Rape, sexual assault and sex education

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These past few days have been very overwhelming, to say the least. From the racial injustice in America, to the stories of rape victims in Nigeria. As a black woman, I have found myself angry, frustrated, overwhelmed and sad. I have also had time to reflect and discuss these issues with close friends. During one of these discussions, a friend mentioned something that struck with me. I have reflected and pondered over this statement and I decided to write about it. He said:  
  
“It is one thing to know that rape is bad; it is another thing to know what constitutes rape”.  
  
This statement lit a bulb in my head. It was so true. And that was how I came to the realisation that a lot of Nigerians, both men and women, do not fully understand what constitutes rape and sexual assault. It is evident from comments and reactions you read online when another rape story hits the news. Comments like “Why didn’t she shout?”, “Why didn’t she push him away?”, “She is his girlfriend/wife so it can’t be rape” and so on.  
  
The idea a lot of people have about rape is that it is this gory act that involves fighting, screaming, and violence. Rape can happen in several ways. A simple definition for rape is having sex with someone without consent, or after they have withdrawn consent.  
  
And this is where sex education comes in.  
  
Sex education is a broad term used to describe education about topics relating to the emotional, physical, and social aspects of sexuality. It usually encompasses topics like sexuality, safe sex, reproduction, reproductive rights, consent, and how to navigate relationships. The argument for the inclusion of sex education in the Nigerian curriculum has been a back and forth debate since sex education became a thing. In 1999, a sexuality education policy was approved by the Nigerian government, yet 21 years later, implementation of this policy into schools remains grossly ineffective.  
  
If sex education is missing from the Nigerian curriculum, how then do children, teenagers, people get information on sex? Their parents, perhaps? I am sure many Nigerians reading this will laugh at that statement. Many Nigerian children have never heard their parents mention the word “sex”. Sex is shrouded in mystery. The only ‘birds and bees’ talk you get (and most often only girls have the privilege of getting it) goes like this: “If a man touches you, you will get pregnant”. And this is where the issue lies. Many children in Nigeria grow up with conflicting information about sex, sexuality, and reproduction. As they become teenagers, their curiosity about sexuality heightens and so they resort to other means to get information to satisfy this curiosity: The media, songs, novels, porn and of course, their peers.  
  
According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation, evidence has shown that comprehensive sexual education empowers young people to make educated, informed, and healthy decisions regarding their sexuality. Sex education has been shown to reduce the rate of sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies.  
  
The opponents of sex education argue that teaching children about sex will lead to an increase in sexual activity. Yet, research has shown the opposite. Evidence actually shows that abstinence-only education is grossly ineffective in delaying the age of sexual initiation, but rather makes it more likely for children to have unsafe and unprotected sex.  
  
Despite this evidence, we leave our children to the mercy of all these untrusted and unprofessional sites to get sex education. We shy away from discussions relating to sex justifying such by alluding to religious and cultural beliefs. Yes, ours is a conservative society, but is it not hypocritical to keep justifying not talking about sex when there is ample evidence that youths are engaging in sexual acts? According to a study published in 2019 by the BMC National Journal, in a survey taken of young adults in Nigeria aged between 15 and 24, only 22.4% of them had never engaged in sex. That means a whopping 77.6% had engaged in sexual activity. Yet, because of our reluctance to talk about sex, our children get sex education from songs that glorify rape culture and reinforce the belief that a man is entitled to a woman’s body. From their peers that themselves have not got proper sex education. From pornographic sites that propagate a violent kind of sex as good sex. And yet, we wonder why rape cases abound.  
  
So, while sharing hashtags and raising our voices are important measures to raise awareness, we must also reflect on how our action, inaction, views, and policies are leading to the propagation of rape culture. We must take action beyond the hashtags. If you are a stakeholder, whether in schools, or in political positions, stand up for policies like the inclusion of sex education in our curriculum. If you are a parent, do not shy away from the sex topic. Talk openly and sincerely. Allow no judgement conversations. Do not propagate fear. Sex is not a thing to be feared. It is beautiful when done in the right context. Empower your children, the youth, to make the right decisions and choices regarding their sexuality. Teach consent, to both boys and girls. And maybe, just maybe, when all is said and done, we will not have to create new hashtags every other week.  
  
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