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Culture of Silence and Wave of Sexual Violence in Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper reviewed the literature on wave of sexual violence and non-disclosure by survivors. This paper discussed the prevalence of sexual violence, health consequences and the factors responsible for under-reporting of sexual violence in Nigeria. The study was anchored on the spiral of silence theory because the theory presumed that people are likely to keep silent if they know that their view will not be recognized or if they are afraid of being rejected or stigmatized. Studies revealed that despite the high prevalence of sexual violence, sexually violated victims hardly report their experiences. Some of the identified factors that serve as impediment to reporting sexual violence are fear of stigmatization, rape myths, government policy and insensitivity of the law enforcement agents to sexual assaults. Also, the health implication of sexual violence on survivors was found to be enormous yet, many of the assailants perpetrate the evil without any punishment for the act because of non-disclosure of the crime. It was therefore recommended that survivor of sexual violence should be encouraged to report assault through regular sensitization programmes. Also, government should put in place stiffer penalties for assailants and the policy should be adequately implemented to serve as deterrent to others.

1. Introduction

In Nigeria, reports from mass media have shown that the rate of sexual violence against children and women is on the increase. A recent study by Adeleke, et al. (2012) on yearly presentation of rape cases in Osun State, Nigeria showed a steady increase from 0.72% in 2003 to 3.61% in 2009 while three quarters of the victims were children and young adults under 18-years old. Also, the study conducted by WHO in 2002 according to Singh, Parsekar & Nair (2014) reported that 150 million girls under the age of 18 years had experienced sexual violence. Despite the increase in the prevalence of sexual violence, reported incidence from observation is a tip of the iceberg, because many cases of sexual violence go unreported pointing to the fact that the available data on sexual violence may not be enough to estimate the true scale of the problem.

The studies of Bourdilon (2000); Onah (2010) and Abrahams, et al. (2014) described sexual violence as a global problem with women and children being mostly vulnerable because of their subordinates' status. The likelihood that male could experience sexual violence from same sex or opposite sex is not ruled out, nonetheless, the prevalence is higher among children and women. The pathetic aspect of it is that many of these assaults happened without being reported. Records have it that African women experience sexual violence at alarming rates but they are less likely to disclose or seek help in the aftermath of the sexual violence (Tilman, Bryant-Davis, Smith & Marks,

2010). Also, National Crime and Safety Survey (2012) has it on record that sexual violence in Nigeria is under-reported compared to other major crimes while Brown worth (1995) and Kiesel (2006) discovered that over 700,000 women are raped or sexually assaulted annually with fewer than half reporting the crimes.

2. Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is any form of sexual activity where consent is not obtained from the partner. It occurs whenever an individual is coerced, forced or manipulated into sexual activity without her consent or engaging in sexual relationship with a victim who could not resist based on the age, illness, disability or under the influence of substance such as alcohol. Other forms of sexual violence include a range of aggressive sexual behaviour such as sex without consent known as rape, either stranger rape or statutory rape (Olive, 2012) and all forms of sexual manipulation such as incest and child sexual abuse. It has been discovered that sexual violence in form of rape is the most under-reported crime (Akinlusi, et al. 2014) as only 39% of rape was reported to law enforcement agents. Other components of sexual violence include forced kissing, forced breast and genital fondling, attempted rape (West & Rose, 2000) and forced exposure to pornography (Eze, 2013). The overwhelming effect of sexual violence is much on the victim and could affect the trust and feeling of safety irrespective of age, gender or socio-economic status of the victim. Also, the damaging effect of sexual violence could spread to the parents, spouse, friends, co-workers or children of the victim.

3. Prevalence of Sexual Violence

Either male or female could be assaulted sexually but studies have shown that the prevalence is more among women than men. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2005) discovered that sexual violence is strongly gendered with many more women reported as experiencing sexual violence than men. Having found it evident that sexual violence against women is common all over the world but reliable data seems to vary from one region or location to the other. For instance, record has it that 12% of women in Western Europe had experienced non-partner sexual assault (Lewis & Reed, 2003) while data on the subject in developing countries including Nigeria is not available (Adeleke, et al. 2012). The incidence of sexual violence is not restricted to any age group but prevalence seems to be more among students. Hill & Silva (2005) discovered that sexual violence is widespread among students as majority of college students experience sexual violence. Also, Smit & Plessis (2011) found a high incidence of sexual harassment among college students in America with a very small percentage of the transgressions being reported. The prevalence of sexual violence among high school students is a serious problem (Mulugeta, Kassaye & Berhane, 1998).

4. Health Consequences of Sexual Violence

The detrimental effect of sexual violence on the health of the survivor is enormous (Kiesel, 2006). Survivor could experience physical health problems arising from the likely changes in sleeping and eating habit that may accompany sexual violence. In addition, victim of sexual violence may be predisposed to gynaecological injuries such as genital-anal trauma and other likely physical injuries. Likewise, issue of elevated sexually transmitted infection such as syphilis, gonorrhoea, chlamydia, herpes simplex virus, human papilloma and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) may occur among survivor of rape. Also, sexual violence in form of rape may result into genital injuries and untreated infection arising from rape could aggravate to pelvic inflammatory disease, urinary tract infection or ascending infection affecting the reproductive organs. In addition, rape or incest could result into unwanted pregnancy.

Holmes, et al. (1996) and Kiesel (2006) posited that 32,000 pregnancies result from rape every year. Survivors of rape are at increased risk of unsafe abortion because of the tendency to want to get rid of the pregnancy arising from the rape. Aside pregnancy, other physical health effects that could arise from sexual violence include trauma in the body. The trauma may be from the assailant or self-harm or self-inflicted injury. Some survivor of sexual violence according to Cavaugh (2002) may inflict self-injury to express emotional pain, anger or blocking out painful thought of betrayal.

Sexual violence is traumatic and most times affect the self-esteem of survivor and relations as the act could destroy women's concept of self. Short or long term effects of rape or other sexual violence that affect the mind of survivor are numerous. Firstly, the experience of unconsented sexual activity accompanied with force, bullying, coercion, assault or intimidation could linger on in the subconscious mind of the survivor. The long term pains could have a devastating effect on the psychological wellbeing of the survivor. Ordinary experiences connected with senses such as daily occurrence or seeing a man could trigger a flashback that could make the survivor find it difficult to connect with reality or feel that the assailant is physically present. Also, sexual violence survivors are more likely to suffer from depression, suicide and other mental health problems. Saunders, et al. (1999) discovered that the rate of lifetime depression among rape survivors was 52% compared to 27% among non-victims.

Sexual violence can lead to a wide variety of unhealthy consequences including behavioural and psychological problems, sexual dysfunction and perversion, relationship problem, low self-esteem, depression, thoughts of suicide, alcohol and drug abuse (Saunders & Kindy, 1993). Emotional symptoms exhibited by sexual assault survivors include major depression, adjustment disorder, substance abuse,

personality disorder and psychosexual dysfunction. Silence has been identified as the greatest obstacle impeding the healing process (Kiesel, 2006)

5. Attitude Towards Sexual Violence

Many people trivialised issues concerning sexual violence. Doubting the case of sexual violence is a common phenomenon in developing countries as people tend to raise question whether sexual violence has taken place most especially if there are no obvious injuries on the victim. In addition, the deplorable notion that women say “no” when they mean “yes” while some believe that if a woman doesn’t physically resist though she resisted verbally then it isn’t rape could be counterproductive in the reporting of sexual violence. In some cases sexual violence could be narrowed down into blaming the victim as having encouraged the act through questionable character such as having collected something from the man. The perpetrator could be excused on the ground that the victim asked for it through her action or dressing because men cannot control their sexual impulses. Also, events such as touching the breast, seductive gaze among others that could degenerate to violent rape are most times disregarded or trivialised. The study of Abe (2012) discovered that sexual violence is usually taken for granted, believed to be normal and not yet perceived as a serious problem that should be tackled as victims have been left to tackle the issues on individual basis

Many do believe that women are more likely to be raped by someone they know such as close family associates and trusted family member rather than by strangers. Hardy (2014) substantiated this that in many cases of sexual violence, the abusers are known to the people and are usually people in position or trust. Also, Akinlusi, et al. (2014) reported that in 54.6% of cases of rape, the assailants were neighbours with the act occurring in the neighbour’s homes. The perpetrators of sexual violence in schools are teachers, peers, and students in higher grades while the chief culprits are the teachers (Chikwiri & Lemmer, 2014). When the attitude of condoning, trivialising or giving excuses for sexual violence is common, some men may feel that engaging in sexual violence is normal and this may likely encourage the increase of sexual assault. On the other hand, because sexual violence is not perceived to be serious, victims may feel afraid most importantly, the uncertainty of what kind of response they will receive from friends, family and institutions such as police or courts will aid silence.

Sexual violence is likely to occur more commonly in cultures that foster beliefs of perceived male superiority, social and cultural inferiority of women (Gurvinder & Dinesh, 2013). The misconception or attitude towards sexual violence may have a grave consequence on the victim. For instance, exonerating the perpetrator for not responsible for his action or shifting the blame to the victim may prevent the victim from seeking help. The devastating effect of the trauma will be borne by the victim, friends and family. and as victim who don’t get the help they need to recover may suffer long term

physical, psychological and emotional problems.

6. Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on the spiral of silence theory which explained why people keep silent or fail to disclose disturbing issues. The three premises of the theory are that people have a quasi statistical organ referred to as the sixth sense needed for reasoning. Secondly, people are afraid of isolation and they know when behaviour may increase the likelihood of been socially isolated. Lastly, people fear rejection and social isolation, the more they perceive they are in the minority on social issue the more silent they will be on such issues. The postulation from this theory is that when one’s idea or experience differs from the majority, it is accompanied with the reluctance to express one’s opinion using the social environment as the reference point (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003, Asikhia and Awolusi, 2013). The interpretation is that the reasoning organ most importantly the brain, makes man know of his susceptibility to social control as well as determine the likelihood of been rejected, face embarrassment or punishment if an issue is disclosed. Knowledge of the likely incident that could follow a disclosure of an event will make man take an action or a stance of whether to open up if he will be accepted or keep silent if on the contrary. The risk of stigmatisation and rejection of survivors impose a culture of silence, preventing women from reporting crime.

Consequent upon the idea referenced from the theory above, the fear whether one would receive desired support or attention could be an important factor mitigating sexual violence survivor’s willingness to disclose the incidence. Victims of sexual violence are often silent due to the fear of stigmatization, fear of who to trust among law enforcement agents and agencies, fear of whether they will have fair judgement from those who are to handle such cases including fear of fund needed to push their case through at the Court.

7. Culture of Silence on Sexual Violence

In Nigeria, many sexually traumatized victims seem to find it difficult to disclose the incidence or the assailant because of the need to protect their identity. This may explain the submission of White House Council on Women and Girls (2014) that African culture still allows the pervasiveness of sexual violence to persist. Documentation is an important aspect in combating sexual violence but it is disheartening that many sexually assaulted victims will not report to allow for proper documentation. It is the right of sexually violated victim to choose whether to report or not but one should not be ignorant of the fact that reporting sexual assault will enhance and strengthen prosecution of the perpetrators. Various factors may influence the disclosure of sexual violence. For instance, inadequate and inappropriate sexuality socialization on sexual abuse prevention within the

culture and families of a child may affect the disclosure of sexual violence in adulthood (Tilman, et al. 2010; Asikhia and Awolusi, 2013).

The culture of double standard of social and sexual conduct for boys and girls may influence silence. For instance, male child is seen as the cherished heir in developing countries like Nigeria. Everything a male child does is permitted by the culture but girls on the other hand, are treated as properties or commodities that must subsume their needs to males in the family. This culture could be blame for the belief that men are unable to control their sexual urges and that women are responsible for provoking the sexual desire (Ariffin, 1997) as well as identifying male dominance as the driving force in rape (Brown-Miller, 1975). Also, fear induced by this same culture may prevent the survivor of sexual violence from disclosing the assault. Another reason for non-disclosure could be attributed to the cultural solution to sexual violence whereby, the sexually violated woman would be advised or forced to marry the assailant in order to preserve the integrity of the woman and her family (Heise, 1993). Economic or geographic situation may further limit options of reporting. In situation where the assailant is the breadwinner on socially influential or strong community ties in rural areas whereby the victim may be related to the perpetrator may also aid silence. The close-knit, self-contained and most often conservative rural culture tends to make it impossible for victim of sexual assault to turn to outsiders for assistance (*Smit & Plessis, 2011*).

Various studies have it recorded that sexual violence is underreported globally. For instance, Odu, Falana & Olotu (2014) discovered that 50%-90% of all rapes and other sexual violence acts were unreported as most incest and molestation are not often reported. While, Eze (2013) revealed that one in five women reports sexual assault and one in three girls reported forced initiation into sexual acts. Many factors may be implicated for the non-disclosure of attack as reported by Abdulkadir, et al. (2011) that the reasons for non-reporting of sexual violence are complex and multi-faceted. The poor disclosure of sexual violence has made many perpetrators escaped punishment because the victims kept silent either due to the fear of being stigmatized or closeness of the assailants. Among the numerous reasons for under reporting sexual violence to professionals include shame, concerns for confidentiality, guilt and fear of not being believed (Sable, Danis, Mauzy & Gallagher, 2006). Furthermore, many families do frown at public confession of being sexually violated.

Non-reporting date rape, stranger or other sexual assault has been linked with shame, humiliation, guilt, cultural taboos, to avoid victimization at the hand of medical authorities (Odu, Falana & Olotu, 2014) and stigmatization. Abdulkadir et al (2011) identified age of the abused, relationship between perpetrator and gender of the assaulted and cognitive variable and the likely consequence of disclosure as factors influencing or encouraging silence. Also, cases of sexual violence may go unreported because many perpetrators of reported cases went unpunished due to lack of

evidence or disbelief. It has also been found that the main reason survivors do not report is that they think no one will believe them and that various authorities, especially legal and medical authorities, will be hostile (Abe, 2012)

8. Stigmatization

Sexual violence remained highly stigmatized in all settings, thus levels of the disclosure vary between regions but precisely it is a widely under-reported phenomenon (Human Security Report, 2012). Sexual violence is under reported by victim for fear of stigmatisation and rejection by colleagues and the society (Kullima, Kawuwa, Audu, Mairiga & Bukar, 2010). No one wants to be perceived as a victim of sexual assault. The assumed dishonour associated with rape or sexual perversion may encourage silence. For instance, Achunike & Kitause (2014) reported that the social stigma associated with rape in Nigeria forces victims to conceal rape and other violent sexual assault in order to save self from shame and public embarrassment. To worsen the matter, the social stigma associated with rape makes it difficult for victim and the family to expose the rapists. The study of Verelst, et al. (2014) revealed that victims of sexual violence reported stigmatization experiences. On the other hand, knowing the perpetrator by the assailant may make reporting of sexual violence difficult as this may cause conflicting emotions such as fear and loyalty. In case the rapist is the father of the victim the possibility of reporting the sexual violence will be low. Also, relative, family, friends or relations who take the advantage of their proximity or relationship to prey upon vulnerable children may do same with impunity because it is unlikely that such case will be reported.

9. Rape Myths

Rape myth is a false or cultural belief that mainly serves the purpose of shifting the blame from perpetrators to the victims. Rape myths could aid silence. For instance, Suarez & Gadalla (2011) discovered that prejudices and stereotypes concerning rape and rape victim exist as men justify rape to minimize personal vulnerability. The beliefs that if a woman did not get hurt or fight back during the incident means that it couldn't be a rape or that women eventually get to enjoy being raped because they want it. Some of these myths may be the reason for the condescending questions from law enforcement agents and the request for proof when physical or testimonial evidence exists to support the claim. This would make the rape survivor to keep sealed lips. If the culture around victims is not open to validating their experience or providing support or speaking out against issues of power and control, then that certainly is a large responsibility for someone who is trying to recover from whatever kind of victimization they've experienced.

10. Government Policy

Observation of the mishandling of past sexual violence

cases by law enforcement agents, where the promulgated law against offenders were not effectively implemented may hinder victim from reporting because sexual violence policy may seem to largely influence whether survivor will report an attack or not. National Crime and Safety survey (2012) has it recorded that police's insensitivity discouraged most survivors from reporting while majority of those who reported were not satisfied with the handling of the cases. The insensitive and traumatic treatments victims experience with the police and criminal justice system in Nigeria (Agams, 2011) would discourage whoever wants to disclose sexual assault. Mistrust about the official to whom an assault is reported do add to the victim's reluctance to report (Kiesel, 2006). Likewise, Nigeria does not have official policy or action on the issue of sexual harassment, in the educational institutions (Cantalupo, 2010; Onigbinde and Awolusi, 2013). The short comings in the anti-rape law such as rape can only be committed by a man to a woman and only involves penal and vaginal sex as well as a victim of rape must establish that penetration occurred as well as proved that consent was not given (Folayan, Odetoyinbo, Harrison & Brown, 2014). These bottlenecks may encourage silence The lax rape laws in Nigeria (Ejim, 2013) that anybody who commits the offence of rape will be sentence to life imprisonment while attempt to commit rape is liable to 14 years imprisonment is well documented but same has not at any time been implemented despite the incessant menace of sexual violence in Nigeria. In Nigeria, the high prevalence of rape and under-reporting underscore the need for specific actions to address sexual violence and to stem the tide on risks associated with sexual assault. (Folayan, et al, 2014) as well as makes perpetrator of rape often go un-punished.

11. Contribution of Silence to the Prevalence of Sexual Violence

Refusal to report sexual violence could be counter-productive because the incidence will not be known to the necessary agency that could punish the offender to halt the repeat of the act. The vast majority of incidents of sexual assault do not come to the attention of the legal system various studies have revealed that non-disclosure of sexual violence could encourage increase in the practice of sexual violence. Willis (2011) discovered that 90% of sexual violence against women and children is not disclosed in which the incidence can leave victims without help and support and cycles of sexual violence continuing unbroken. Non-reporting of sexual violence is a clog in the wheel of delivering the necessary judgement to assailants. For instance 68% of cases of sexual assault that was not reported could be among the factors responsible for the 98% of rapists that will never spend a day in jail (Justice Department, 2012)

12. Conclusion

The study revealed that sexual violence is under-reported.

Factors such as stigmatization, rape myths and poor response from law enforcement agents played prominent roles in preventing rape survivor from reporting. Perpetrators of rape often go un-punished because of the affected victim's refusal to expose the assailant. Consequently, if offenders of sexual harassment are aware of the severe punishment that awaits them, this will make them to desist from such acts.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, it was recommended that:

- The populace should be educated to dispel many of the rape myths that hinder people from reporting sexual violence.
- Sensitization programme should be conducted to encourage women to report cases of rape.
- The law enforcement officers should be educated on proper handling of cases of rape survivors.
- Offenders of sexual violence should be severely punished to serve as deterrent to others through appropriate bill that is zero tolerance to rape.
- Government should formulate appropriate policies that would help in reporting sexual violence as well as investigate reported cases and prosecute perpetrators.

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