Sexual harassment: PDP, others demand Akpabio’s removal

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Major opposition parties in the country on Sunday called on the Senate President, Senator Godswill Akpabio, to immediately step down from his seat to give room for a transparent investigation into the sexual harassment allegations levied against him by the lawmaker representing Kogi Central Senatorial District, Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan.  
  
Pitching their tents with leading opposition figures, former Vice President, Atiku Abubakar, and ex-Senate President, Bukola Saraki, the Peoples Democratic Party, New Nigeria People’s Party and the Obidient Movement of the Labour Party, on Sunday, urged Akpabio to respect the Senate by stepping aside to ensure an impartial investigation into the allegation against him.  
  
Akpoti-Uduaghan had in an interview last week linked her recent face-off with Akpabio on the floor of the Senate to her refusal to yield to alleged sexual advances from Akpabio.  
  
In an interview with Arise Television on Friday, the Kogi lawmaker accused Akapbio of turning against her because she declined to yield to his sexual advances.  
  
Her conflict with Akpabio began on Tuesday when she discovered her seat in the Senate had been changed.  
  
She expressed her frustration, leading to a temporary disruption during plenary.  
  
Following the incident, Akpoti-Uduaghan was referred to the Committee on Ethics, Privileges, and Public Petitions for disciplinary review.  
  
The committee, headed by Senator Neda Imaseun (LP, Edo South) has two weeks to report back to the Senate for further actions.  
  
During her appearance on Arise Television, she explained, “My issue with Akpabio started on December 8, 2023, when myself (sic) and my husband visited Akwa Ibom for Senator Akpabio’s birthday.  
  
“Akpabio was showing me around his house and was holding my hands with my husband following behind us when he said he wanted me to come and spend special moments in his house. My husband heard him and later told me not to travel abroad alone or be with the Senate President alone. My case is a case of a student being punished by a lecturer for refusing to sleep with him.”  
  
While the Senate President has yet to respond to the allegation, his wife, Ekaette, denounced the Kogi senator and filed a defamation lawsuit against Natasha.  
  
In response, Natasha’s husband, Emmanuel Uduaghan-Akpoti, expressed support for his wife, revealing that despite his intervention, Akpabio had continued to harass her.  
  
Although Senator Ireti Kingibe, representing the Federal Capital Territory, downplayed some of the issues raised by Natasha, both camps have continued to fire salvos, pointing accusing fingers at each other.  
  
In an interview with The PUNCH on Sunday, PDP National Publicity Secretary, Debo Ologunagba, described the scandal in the Senate as an embarrassment, noting that important issues requiring the Red Chamber’s attention were being overlooked.  
  
He said, “We do believe that when you are accusing Senator Akpabio of this, it would be appropriate for the Senate President to step aside for now to allow for a proper investigation. Senator Akpabio should step aside and allow for the investigation because he cannot be a judge in his own case.  
  
“We, as a party, believe that women should have their rights and that discrimination against anybody, particularly women, based on being a woman, is unacceptable and unconstitutional.”  
  
According to the publicity scribe, there is a need for the Senate, as a revered institution, to look itself in the mirror, do the right thing and save the country from unnecessary embarrassment.  
  
“We do know that the Senate itself would have a duty to look into these issues and those allegations and deal with them appropriately. But beyond all of that, I think it’s an embarrassment for this nation. There are big problems. There are bigger issues. There are bigger issues for the Senate to deal with.  
  
“The Senate President ought to be challenged by those problems in the country. Indeed, the issues raised are very concerning, particularly when it comes to those allegations; they need to be investigated.  
  
“We do know that the Senate has a process for looking into such matters because, again, this has reached a level where it’s embarrassing for the nation. But it just goes to show you the level of issues within the All Progressives Congress and the structures and the leaders in the APC.  
  
“We would have expected that even the Senate by now should have acted in such a way as to address that unnecessary distraction from these real matters of state. Senator Akpabio has a duty to himself, to the country, and to the institution of the Senate to ensure that the truth comes out. And if indeed he wants a clear and genuine investigation, then an investigation into the matter should be carried out,” Ologunagba added.  
  
Similarly, the New Nigeria People’s Party and the Obidient Movement have backed the call for Akpabio to step aside for a proper probe to be conducted into the allegation levelled against him by Akpoti-Uduaghan.  
  
NNPP’s National Publicity Secretary, Oladipo Johnson, endorsed the demand for an unbiased probe into the sexual harassment case.  
  
Johnson told our correspondent in an exclusive interview that it was the right thing to do.  
  
He said, “When you have something like this, it is normal to have him temporarily step aside for the sake of transparency and to have the matter properly investigated by an independent investigator.”  
  
Similarly, a chieftain of the Labour Party and the National Coordinator of the Obidient Movement, Yunusa Tanko, reinforced the call for a credible investigation of the allegation.  
  
“It is about the integrity of the Senate and the man presiding the office in question. The office must be protected. That is my major concern. I don’t have anything personal against Akpabio.  
  
“It will be disappointing if the matter is allowed to die like that. We want people to come clean on the state of things. He must also be allowed to defend himself against the allegation,” he stated.  
  
The All Progressives Congress insisted it was a matter for the Senate to handle, adding that it would not intervene in the controversy.  
  
In separate interviews with The PUNCH, the National Secretary of the APC, Senator Ajibola Basiru, and the Deputy National Organising Secretary, Nze Chidi Duru, insisted that it is a matter only the legislative arm can resolve.  
  
Basiru argued that the ruling party could not get involved in the matter, hinging his argument on the fact that Akpabio’s accuser was not a member of the APC.  
  
“It is not a party matter. It is a matter for the legislative arm, and Natasha is not our member. Our member possibly may not behave the way she’s behaving, but she’s not our member. So we don’t want to get ourselves involved in the matter.  
  
“As far as I’m concerned, SP (Senate President) is competent to defend himself against any allegation. He is competent to do so, and the matter that has to do with legislative privileges will be taken up at the Senate. A matter that has to do with defamation will be taken up at local courts.  
  
“So, it is not a party issue as far as we are concerned. It would have been an issue possibly if both of them were to be our party members. But she is not a member of our party, and it’s not a party matter. It is a strictly legislative and legal matter for which proper legal action will be taken against anybody that is infringing the law,” he stated.  
  
Duru also echoed the same sentiment, saying, “They have ways and means to handle such matters, including the one that is in question between the two parties. It should be dealt with comprehensively by the National Assembly.”  
  
The Chairman, the Centre for Accountability and Open Leadership, Deborah Adeniran, said that law enforcement agencies should investigate whether the Senate President’s actions towards the female senator constituted mere advances or actual harassment, and that if proven, he should face consequences.  
  
“She said she has evidence, of course, there should be a forensic investigation of the evidence at her disposal. You know there is a different definition of advances and harassment. He could have made advances to her without harassing her. If it’s something that there is a confidential discussion between a man and a woman on whether they want to befriend each other, that is different.  
  
“But the harassment will come in if you now threaten that if you don’t do what I want you to do, I will show you that I’m the President of the Senate and I will not allow you to have your way when you want to speak. If you make any bill, it will not pass through and all of that, or maybe pinning her down to a corner and saying he wants to have his way could amount to harassment.  
  
“So, if those things happened, of course, the law enforcement agencies should investigate how far, what constitutes harassment for Natasha and how far Akpabio went while the discussion lasted. So if it is a mere approach or advances or if it is true harassment, then Akpabio should pay for it,” he said.  
  
On his part, the Executive Director of the Civil Society Legislative Accountability and Advocacy Centre, Auwal Musa Rafsanjani, cautioned against the allegations against the Senate President, adding that Akpoti-Uduaghan must also produce further evidence of her claims.  
  
“I also want to caution people, you know, who have not established concrete evidence against making such kind of pronouncement because you are likely to destroy somebody’s reputation, you are likely to destroy somebody’s integrity. So, this is the way I see this.  
  
‘’Yes, the Senate President is known to make, sometimes, certain loose statements. But, you know, in this case, she has not also established any evidence of sexual harassment.  
  
“She needs to prove further to give evidence that, yes, she experienced this. When was that? Who was there? What were the circumstances? Has she recorded anything? Has she got any evidence or proof of direct sexual harassment to her?  
  
“What I think, you know, if she does not withdraw the allegation against him, probably there’s a need to investigate and establish the authenticity of her claim. When it comes to issues of direct sexual allegation, then there’s a need to prove it, to have evidence against the Senate President,” he stated.  
  
Akpabio kicks  
  
Meanwhile, the embattled Senate President has rebuffed suggestions by Atiku, Saraki and the opposition parties to step aside for the commencement of an investigation into the allegations against him.  
  
Speaking on Sunday through his Special Adviser, Media and Publicity, Eseme Eyiboh, Mr Akpabio faulted the premise in which he was being asked to step down albeit temporarily, noting that the situation that played out in Saraki’s case bears no relation with the issue at hand.  
  
He said, “What Senator Saraki said has no place for contemplation at this level because there is no petition either to the police on any matter in court or before the Senate regarding sexual harassment. It is just the exercise of the freedom of expression. Another person could well have gone to the Wuse (Abuja) market and laid an allegation and you are asking the institution to investigate. It is a different case to what happened to Saraki.”  
  
According to Eyiboh, “There was an allegation that Saraki used his office as President of the Senate to import bullet vehicles without paying appropriate customs duties. Even though the allegations were not correct, a petition was sent to the Ethics and Privileges Committee. The important thing is that there was a petition. In this case, there is no petition anywhere with the police, court or the National Assembly.  
  
“So, from where will the Senate as an institution going to set up a panel? Who is the complainant? In every allegation, there must be a complainant. We are beginning to see some level of dance drama in the theatre of the absurd. What Saraki is saying has no place in the conversation.”  
  
That said, Eyiboh faulted Natasha’s behaviour at the plenary last week, stating that relocation of seats is a common occurrence given the country’s political experiences with defection from the opposition to the ruling party.  
  
He continued, “As a Senator, you should know that when there is defection, there is going to be seat adjustment. You don’t need to be told; it’s something you need to know. In this case, there was a defection of Senator Ned Nwoko from PDP to APC and another Senator from Imo State. So, there was a need for that re-adjustment.  
  
“Every Senator ought to know that once there is defection, in compliance with Section 11 (3), there will be a re-adjustment of seats. Senator Ireti Kingibe stated the other day that her seat has been changed about four times. Other Senators will tell you that. I don’t know why this particular case is different.”  
  
He also reminded Akpoti-Uduaghan that a lawmaker who makes a valid contribution on the floor of the chamber would be sought out by the cameras regardless of his or her sitting position.  
  
“We need to ask how impactful and active you are in the proceedings of the Senate and not somebody giving an excuse that where she was asked to sit, the cameras will not focus on her.  
  
“The journalists will focus on you based on contributions. If you want the cameras to be focused on you, you must be ready to be active with your contributions and delivery. You must be able to bring your constituency in nexus with whatever is going on in the national development plan,” he added.  
  
On the parliamentary procedures to make contributions during plenary, Akpabio’s media adviser said, “The first thing is that you must speak from your seat. You cannot go to court as a lawyer and speak outside the bar to the judge. You will not be heard.  
  
“The Presiding officer is the presiding officer of the Senate and whenever the Senate is in session, members are expected to be seated. They are called Distinguished because of decorum, elegance, and ethical integrity. You are expected to live within these descriptions. If you are asked to speak, you are expected to speak from your seat and not from anywhere.”