

Brief Research Report

Sexual Violence and Victim Blaming in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Aims and Objectives

To determine the trend and pattern of sexual violence and victim blaming in Nigeria, which is associated with a range of health consequences, to publish the trend and proffer solutions on how to stem the tide.

Methods

Questionnaires were administered to individuals physically by hand as well as electronically *via* online social media groups.

Results

In this study carried out between July 2019 and August 2020, the opinion of 251 respondents comprising 153 males (61%) and 98 females (39%) between ages 23 and 60 years, were sought concerning who to blame in a sexual violence event: 150 (60%) comprising 120 males (45%) and 30 females (15%) blamed the victim: 80 (31%) comprising 26 males (10%) and 54 females (21%) blamed the perpetrators, while 21 (9%) comprising 7 males (3%) and 14 females (6%) were indifferent.

Conclusion

Victim blaming is prevalent in Nigeria and this has been one of the major factors that make sexual violence the fastest growing crime in this most populated Sub-Saharan African Country.

Keywords

Sexual violence; Victim blaming; Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence is a major public health and human rights issue. Sexual abuse cuts across all societies, manifesting in different shades. It is not entirely limited to females; males are affected as well.¹ According to the World Bank, more females have been sexually assaulted than males. Gender-based violence (GBV) or violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a global pandemic that affects 1 in 3 women in their lifetime. Sexual violence includes sexual harassment (including demands of sex for job or school grades), rape of any kind, female genital cutting (FGC), and child marriage, trafficking and forced exposure to pornography.^{2,3}

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines sexual violence as “any sexual act, attempt to obtain sexual act, unwarranted sexual comments or advances or acts to traffic a person or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion by any person regardless of the relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work”.⁴

Findings from a National Survey carried out in 2014 in Nigeria confirmed one in four females reported experiencing sexual violence in childhood with approximately 70% reporting more than one incident of sexual violence.^{5,6} In the same study, it was found that 24.8% of females aged 18 to 24-years experienced sexual abuse prior to age 18 of which 5.0% sought help, with only 3.5% receiving any form of support. It comes as no surprise that victims of sexual violence are often scared to tell anyone about what happened or even go to police.^{6,7}

Besides not getting support, some victims were actually blamed when they sought help. Some were blamed for indecent dressing and wrong company; others for being careless or walking alone.⁸ Victim blaming is flourishing in Nigeria.

United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) reported in 2015 that one in four girls and one in ten boys in Nigeria had experienced sexual violence before the age of 18.^{5,8} Since the report of 2015, sexual violence has been on the increase in Nigeria.

Many women and children suffer from sexual violence, while the perpetrators of sexual violence often get off scot-free. One man confessed to the police that he raped over 40 women, including an 80-year-old before his case was reported.⁶ The rise in sexual violence was reported by the Police *via* Press Releases in official print and electronic media, based on documented confirmed monthly reports which were compared with those of pre-COVID-19 period.^{10,11}

During the lockdown, as a result of Covid-19 Pandemic, sexual violence also became endemic in Nigeria. The Nigerian Police recorded 717 rape cases between January and May 2020.^{12,13} In another report, on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the sexual violence in Nigeria, in just two months of the lockdown there was widespread rise in sexual violence cases across the six geopolitical zones of the country as follows.

Northeast (NE): 50 in March and 115 in April. Northwest (NW): 52 in March and 87 in April. North-central (NC): 67 in March and 156 in April. Southeast (SE): 36 in March and 92 in April. Southwest (SW): 91 in March and 296 in April. South-south (SS): 18 in March and 35 in April.^{10,13}

On the 5th June, 2020, human rights campaigners rallied in Nigeria’s Capital (Abuja) to raise awareness about violence against women after a series of high profile rape cases sparked an outcry in the country.¹⁴

Sexual violence is a severely traumatic experience that affects the victim emotionally and physically. Sexual violence increases shame, leaves the person more disconnected from their own feelings as well as make it harder to connect with other people. Many sexual violence victims sustain physical injury with attendant pain as well as develop sleep disturbances excessive fear, suicidal tendencies and hatred for men. Yet there is limited attention to this crime and the flourishing of victim blaming.

Blaming the victim refers to the tendency to hold victims of negative events responsible for those outcomes.¹⁵ In Nigeria this is very common occurrence following sexual violence events where the victim is blamed in various ways as follows. “*Look what they were wearing*”. “*They deliberately go to where they get raped*”. “*Girls always want sex*”. “*They can’t tell their story the same way twice*”. “*She went back to him after he raped her*”. They are married so it couldn’t have been sexual violence. “*Where was the mother when it happened?*”

Sexual violence has led to death of victims. Between Jan-

uary and June 2020, cases of death following sexual violence have been reported.¹⁰⁻¹² Vera Uwala Omozuwa was raped and killed in a church in Benin, Nigeria. Eighteen (18)-year-old Barakat Bello was raped to death in Ibadan Nigeria. In Jigawa, Nigeria, 12-year-old girl was gang raped by 12 men including a 67-year-old man; and so on. Sexual violence is evil and victim blaming is offensive. Both sexual violence and victim blaming need to stop. This study was conducted to determine the trend and pattern of sexual violence and victim blaming in Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

Questionnaires were administered to individuals. Before the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic, questionnaires were administered physically as well as electronically *via* online social media groups. Following the emergence of COVID-19 only the online method was retained and maintained. The questionnaires comprised of a section for demographic information as well as employed the Likert scale. Five points were utilized on this scale, namely: (1) Strongly agree (2) agree (3) Neither agree nor disagree, (4) Disagree and (5) Strongly disagree. Points 1 and 2 were interpreted as “*Blamed the victim*”. Point 3 was interpreted as “*Indifferent*”. Points 4 and 5 were interpreted as “*Blamed the perpetrator*”.

RESULTS

Opinion

The victim of sexual violence such as rape should be blamed.

DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to determine the trend and pattern of sexual violence and victim blaming in Nigeria. The result shows that sexual violence and victim blaming are common in Nigeria. The fact that a greater percentage of respondents are in favour of victim blaming calls for deep concern. A look at the table shows that more males are in favour of victim blaming and more females are indifferent. During the study, most females declined response to the physically administered questionnaire but they responded very well to the online questionnaire. Apart from victim blaming, another barrier to campaign against sexual violence is stereotyping where most females avoid discussing sexual violence so as not to be labeled former victim. As a former victim, she could be jilted by a friend, fiancé or even spouse on the ground that she might have contracted dreaded diseases or had been promiscuous. Prospective suitors would also avoid her. This may have informed the reluc-

Response	Male	Female	Total	Interpretation	Total	Percent (%)
Strongly agree	20	10	30	Blamed the victim	150	60
Agree	100	20	120			
Neither agree nor disagree	7	14	21	Indifferent	21	9
Disagree	6	24	30	Blamed the perpetrator	80	31
Strongly disagree	20	30	50			
Respondents	153	98	251		251	
Percent (%)	61	39	100			100

tance of female respondents in responding to the questionnaire administered physically and for the higher number of females remaining indifferent.

In Nigeria, there are at least five legal provisions which provide access to justice for victims of sexual violence, but certain prevailing attitudes tend to encourage this crime and contribute to the underreporting and low conviction rates.^{16,17}

Victim blaming is one of the prevailing attitudes in Nigeria that discourage survivors of sexual violence from reporting their ordeal to friends, family members or even the police. Survivors hide in guilt and shame and perpetrators continue with impunity.

Other barriers to seeking victim support and care include rape myths. Rape myths are those ideas or beliefs that deny or minimize victim injury or blame the victims for their own victimization. Rape myths that are commonly accepted include “*She is too proud and deserves to be raped*”, “*she asked for it through her provocative behavior or dressing*”, “*There was not much physical damage*”, “*A woman can't be raped by her husband*”, “*When women say no they actually mean yes*”, “*Stranger rape is more offensive than acquaintance rape*”, “*After enjoying it she is here to blackmail the poor guy*”.¹⁸ There is growing body of evidence showing that despite years of public education about sexual violence, rape myths and gender stereotypes are still accepted, believed and propagated by communities in Nigeria.^{13,19-21}

CONCLUSION

Sexual violence is associated with a range of health consequences. Some consequences are direct, such as physical injury, sexually transmitted infections (STI) including HIV, damage to reproductive structures as seen in cases of child sexual abuse, and unwanted pregnancy. Emotionally, sexual violence is associated with chronic somatic disorders, anxiety, depression, high-risk sexual behavior, and chronic illnesses, aversion for sex and hatred for men. There are also socio-economic consequences that generally impact negatively on the victim's quality of life. Victim blaming is a way of encouraging the perpetrators of sexual violence to continue with impunity. This further gets the victim humiliated and dehumanized. The person feels invaded, defiled and disowned through victim blaming and gender stereotyping. The victim of sexual violence almost always resorts to blaming themselves, because in the culture people tend to blame the victims in general. The government and people of Nigeria should take steps to end sexual violence and victim blaming through preventive measures, such as centers for providing comprehensive care to victims of sexual violence, community activism by men, psychological care and support for victims, stiffer penalty for perpetrators, school-based awareness programmes, medico-legal services and enforcement mechanisms.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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