Unending trauma: Rape victims recount heartrending encounters at childhood (1)

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The sickening events of rape have left indelible marks on its victims even as they grow into adults, Naomi Chima writes.  
  
Twenty-eight-year-old Rose Chukwuka, a beautiful lady from Enugu State, curvy, with her caramel skin complexion, beautiful set of teeth, and welcoming eyes, is physically endowed but emotionally and psychologically damaged by the stigma caused by paedophiles and rapists who took her pride at an early age.  
  
Chukwuka shared how she had continued to wake up every day of her life with regrets and pain as she thinks of her past that has refused to die.  
  
According to her, a family friend called Okoka sexually abused her in his one-room apartment but her mum never raised an eyebrow.  
  
She takes our correspondent down the memory lane as she narrates her ordeal and how she has continued to bear the brunt of the incident even as an adult.  
  
She recalled, “It all started in 2000, when I was six years old, at Aso Pada in Nasarawa State. Okoka, as he is fondly called by my parents, was a family friend. Although married with two kids, he lived alone. He would often send me to run errands whenever he was off from work, usually in the afternoons when I had returned from school, and on my return, would sexually assault me.  
  
“One of the various occasions I can remember was the afternoon it all started. He came and called me from my mum’s shop to help him to buy something nearby. By the time I returned from the errand, he was tying a wrapper inside his room. I stretched my hand to give him the stuff I bought but, he drew me inside and started kissing me. I didn’t know what to do or why he was doing what he was doing. I tried to push him away, but he overpowered me. He started touching me, pushed me to his bed, and kept using his finger to touch me. I was trying to scream because it was painful, but he had his hand on my mouth.  
  
“After satisfying himself, he told me sorry, that he would never do it again. He also begged me not to tell my mum and promised to buy me snacks. I wiped my tears and left thinking that was the end.  
  
“Unfortunately, Okoka started making it a habit. Every day, he would seek my mum’s approval to take me to his house and help him clean up and, my mum would not even raise an eyebrow. Sometimes, I would refuse, but, she would pet me, and call me a good girl, with the advice that he always called me because he noticed I was hardworking and intelligent.  
  
“I was scared of ruining the relationship between Okoka and my family because he often helped us financially too. So, I started going to help him run errands regularly, and he seized that opportunity to touch me every day. He never even imagined that he was older than my dad, that I could be his daughter.  
  
“He lived alone and his neighbours were never around, I didn’t even know how to explain this whole thing to anyone, and I got used it with time.” She let out some heartbreaking tears as she said this.  
  
“My parents would never have believed me, at least so I thought and that was what he told me,” she added.  
  
Continuous trauma, sexual torment  
  
Okoka was not the only man in the neighbourhood defiling the child. Alfa, a secondary school teacher, used to come into her mum’s shop to touch her every time her mum was not in. He would sit her on his lap and instruct her to fondle his manhood.  
  
“Alfa, too, used to touch me. He would come to my mother’s shop opposite his house, call me, and forcefully sit me on his manhood. He would ask me to hold and fondle it.  
  
“He used to do this anytime my mum was out to the market. I don’t know how he did it, but it seemed he timed himself because my mum never caught him until he moved out of the street.  
  
With more tears in her eyes, she added that one of her father’s brothers who lived with them in the house, also violated her using his finger and she couldn’t tell anyone. These paedophiles made her parents feel like she was the most loved by them, and so they believed they could not harm her in any way while they violated her behind their backs.  
  
These perpetrators were considered responsible family members, and friends by her parents.  
  
“One of my uncles too abused me once. That night I lay in the parlor with my uncles and siblings. While I slept, I felt someone opening my pants, my uncle dipped his finger into my vagina. I couldn’t shout, my parents, siblings and other uncles living with us would wake up, what would I tell them? I was so scared I begged him amidst tears, but he didn’t.  
  
“The stigma made me timid, and scared, and for years, I could not build any relationship.  
  
Amidst tears, she said, “My childhood was completely ruined. My parents were always out, busy striving for our daily bread and I did not want to add to their hurt. I am battling trust issues today, I feel uneasy anytime I see my siblings around boys or men, even my dad.”  
  
Incest, underage abusers  
  
Chidi Ekemini shared a shocking experience with The PUNCH about how his 15-year-old cousin always slept with him at age nine.  
  
He said, “I came to live with my aunty in the Igando area of Lagos State, when I was nine years old. I was in Junior Secondary School 3 and innocent too. My aunt had told my dad to change my school and suggested the one around her house.  
  
“Some nights after I came, I started noticing my cousin’s strange behaviour around me. I noticed that she found me attractive and always hung around me. She was always buying me stuffs, but I did not think too much about it since she was my cousin.  
  
“One night, I noticed my boxers were off my waist and, she was touching me down my loins. I was shocked and could not speak but, tried to push her away that night.  
  
“She kept on doing this. I would sleep far from her, but in the middle of the night, I would see her beside me doing the same thing. I could not avoid her anymore. It got worse, and worst as she started raping me every night.  
  
“I wanted to run away several times but, where would I run to? I didn’t know what or how to say it to my aunt. This went on every night until I finished my JSS3 examination and left their house.”  
  
Ekemini stated that the trauma of what she did to him haunted him, and played down on his ego and self-esteem.  
  
“She made me hate myself. I used to think it was men only who raped or deflowered girls but it was not so in my case, it felt like I was used. My brain was always on fire, I became a loner.”  
  
The disheartening question: who are our children safe with?  
  
A community leader from the Iwaya in Lagos who spoke at a workshop organised by the Centre for Women’s Health and Information in collaboration with Child Protection Network, Francis Ogubanjo, recently, lamented that the community needed to become watchdogs and guide this generation properly against child sexual abuse.  
  
“Children are blessings from God, so they need to be loved, guided, and protected by all from all forms of violation.  
  
“Unfortunately, in our society today, parents, guardians, relatives, neighbours, and caregivers who are charged with the responsibility of protecting children hardly have time for them. The children are even more endangered by these people.”  
  
A lady who resides in Abuja, who for fear of being stigmatised by her husband’s family preferred to be anonymous, told our correspondent how her husband had been defiling her three-year-old daughter since she was one year old.  
  
“I don’t know what to do, my husband has been defiling my only daughter since she was one,” she said.  
  
“I confronted my husband and he reported me to his family. They said that I was possessed with an evil spirit and had transferred it to my daughter who was being violated by the said evil spirit. They called a family meeting and warned me, threatening to send me away with my kids.  
  
How it happened  
  
The mother of four said, “When my daughter became a year old, I started noticing that my girl was having scratches in her vagina area, sometimes discharge. I was shocked. She started bed wetting, something she had stopped since she was eight months old.  
  
“So, I became conscious. I started placing her on the bed next to me, but anytime I slept off, I would wake up to find her next to my husband and she would have urinated on herself.  
  
“I told the pastor, but he did not believe me. He asked me to get evidence. I couldn’t get any at that time, so he advised that I should not let the issue break my home.  
  
Living in a one-room apartment, with the hardship, she succumbed to the societal norms of not breaking her home.  
  
“My husband waits for me to sleep off before he performs his devilish acts. I now carry my girl everywhere but how do I stop him at night? I will definitely sleep off. ”  
  
“Recently, I laid my girl beside me, but I woke up to find her at the foot of the bed, close to him. She had urinated already, so I tried to change her clothes. I saw fresh wounds with blood stains around her vagina and on her pants.  
  
“I don’t know what to do, I see a beast in my husband but I can’t leave the marriage. What will I do with four kids without their father?  
  
Ogubanjo added, “It is not new, but is shameful to comprehend the fact that family members cum relatives, to wit; fathers, uncles, and cousins, as well as neighbours, sexually harass children they are supposed to care for. They take advantage of their close relationships with their victims to abuse them.  
  
“These destroyers are not just after any child but every child and they increase in number by the day.”  
  
Media reports on rape  
  
A Magistrates’ Court sitting in Yaba, Lagos State on April 7, 2023, remanded a 20-year-old man, John Taiwo, in the Ikoyi Correctional Centre for allegedly defiling a nine-year-old girl in New Makoko, in the Sabo area of the state.  
  
Speaking to our correspondent with so much pain, the girl’s father said, “John came to our house and asked her (the victim) to come and help him buy something. When she followed him to his house, he defiled her there and warned her not to tell anyone.”  
  
The victim’s parents, however, did not want the defendant taken to prison over the issue.  
  
In March 2023, a 27-year-old paedophile was arrested by the Lagos State Police Command on March 29, 2023, for allegedly defiling a nine-month-old baby at Railway, Ijora Badia, in the Apapa-Iganmu Local Council Development Area of the state.  
  
The police spokesperson, Benjamin Hundeyin, disclosed that the suspect allegedly went to the apartment where the baby’s mother, a teenager, laid her on the floor, and quickly went to buy something outside the compound, and had sexual intercourse with her.  
  
Again on May 1, 2023, a 24-year-old Jacob Ekene, was remanded to the Ikoyi Correctional Centre for allegedly defiling and impregnating a 14-year-old girl at her aunt’s residence in the Amuwo Odofin, Lagos.  
  
Ekene visited to collect his National Identification Number card but met the teenager alone at home, so he defiled her and threatened to kill her if she told anyone. He started visiting frequently with friends who also slept with the survivor.  
  
Also, on March 2, 2023, around 06.30 pm, two men, Aminu Hashimu, 24, and Lukman Dogara, 18, of Obi LGA, Nasarawa State, criminally conspired and raped a teenager of 15 years who was physically challenged.  
  
Sexual education explained by DSVA  
  
Sex education for children and teens is not undertaken as proposed by some religious persons who condemn it. This type of education includes the following; teaching them what abuse is, the proper names of genitals, educating them on how to set boundaries and consent especially when it comes to touching, identifying feelings; the types that are deceiving safe touch and unsafe touch. It also involves teaching them to maintain and have their privacy, teaching them how to report to the right persons when their privacy is encroached on, and explaining their various private parts- the whole body is private to them and teaching them that it is their property and they need to protect it from any form of abuse.  
  
DSVA’s roles and contributions to rape issues  
  
The Lagos State Sexual Violence Agency has been working assiduously to curb the menace of rape in the state.  
  
The Head of Psychology Department, DSVA, Mrs Olive Oluwagbemileke, in an exclusive interview with The PUNCH, stated the dangers involved in child sexual abuse to, not only the family but also the society. She gave some tips on how parents and guardians can monitor their children and wards who are being abused or about to be abused.  
  
“At the centre of all the signs, there is one that is very important, a key indicator that something is wrong. That is a change in behaviour. If maybe a child that used to be soft all of a sudden becomes aggressive and rebellious, this is an indication that something is wrong. It may not necessarily be sexual abuse, but it indicates that something is wrong. It is either an abuse that is about to occur, or is happening. Also, the child’s eating or sleeping patterns or both may change. So, we need to watch out for that.  
  
“We also have inappropriate sexual behaviour. When a child has been exposed to sexual abuse, they will be found using sexual language; the child would be interested in sexual activities. Also, when a child has been exposed to inappropriate sexual activities, they would have injuries in their private parts, a disorder in urination, or painful urination, they will be apprehensive of you cleaning that area. This is also an indication that something has happened, and there is a need to get medical attention to check.  
  
“Change in a child’s school performance is also another indicator. Children who have been abused or are being abused might find it hard to focus. This is however not the time to criticise or punish the child rather, parents should find out why there is a sudden drop in the child’s performance.  
  
“Also, the case of some children being apprehensive of going home, or unwilling to go to school, because of the fear of what they will expect at home, by a neighbour or in school is another issue.  
  
“When a child has regression traits, that’s when a child who doesn’t bed wet all of a sudden begins to bed wet, begins to have nightmares, begins to be scared of the opposite sex, or used to the opposite sex, that tells that something is wrong and there is a need to check. Parents at this point should ask questions.  
  
Psychological problems of victims/survivors  
  
The psychologist goes on to reveal the most common psychological issue victims and survivors suffer.  
  
“Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and social violence are some of the most common problems. The victim and survivors have flashbacks. Some of them become suicidal, clinically depressed, and have to be on medical attention, some contract HIV, and STI and even become pregnant at a very young age.  
  
The most feared truth  
  
“When a child gets used to abuse, it is likely they will see it as normal. So, they grow up into adulthood and they have a series of internal conflicts. The next thing they do to express their lack of satisfaction is to hit their partner or have partners that will be abusive towards them, or they will become abusers themselves.  
  
“Another very troubling problem is that some children become overtly sexually active, and they are now the ones who go after their abusers. They crave it because they have been exposed to it. Some can become anti-the-opposite-sex, because of the type of man or woman that abused them, and they withdraw from the opposite sex.”  
  
Getting it right or wrong?  
  
“Our society drains and accuses the survivor and unknowingly shields the perpetrators.  
  
“We need to shift the blame and spotlight on the abusers, believe the survivors, encourage them to speak their truths and encourage them to make formal complaints. When other survivors see that society is encouraging the survivors to speak up, they may be encouraged to also speak up. It will send a deterrent and accountability message to the perpetrators, and we will create a society that doesn’t support or encourage the perpetration of sexual violence.  
  
“What we should do more as a society is to stop shaming victims, stop mounting blame on the survivor but rather focus on the abuser, call them out.  
  
Societal damage, a vicious circle  
  
Oluwagbemileke continued, “The public or some people do not still know what effects child sexual abuse can have on society.  
  
“In 2015, we had a research with the Nigerian Prison Centre and Human Correctional Centre and we held a service that engaged over 100 inmates. Eighty percent of them told us that they had been exposed to sexual abuse as early as the age of six and, they were in custody at the time for defilement, raping and sexual abuse.  
  
“We are seeing the vicious circle of sexual abuse, and if we don’t address this issue, what will happen is that we will be breeding abusers. People will be attracted to those who are not yet abused and we will be encouraging the vicious circle of abusers. We need to realise now that this menace is no respecter of class or status, as any child can be a victim or survivor of child sexual abuse.  
  
“We are looking forward to the day when every state will adopt a disciplinary approach on how to treat these cases even if not an agency.”  
  
Worrisome trends  
  
Oluwagbemileke also decried the current trend of abuse in society.  
  
“Recently, we were facing child-to-child abuse, incest; a 13-year-old having sexual intercourse with a three-year-old boy or girl, cousins and siblings having intercourse, and fathers raping daughters. It is a very worrisome trend and it is important that all hands should be on deck because no person can do it all. Religious institutions, schools, communities, and caregivers all truly have a role to play in ending child sexual abuse. We advise members of the public to support this cause, as the government cannot truly do it alone. We need more collaboration,” she added.  
  
DSVA’s reports of sexual violence on children  
  
In January 2023, according to a report by the spokesperson for Lagos State Domestic and sexual violence Agency, Joke Ladenegan-Oginni, a perpetrator was taken to court based on a report that the violator, who is a supposed guardian, Bernard Uzi, allegedly defiled a nine-year-old.  
  
It was reported that the primary 5 pupil of the school revealed to her class teacher that her guardian had been having sexual intercourse with her since 2020.  
  
Also, on February 5, 2023, another perpetrator, a lecturer at the Lagos State University of Technology, formerly known as LASPOTECH was arrested by the agency for allegedly having sexual intercourse with his 10-year-old daughter.  
  
Again, on February 13, 2023, the agency also reported that one Mr. Chukwu Ndubuisi, a private school teacher, bagged a life sentence for allegedly defiling a six-year-old pupil in the school.  
  
On December 14, 2022, again, the Lagos State DSVA received a case of defilement by the mother of a three-year-old toddler that was defiled by one Mr Nonso in a daycare centre where the survivor attended.  
  
The agency again on December 15, 2022, reported that a 73-year-old man allegedly defiled a five-year-old girl. It was alleged that the suspect was caught in the act by a neighbour who had been suspecting him before the incident.  
  
More experts speak  
  
Supol Thomas Nurudeen, attached to the State Criminal Investigation Department, Panti, legal department of the force who spoke to The PUNCH said from his years of experience as a prosecutor, the homes and environment where children grew up are the problems. He advised that cleaning of these perpetrators should begin from the home.  
  
“The welfare of the children, and the type of environment where they live, tells a lot about the children. For instance, when a man with six children lives in a one-room apartment, the children males and females, who possibly are not always fast asleep while their parents are making love will try out what they see their parents do at home someday either with each other or outside their homes.  
  
Speaking on the conviction of the perpetrators, he said, “The court convicts a lot of these violators and it is over the media; the one of Baba Ijesha is a strong example. At least, 90 per cent always have cases to answer and are often charged to the high court.”  
  
Parents compromise judgment  
  
Nurudeen disclosed that several parents often compromise judgment and forestall the conviction of suspects.  
  
“Parents play a strong role in these issues. They should assist in the prosecution of the case because when they compromise, they don’t allow the case to get to the judgment level. There was one we had here, and it took about two years before we were able to charge that man to the high court. It was the case of a father who slept and impregnated his daughter; his uncle who caught them in the act also got his fair share to enable him to keep quiet. When they were arrested by the police and charged to the magistrate court, the family tried to compromise for two years.  
  
“Some of these parents will not pick up their calls when you call them, and when they notice you are calling them for this case they will just hang up, most of them even change their SIMs because of these cases.