said.  
  
A Lagos-based lawyer, Selina Onuoha, who spoke with our correspondent, said although there had been a recent move to make rape a capital offence, not much had been done concerning the menace, adding that the judiciary should always exercise the principle of accelerated hearing.  
  
Onuoha encouraged Nigerians to seek justice whenever rape issues came up. “When it comes to rape, it should be taken very seriously. When we do, some people will not even think of it, because they know the consequences will be grave. There should be no room for much delay when it comes to this matter. Focus should be on rape matters and verdicts should be issued with speed to the full extent of the law,” she said.  
  
A Twitter user, @ebbyedet, tweeted, “Other ladies who had experienced and escaped these guys would have saved Ini if they had come out with their stories. She wouldn’t have gone to the same place if she was aware others had spoken against it. Learn to speak up to save others.”  
  
A psychologist, Mr Usen Essien, who spoke with The PUNCH on the reasons rape victims do not like to come out, said, “Stigmatisation and labelling are the core causes. Rape victims are afraid to be victimised, mocked and discriminated against on the grounds that they have been sexually violated before.”  
  
He, however, advised them to speak to therapists so that they would not experience depression or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.  
  
Essien stated, “Most girls, when sexually abused, do not want to tell anyone, because they are ashamed that people will laugh and make fun of them. They live with the accumulated trauma and pain, which is not easy to carry alone. Also, people always doubt rape victims’ stories. The question is always, ‘What did you go to his house to do?’  
  
“For Ini, she went in search of a job and fell into the wrong hands. Communities and government should support rape victims to get justice.”  
  
Another tweep, @chyddee, tweeted, “Turn on location, she did. Tell family where you are going, she did. Give them the visitor’s phone number, she did. Go during the day, she did. In case you have more tips on how women can stay safe, remember that Hinny Umoren took them all, and she’s still dead. Stop telling women how to stay safe. They’ve been doing that all their lives. They know. You can help by not raping, being radically anti-rape, ostracising rapists, joining pressure groups to reform laws and the justice system. Also, make it less difficult for survivors to speak up.”  
  
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