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SEXUAL ASSAULT AMONG WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN NIGERIA

The term sexual assault refers to sexual contact or behavior that occurs without explicit consent of the victim. Sexual assault can take many forms, circumstances and settings. some of the forms include: attempted rape, fondling or unwanted sexual touching, forcing a victim to perform sexual acts such as: oral sex or penetration into the victim’s body also known as rape. However, it is good to know that not all sexual assault is rape, but rape is a form of sexual assault. In as much as sexual assault may take different forms, one thing remains the same: it’s never the victim’s fault.

Women and children are mostly the victims of sexual assault because they are often perceived to be weak. According to UNICEF, six out of ten children in Nigeria experience emotional, physical or sexual abuse before the age of 18, of which 8 out of 10 of those cases are perpetrated by people the victims know.

Contrary to what most people believe, sexual assaults are not caused by the victims and is not the victim’s fault, rather, it is the fault of the perpetrator who should be duly punished for his acts. Although, the society frowns at all sorts of sexual assaults, the same society has continually made it difficult for victims to come out to share their stories so that their abusers can be charged to court and prosecuted. It is appalling that rapists have continued to be hidden by apologists who go about making excuses for them and shifting blames to the victims. Whenever a case is reported, apologists often ask questions such as: ‘where was she?’ ‘what was she wearing?’ ‘why did she visit him (the assaulter)?’ ‘why was she walking alone?’ etc. to intimidate the victims.

In recent weeks, sexual assaults have been termed as an epidemic in Nigeria as more cases of rape have sprung up from different parts of the country. Assault of women and children is now) the order of the day. Women and children have lived in fear of being a victim and no longer feel safe even in their own homes. 18-year-old Barakat, a student of the federal college of animal and production technology was found raped and stabbed to death at the back of the home she hared (shared) with her family in Oyo state on Monday, June 1, 2020. Similarly, there is the case of Uwaila Vera Omozuwa who was also beaten, raped and murdered where she was reading alone inside a church in Edo state on May 30, 2020. 12-year-old Jennifer was also reported to have been raped by 11 men in Jigawa state.

Among factors that increase men’s risk of committing sexual assault include social relationships and family response to the act that blames women without punishing men, concentrating instead on restoring ‘lost’ family honor creates an environment in which rape can occur with impunity. While families try to protect their women from rape, there is rarely much social pressure to control young men or to persuade that coercing sex is wrong. Instead in some communities, there is frequently support for family members to do whatever is necessary including marrying off the victim to her violator in a case where rape leads to pregnancy, thereby legitimatizing the union in other to alleviate the shame associated with rape or other sexual transgression.

Poverty is also a factor that increases the risk of women and children from being sexually assaulted. Poor women and girls may be more at risk of rape in the course of their daily activities than those who are better off, for example when they walk home on their own from work late at night, or work in the fields or collect firewood alone. Children of the poor women may have less parental supervision when not in school, since their mothers may be at work and unable to afford child care. The children themselves may, in fact, be working and thus vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

Victims of sexual assault go through a series of adversities after being assaulted, some of which include pregnancy and gynecological complications, risk of sexually transmitted diseases, suicidal behavior, social ostracization and mental health challenges. A lot of victims mostly go through gynecological complications as a result of forced sexual activity. Some victims get pregnant through the process in which they are forced to bear the child or else put their lives at street with back-street abortion. HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases are also recognized consequences of rape.

Abused women reporting experiences of forced sex are at a significantly greater risk of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and capability of committing suicide than non-abused women.

Victims are also at a risk of being ostracized in the society because the community believes they are responsible for provoking sexual desire in men. Other families may warn their wards not to move around with the victims because the society sees them as ‘wayward’. Some men may also reject their wives if they find out they have been sexually assaulted in the past.

Also, children who have been abused at an early age tend to see sexuality as something in which they have no control and practice high risk sexual behavior in future.

Community activism among men would go a long way in reducing and preventing the occurrences of sexual assaults against women and children. Campaign programs should be put in place for men in order to educate them on consensual sexual practices. They should be educated that it takes two to agree in a sexual relationship and there is no justification for violating the other party’s rules or wishes.

Education of the girl child would also go a long way in curbing the act of sexual assault among women and children. The educated girl child finds it easy to report any form of sexual assault and make sure her predator faces the law than girls who are not educated, who will easily succumb to societal pressures of concealing the subject to avoid shame.

Legislative amendment is also a very key measure in preventing sexual assault against women and children. Most of the time, perpetrators escape the full wrath of the law after being caught guilty of a sexual offence. Some are even given a lenient term of five years in prison. Sexual assaults would be curbed if those caught guilty are severely dealt with. Also, the increment of the age of consent in Nigeria from 11 to 18 would go a long way to prevent sexual violence against children in Nigeria.