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**RAPE CULTURE IN NIGERIA**

According to police reports, 717 rape incidents have been reported in the last five months during the Covid-19 lockdown. The month of June started with the gang-rape and murder of 18-year-old Barakat Bello in her Ibadan home. Two days later, four masked men raped a minor in her home in Lagos.

The month before 11 men sexually assaulted another minor in Jigawa, which was closely followed by the rape and slaying of 22-year-old university student Vera Uwaila Omosuwa on a church’s premises in Edo State. The death of Omosuwa started the #JusticeforUwa hastag and led to “State of Emergency gender-based violence” protests organized in June in Lagos and Abuja.

Nothing exposes the backwardness of a country more than this prevalent rape culture, backed by religious and cultural sentiments of male supremacy and dominance. The 2014 National Survey on Violence Against Children in Nigeria found that one in four women have experienced sexual violence in childhood, with over 70% of them reporting more than one incident. Of the 24.8% of women aged 18 to 24 who have experienced sexual abuse before the age of 18, a dismal 5% sought help, and just 3.5% received any assistance. Nigeria’s Criminal Code recommends life imprisonment for those convicted of rape and 14 years for attempted rape. Given that as few as two out of 40 rape cases are reported in Nigeria, it is difficult to estimate the number of rapes committed each year. Yet it is quite shocking that in the legal history of Nigeria, fewer than 20 persons have been convicted of the crime.

What is rape culture and how do we contribute to it in Nigeria? Rape culture is a culture in which sexual violence is treated as the norm and victims are blamed for their own assaults. It is the social environment that allows sexual violence to be normalized and justified, fueled by the persistent gender inequalities and attitudes to gender and sexuality. It’s not just about sexual violence itself, but about cultural norms and institutions that protect rapists, promote impunity, shame victims, and demand that women make unreasonable sacrifices to avoid sexual assault. Rape culture pressures women to sacrifice their freedoms and opportunities in order to stay safe, because it puts the burden of safety on women’s shoulders, and blames them when they do not succeed. Rape culture treats rape as a problem to be solved through improving the behavior of potential rape victims (who are commonly presumed in Nigeria, to be women), rather than improving the behavior of potential rapists (who are most likely to be men in Nigeria)

Nigeria is still very much a patriarchal society in that male supremacy is largely at play and the power is in the hands of men. Women have been subdued for hundreds of years and have been considered to be of little or no value unless shown in culinary skills or childbearing. Women in Nigeria are discriminated against at almost every level from government to family to religion. They are assigned roles and molds to fit into and are not expected to exceed those limits set for them. Some laws in the constitution easily back these assertions. For example, Section 353 of the Criminal Code states that “Any person who unlawfully and indecently assaults any male person is guilty of a felony (a serious crime), and is liable to imprisonment for three years. The offender cannot be arrested without warrant.” However Section 360 of the same Criminal Code has this to say “Any person who unlawfully and indecently assaults a woman or girl is guilty of a misdemeanor (a minor wrongdoing), and is liable to imprisonment for two years.” The same constitution states in Section 55(1)(d) that “Nothing is an offence which is done by a husband for the purpose of correcting his wife.” Also Criminal Code Section 229 states that “Any woman obtaining a miscarriage purposefully is guilty of a felony and is liable to imprisonment for up to 7 years.” Section 182 of the Penal Code provides that “sexual intercourse by a man with his own wife is not rape if she has attained puberty.” It is easily decipherable from all these laws that women are considered to be of lesser value than men are. Women are considered objects who are to be owned by members of the greater sex who are considered to be men. Take into consideration the law that states that women who have intentional miscarriages should serve a jail term of seven years not considering the possibility of rape when her rapist may not be charged or may only serve a sentence of two years.

Rape in its simplest form is not just an urgent, unexpected sexual desire that needs to be satisfied. Instead, it is the violent expression of power against another. Rape is primarily about power and its abuse. Within the Nigerian context, it is the punishment for wishing to be independent, for daring to threaten the status quo, the societal power dynamics. In Nigeria, when a woman is raped, the perpetrator is simply saying the victim's body is his to take with or without her consent and when a society as a whole fails to protect the victim and punish the perpetrator, that society is consenting that indeed the woman's body is up for taking with or without her consent.

However, we (Nigerians) as a society do not need to wait for a woman to be violently assaulted sexually to be complicit in the act of rape. Everyday, we make decisions consciously or unconsciously that perpetrate the culture of rape, that is, a culture where rape and sexual violence are common and in which prevalent attitudes, norms, societal practices and even the media normalizes, excuses or tolerates rape.

With the above definition in mind, it is obvious that we do indeed have a rape culture in Nigeria. When we think it is okay for a husband to forcefully have sex with his wife, we are obliquely perpetrating a rape culture by telling the woman that she is nothing but a pleasure object for her husband. We are saying she has no right to consensual sex, her body is his to use when and how he pleases. Conversely, when he cheats and we blame the wife, we are inadvertently telling her she made her husband vulnerable by denying him sex, thus creating room for him to be tempted. By absolving the man from blame, we are telling the woman that not only must she be an object of pleasure for her husband at all time, she must also satisfy his needs.

When we look the other way when the "oga" (boss) sexually violates the maid/nanny/distant cousin from the village, we are an accomplice in the act of rape. When we blame the rape victims, we are complicit in an act of rape. When we refuse to punish the victims, blame the devil, watch Nollywood movies where a rape victim is killed/dishonored/disowned by her husband, family or society at large, we are permitting and encouraging a rape culture.

Most importantly and less nuanced in our perpetration of rape culture due to the spread of fundamentalist religions in Nigeria is when we insist that women must remain virgins till marriage. This is because in this scenario of virgin-till-marriage, a woman is seen only through the lens of procreation and pleasure object for her husband. Value is placed on the purity of the woman instead of on the woman herself. The woman is seen as an object to be collected, desired by the menfolk and only through her virginal purity is her worth validated.

It is in this policing of a woman's body and the hyper-vigilance of the female sexuality, which dictates and subordinates what the woman wants or does not want, that the problem lies. This policing and hyper-vigilance translates to the society telling the woman that there is something inherently wrong with her body. Thus she must be told what to wear (or not wear) to limit the exposure to the men and when she doesn't conform, and is assaulted or arrested, then she is responsible. In other words, if a woman's body is visible, it ought to be available for sex or punished for this visibility.

What am I saying after all? The modesty culture we preach is a rape culture because of our insistence on female purity and modesty. Why is it the sole responsibility of the female to remain chaste? Why isn't the male tasked with chastity? By focusing on the female, we reduce the woman to mere flesh and place control over the female body and sexuality in male hands. When she is sexually violated who do we infer to as "dishonored"? The victim? Or her family, which means her father or male relatives because as we know in Nigeria, it is the father/brother/other male relatives that are the symbol of a family? Therefore when a family is dishonored, we basically saying, the father/brother/kins men are dishonored.

We need to do away with this system that espouses the idea of woman as a possession and develop instead a society that sees the woman as human with rights, consent and abilities. A society where ethical sexuality is promoted and supported. Instead of telling the woman she is at fault for getting raped, we should teach our sons the importance of consent, that no means no and a woman can withdrew this consent at any time. Instead of telling the victim of sexual assault not to speak up so as not the shame her family, we should create a society were victims are helped to overcome the trauma of the assault. Instead of telling the young girl she 'asked' for it because of the way she dressed, we should punish severely and publicly shame rapists. We should consciously make the effort as consumers not tolerate music videos and home movies that objectify the female body form in the name of art.

I believe it is the right time for us as a nation to have this all important conversation on rape and sexual harassment endemic in our society. We don/t have to wait for Uju/Jumoke/Zainab to be sexually and fatally violated by the pastor/stepdad/boyfriend to realize that we have rape problem that needs addressing. Of course, rape culture in the Nigerian context goes way deeper than discussed here. However starting this discussion means slowly chipping away one splinter at a time the pillar of female oppression which our society is built upon.

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