Why rape cases are high in Ogun – Commissioner

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Ogun State Commissioner for Women Affairs and Social Development and former member of the state House of Assembly, Motunrayo Adeleye, talks to BANKOLE TAIWO about the rise in gender-based violence in the state and what the government is doing to check it  
  
There have been several reported cases of rape and defilement in Ogun State. What is the government doing to stem the tide of gender-based violence in different parts of the state?  
  
We have raised the game when it comes to dealing with the menace of gender-based violence in the state. We have the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Law and we have a committee set up to even do a follow-up on how far have we gone, and where we are supposed to be. The Violence Against Persons Prohibition Law Committee is headed by the wife of the governor, Mrs Bamidele Abiodun. I am a member too and we equally have people from other agencies, civil rights groups, security agents and others. We have child rights laws too, and we just ended 16 days of activism against gender-based violence. The governor further gave us his commitment and because of the kind of help we have received so far from our governor, Prince Dapo Abiodun, we are hopeful that he will fulfil his promises.  
  
One of the challenges is not having a safe place of our own to house these victims of gender-based abuse. For instance, it is natural for a woman who was battered or abused by her husband and reported him, to find it difficult to go back to the house where she had been living with such a husband, but because we don’t have shelter, such women are compelled to go back and they are abused again and again.  
  
Similarly, we have cases where daughters who reported their fathers for allegedly molesting them were victimised by their families who told them to go find another place to live. Where do you expect such a child to stay? These are the issues but we thank God we are getting the attention of the governor. He has directed the Commissioner for Housing to meet with the Secretary to the State Government to find a suitable place for us and that if they cannot get one, they should identify where to build one.  
  
Does that mean the state government does not have a place where victims of such abuse receive support?  
  
We also have a sexual assault referral centre in Ogun State. The one we have now is domiciled inside the Olabisi Onabanjo University Teaching Hospital, Sagamu, but we are working hard to ensure that we have three more such that there will be one each in the four divisions of Egba, Ijebu, Remo and Yewa. We trust God that before the middle of next year, we will have achieved all of these because we want people to get help on time when they are assaulted.  
  
How many such cases were handled in the outgoing year?  
  
We have handled over 200 cases this year, 27 of them are in court already while we have recorded at least four convictions. Let me quickly say that on this note, we are clamouring for a special court to try offenders. What we have discovered is that yes our judiciary is doing so much to support us, many of our judges don’t joke with cases relating to gender-based violence offences but the truth is that their hands are full. That is why we are advocating for special courts to try offenders. This will help hasten the course of justice for the victims of these terrible acts. When people suffer gender-based violence, it’s like a wound and when you have a wound you will want to look for how it will get healed. Part of the healing process is for people who have been abused to get justice, but if they do not, you will see some of them going into depression and you know where this can lead to. On another hand, when victims report but do not get justice, others are not encouraged to speak up, they will ask you what came out from the cases reported. With this, we wouldn’t be achieving our determination to discourage these acts by making sure that rapists and other offenders are adequately punished as outlined by the law.  
  
What are you doing to scale up enlightenment about the campaign against gender-based violence?  
  
We are doing a lot of advocacy. Let me tell you a story. You would be very aware of the case of a secondary school teacher in the state who raped two young adults within 24 hours. It was the result of our sensitisation that helped us to discover the case. One of the young ladies who was raped did not know where to go or what to do but she had an elderly woman in the neighbourhood, so she reported the case to her. Luckily, the elderly woman had attended one of our programmes in the past where a phone number was provided to report such an act. The lady called us through the number and it was in the process of going to arrest the teacher that he was caught assaulting another young lady.  
  
What does gender-based violence consist of and does it include male victims?  
  
This is any form of violence against men or women. It is always funny to people whenever I said that a husband can rape his wife. The men will ask, “Is she not my wife, the one who I married with my money?” Yes, you married her with your money but she is not an object of sex and so there must be her consent otherwise, it is rape. Gender-based violence can be any form of violence, it can be emotional, socio-economic, or physical. Most times when men complain of abuse, it is mostly emotional. You know men are stronger than women, you rarely see a case of a woman beating up a man but we know that most of the abuses against men are usually emotional. When some women talk, one can feel like ending it all in a nearby river or ocean; this is a classic case of emotional abuse. There must be a way to talk to men and that applies to men because some men are also good in that area (emotional abuse). When you have the means and you refuse to provide for your wife and children, that’s another form of violence. In short, anything that is without consent is deemed violence.  
  
What is the update on the four TASUED female students who were raped when their private hostel at Abapawa was invaded by robbers?  
  
It is unfortunate that the four innocent females were raped, even three of them were virgins. If at that age they can still keep their virginity, then it means a lot to them. The police are still working to bring to book the perpetrators. The students were, however, taken good care of; they were taken to the Sexual Assault Referral Centre in OOUTH. They have been counselled not to see the ugly incident as the end of the world. They have been encouraged to stay strong and continue with their studies and by the grace of God, they are fine. F  
  
What about the secondary school teacher who allegedly raped the two young adults?  
  
For the Secondary School teacher, he is being tried and currently, he is in custody; the same applies to the 76-year-old man who impregnated his 16-year-old daughter. They are all in court. We are equally following up on these cases to ensure that justice is served. As for the projection for next year, we are not even waiting for the new year to come, we are always on our feet. We are not resting on our laurels at all. Next year, we shall take the raising-male-champions campaign to other schools in the state. At the moment, we are working on domesticating the national gender policy that has been adopted at the national level; we hope to have this done by the first or second quarter of next year.  
  
We are also working with a study group led by a professor at Babcock University, Ilisan Remo, and what they are trying to do is look at the causes of gender-based violence. Sometimes, what we do is to cut the trees from the top but as soon as it rains the tree sprouts again. So we want to know what is happening. Why are we having a spike in gender-based violence? One of the things we have discovered fuelling this gender-based violence is the family values that have been eroded, and the lack of proper upbringing of our girls and boys among others. We shall do a lot of work in the new year. I have not been sitting down since I got here to the ministry, it’s been business unusual because there is a lot to be done and we are willing to do our very best.  
  
What are the government’s plans for child beggars and hawkers who move from one street to the other when they ought to be in school?  
  
It still boils down to not having a safe place which I have mentioned the other time. This is because some of these children don’t have a home. If you take them off the streets, where will you put them? The juvenile correctional home is not just for anybody but for children who are beyond the control of their parents. It is not as if some of the children are not ready to change but circumstances have thrown them into the streets. At times when we take them off the streets, we will still have to release them because the (juvenile) home has its capacity and before you know it, they are back on the streets. The government is trying in this area because sometimes when we get the children, we take them back to their homes and see how we can support their parents so that they won’t return to the streets.  
  
Not too long after I resumed as the commissioner, there was a woman who used her child to beg. She also had a two-month-old baby who died in the process. We took her back home and we found out that the husband of the woman was blind. So it is whatever she brought back home that she and her husband and three kids ate. The government is about empowering such women but how many of such can the government do? It is on this note that I want to specifically appreciate the civil rights organisations and other non-governmental organisations who have been supporting us in this journey and I equally want to urge other well-meaning Nigerians to help in supporting families who need help like the case cited here.  
  
How cooperative are parents of the victims of sexual abuse with the government’s investigation and possible prosecution of cases?  
  
We are usually put in a difficult position when these issues arise because most of the time when we have a good case, you will see the parents coming out to say that they are not interested. What we have found majorly behind this attitude is threat and coercion. They will tell such parents to forget about the case and convince them that nothing would come out of it. I don’t want to mention the name of any organisation, but sometimes, an organisation can tell such people to step down from the case and rather collect money that the offender is offering to bury the case.  
  
Let me tell you this story. There is a case of a young lady who was abused, it was even the principal of the secondary school she attended that took the matter to the police and we were asked to come in. On getting there, one of our directors discovered that the young lady had been abused before by two different men, that was before I got to the ministry. So, I got curious and said I wanted to know what happened to the first case when the young lady was abused and we found out that her father collected N400,000 to drop the case. But because the first case was not dealt with, the lady fell victim again. That is the reason why parents should not submit to threats or trade such acts of wickedness for money because of the dangers it involves. Failure to prosecute can embolden others to think that they could also do it and get away with it or probably bribe or buy their way through. In that particular case, I asked that the father should be kept somewhere for the time being because I couldn’t understand why he would do that to his daughter. However, we may not have so much of a problem if we have a safe place to house victims like that young girl; she will still have to go back home with her father and live in the same environment as her abusers who had been released. I am using this medium to call on parents being threatened to report back to the ministry.  
  
Are there other cases like that?  
  
We still had such a case last week. The man was ready for the case to be prosecuted but he later came back to us to say that all he wanted was peace, that he was no longer interested in pursuing the case and by the time we interrogated him, we found out that he was being threatened. This is where the parents must be courageous. They must stand by the ministry and the government to ensure that these people are made to pay for their sins. That is how we can win this war. If your daughter is assaulted, get in touch with us. We may not have a safe place but some organisations are working with us and helping with that, providing shelters for people who have been abused. We may not mention them for safety reasons though but let me use this medium to say that we appreciate them so immensely. I want to thank the police and also specifically appreciate the Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps for helping us in the fight against gender-based violence.  
  
Is your interest in the welfare of women connected to your family or educational background?  
  
I was born into the family of Pa Adeleye from the Akodu compound in Ago-Oba, and Madam Adeleye from the Soji compound in Igbore, Abeokuta, about five decades ago. I came from a very humble upbringing yet disciplined, and my educational journey began at Methodist Primary School, Tabon-Tabon, followed by Lagos Baptist Secondary School and Iju Grammar School, all in Lagos State. Despite facing challenges affecting the pace of my education, I acquired a diploma in Yoruba Linguistics from the prestigious University of Lagos in 1998. Subsequently, I pursued further education in Accounting at the Institute of Chartered Management Accountants and I am not stopping there as I plan to return to the four walls of the classroom very soon.  
  
Was your foray into politics intentional?  
  
My foray into politics was unintentional, starting with the United Nigeria Congress Party and later moving to the Alliance for Democracy and eventually joining the Peoples Democratic Party in 2003. I began at the grassroots level, serving as the women leader in my ward and later becoming a consultant on community development matters in the Ifo Local Government Area. My journey of about two decades in public service includes roles as a two-term member of the House of Assembly. Thereafter, I answered a call to service in the National Assembly as a senior legislative aide to a former Deputy Speaker of the Federal House of Representatives, and subsequently held positions as Special Adviser to Governor Dapo Abiodun on Women Affairs, and later as Commissioner for Culture and Tourism before being re-appointed to the Women Affairs and Social Development Ministry. Suffice it to say, I have a stint in local government administration, state legislation and now in the executive arm of government.