States must combat sexual violence surge

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A grave social epidemic plagues Nigeria. It is in the form of sexual and gender violence and state governments seem overwhelmed by it. This gnawing situation further tears down the social fabric. Thus, governors must combat the vice with consistent enlightenment campaigns and harsh punishments for sexual perverts.  
  
Recently, the Lagos State Government lamented a surge in sexual and gender-related violence between January 2019 and December 2023. It disclosed that the number of reported cases of sexual, physical, and psychological abuse increased from 3,446 to 6,398. A breakdown showed 3,446 SGBV cases were reported in 2019, 4,302 in 2020, 3,943 in 2021, 5,929 in 2022, and 6,389 in 2023.  
  
Alarmingly, the situation is extensive in all the 20 LGAs. Alimoso Local Government Area topped the malfeasance with 588 cases, Ikorodu with 382 cases, and Eti-Osa with 286 cases. Reported SGBV cases in Kosofe and Eti-Osa were 271 and 252. Oshodi and Eti-Osa assumed the fourth and fifth positions with 225 and 173 cases.  
  
Children also bear the brunt of the physical assault: Alimoso topped others with 497 cases, while Ikorodu and Kosofe had 230 and 228 cases.  
  
Although the outlook on Lagos is dismal, the state has emplaced systems that have enhanced the reportage and prosecution of SGBV. It has tracked offenders, opened an active sexual offence register, and created a special court to expedite justice.  
  
These interventions do not absolve Lagos of the distasteful smear. It should do more enlightenment campaigns in schools, churches, mosques, markets, and communities. It must improve infrastructure such as streetlights to curb it while ridding its streets of drug-addled hooligans.  
  
However, Lagos is not the only state plagued by the menace. In Gombe, the State Police Command paraded a 13-year-old suspect, for raping an eight-year-old girl in the Akko LGA at the weekend. The police also paraded Usman Husseini, 18, and Mohammed Yaya, 45, for allegedly defiling their victims.  
  
Data revealed that Akwa Ibom (2,987), Benue (710), and Cross River (507) had worrisome numbers of GBV in the country between January and May.  
  
Although 34 and the FCT out of 36 states have domesticated the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act 2015, implementation remains low. While the Kano State House of Assembly is yet to pass the VAPP Act, Taraba has yet to assent to the bill. NGOs should pressure them to do so.  
  
Apart from physical harm, the victim of SGBV also grapples with lifelong psychological traumas and behavioural changes that may affect her social relations with others. She may be subtly or blatantly ostracised by society and might struggle with an unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. This could engender a suicidal reaction.  
  
States should replicate the practice in Lagos and Ekiti, which have robust and open sexual offender registers. This helps the public to identify a sexual offender and prevent his or her propensity to commit new crimes. They should collaborate with NGOs, community leaders, and law enforcement agencies to bring offenders to book.  
  
According to the National Gender Based Dashboard of Federal Women Affairs, there are 44,270 reported cases, 2,126 fatal cases, 31,730 closed cases, 12,540 open cases, and 642 convicted perpetrators nationwide. These abysmal statistics translate to a lack of closure on many SGBV cases in the country.  
  
States must create a special SGBV court to try special cases and provide adequate forensic instruments, and medical expertise. They should facilitate the establishment of accessible help desks manned by competent psychologists in schools and police stations.  
  
Sex education should be entrenched across all levels of education so that children become aware and guard themselves against strangers, perverted neighbours, and family members.