Rising pandemic of child sexual abuse

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NIGERIA is evolving into a child sexual abuse basket case. In March, Saviour Edith, 24, was arraigned at a magistrate’s court in Lagos for allegedly defiling his neighbour’s three-year-old daughter. The court heard that it was the girl’s agonising cry that alerted her mother to the scene. Edith is among a growing army of child rapists in the country. If the phenomenon is left uncontrolled, it will mature into a pandemic.  
  
For victims of the act, life is permanently bruised by the stigma associated with it. The account of a primary five pupil in Bariga, Lagos, who was gang-raped by six men in January, underscores this. The girl says everybody in the community has been avoiding her since the incident occurred. In 2015, Sylvester Ehijele, 49, allegedly raped his seven-year-old daughter. Mrs. Ehijele said the last straw was when her husband, who had earlier defiled their 17-year-old daughter, violated their 18-month-old granddaughter.  
  
The lifelong trauma aside, sexual molestation can trigger fatality. Last year, Funmilayo Adeyanju stabbed her three-year-old son to death. Her neighbours in Ota, Ogun State, linked her act to depression, caused by the incestuous relationship that produced the boy. Rafiu Idowu, 26, was arrested by the police in Ile-Ogbo, Osun State, last year for defiling his cousin, aged 10. He strangled the girl for raising the alarm during the act.  
  
This ugly spectre covers the country. The medical director of Funtua General Hospital, Katsina State, Tijjani Bakori, said all the 13 rape victims treated in the past four months in the hospital were below 13 years of age. He said that some of the cases required surgery because they “were very severe.” In one of the cases, the victim, aged 13, was allegedly raped by her neighbour, Dahiru Lawal. Jummai Musa, the mother, said her daughter was sent to buy oil when she was lured and raped by Lawal. Also, Matthew Umeh, 35 was arrested recently for allegedly raping his wife’s 15-year-old sister, who had been living with them from the age of five. Police reports stated that Umeh had been violating the minor since she was five years old.  
  
In another repulsive case, a man raped his 12-year-old daughter in Ogbia, Bayelsa State. When the girl was four months pregnant, he took her to a quack health practitioner to procure a crude abortion for her. Recently, an undergraduate recounted how she was abused by her uncle, who made her to suck his manhood and swallow the semen thereof for three years.  
  
Sexual assault of minors and incest are rising globally, but we refuse to take solace in this. Citing several instances, Amnesty International petitioned the United Nations after its peacekeepers raped minors in the Central African Republic in August 2015. The case of a 12-year-old victim, whose brother and father were gunned down after the incident, is still very troubling. On hearing the report, Ban Ki-moon, the UN secretary general, described minors sexual abuse as “a cancer in our system.” That is incontestable. In Congo, the UN grappled with 108 cases, saying that “the vast majority” of them were under-age girls who were raped, sexually abused or exploited by foreign troops  
  
The worst places in the world where children suffer sexual assault include South Africa, India, Zimbabwe, the United Kingdom and the United States. In South Africa, where Helping Hand, a charity, says a child is raped every three minutes, it is sometimes based on the belief that sleeping with a virgin baby could cure the man of Human Immunodeficiency Virus. In India, where child rape cases jumped by 336 per cent in 2001 to 2011, the government promulgated the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act in 2012 to stem the scourge.  
  
Child molestation is perpetrated by the rich and poor, teachers and coaches, religious leaders and laymen, educated and illiterate, and more especially by family members and neighbours. In May 2015, Bob Hewitt, a tennis icon who won seven Grand Slam titles, was sentenced to six years in jail at the age of 75 for defiling young girls that he coached in the 1980s and 1990s.  
  
So, how do we confront this monster here? The National Assembly should strengthen the laws against child molestation. The enforcement of the law will curb the resort to sentiment and pressure, which allow child sexual abuse suspects to plead with the families of their victims not to be prosecuted. The police should establish a desk dedicated to the crime in every station in the country and train those deployed there in the science of investigating such deviant behaviour.  
  
On its own, the law cannot suddenly erase the culture of sexual abuse. For one, there are shortcomings in the law, which should be addressed. Apart from this, convictions are rare. Against this backdrop, civil society organisations and charities can play a major role by offering counsel, finance, and helping victims to get shelter and education.  
  
Thankfully, organisations like the Women’s Right and Health Project and the Mirabel Centre, established in 2013, have come on board in Nigeria, assisting victims of child sexual abuse and rape to resume normal life. However, they are both based in Lagos. This means their spread is not wide enough. We need more of such NGOs spread around the country to provide succour to the victims. To curb the menace, religious organisations should stop living in denial of it. They should review their modus operandi and inculcate moral values in their adherents. The parents of victims should not shy away from seeking help. They should brave the odds and report to the police and charities, to take up their cases.  
  
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