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Rape and Women's Sexual Health in Nigeria: The Stark Realities of Being Female in a Patriarchal World

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Abstract

Historically, women have always been subjugated and oppressed by men in most cultures in Nigeria. This situation is due to the inequality in gender relations between men and women. Rape has always been with mankind throughout the world. However, in recent times, the incidence of rape has increased in Nigeria. The hegemonic patriarchal values and practices make it difficult for women who are raped to obtain justice. Perpetrators often go unpunished even if the victims have the courage to report the incident. The court acquits most of the rape offenders on account of the lack of evidence or because the victim has a 'questionable' character. Owing to this, rape victims suffer in silence due to the stigma and humiliation attached to the public acknowledgement of rape. This article examines how patriarchy interlocks with gender relations and inequality to deny justice to rape victims. The paper looks at the issues of gender and rape and their implications for the health of the victims. Feminist theory is used to explain rape, the societal reaction to it and the health outcomes for the victims. The paper concludes that many health problems suffered by women in Nigeria are as a result of rape. Public health practitioners should devise mechanisms of eliciting rape information from victims so as to effectively manage their health problems. The paper recommends the need for more practical ways of implementing laws on violence against women so that victims can obtain justice. Also, the role of women lawyers and other women's organizations should be reassessed.

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Résumé

Historiquement, les femmes ont toujours été asservies et opprimées par les hommes dans la plupart des cultures au Nigeria. Cette situation est due à l'inégalité dans les relations entre les hommes et les femmes. Le viol a toujours été une pratique courante dans l'histoire de l'humanité. Cependant, ces derniers temps, le nombre de viols a augmenté au Nigeria. En raison des valeurs et pratiques patriarcales hégémoniques, il est difficile pour les femmes violées d'obtenir justice. Les auteurs restent souvent impunis, même lorsque les victimes ont le courage de dénoncer l'incident. Les tribunaux acquittent la plupart des auteurs de viol faute de preuves ou parce que les victimes sont d'un caractère « douteux ». De ce fait, les victimes de viol souffrent en silence à cause de la stigmatisation et l'humiliation liées à la reconnaissance publique du viol. Ce papier examine les liens entre le patriarcat et les relations et l'inégalité basée sur le genre qui motivent le déni de justice aux victimes de viol. Cet article se penche sur les questions de genre et de viol et leurs conséquences sur la santé des victimes. Le viol, la réaction de la société à ce phénomène et les résultats en matière de santé pour les victimes sont analysés à la lumière de la théorie féministe. L'article conclut que de nombreux problèmes de santé dont souffrent les femmes au Nigeria sont le résultat d'un viol. Les praticiens de la santé publique devraient concevoir des mécanismes pour recueillir les informations nécessaires auprès des victimes de manière à gérer efficacement leurs problèmes de santé. L'article recommande la nécessité de trouver des moyens plus pratiques pour assurer l'application des lois sur la violence contre les femmes afin que justice soit rendue aux victimes. En outre, le rôle des femmes juristes et d'autres organisations féminines doit être réévalué.

Introduction

Rape has always been condemned by most societies around the world. It is usually associated with primitiveness and brutality and it is not seen as something that would be found among refined people. Most societies define rape as a criminal offence and those found guilty of rape are severely punished. Rape can be perpetrated by a man or a woman but in this paper I focus on the woman as the victim. Rape can be by a stranger or by someone who is very familiar such as a husband, brother, in-law or other relations.

Before I proceed, I will define the concept of rape. Rape is used interchangeably with sexual assault and sexual violence (Kilonzo et al., 2009). The World Health Organization defined sexual violence as any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments and advances or acts to traffic or otherwise directed against a person's sexuality using coercion by any person regardless of their relationship to the

victim. In the same vein, Onyejekwe (2008) defined rape as one of the more pervasive forms of violence against women and a crime in which the assailant uses sex to inflict humiliation on the victim or exert power and control over the victim. The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against women adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1993 defines violence against women as any act of gender based violence that results in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life (Onyejekwe 2008). Also, rape can be defined as sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual penetration by one person (the accused) with or against another person (the victim) without the consent of the victim (Peters and Olowa 2010).

In recent times, there has been an upsurge in cases of rape in Nigeria. In a study of causes and incidence of rape among middle aged and young adults in Lagos State, Nigeria, Peters and Olowa (2010) found that between 2001 and 2005, 10,079 rape cases were reported. The same study also indicated that only 18 per cent of rape cases in Nigeria are reported. A figure of 10,079 (which is assumed to be 18 %) within these few years, is an indication that rape is very rampant in Nigeria and constitutes a serious public health problem. In the same vein, Kilonzo et al., (2009) indicated that in the WHO multi-country study on women's health and violence against women, 15-59 per cent had at some time experienced sexual violence from intimate partners in Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa and other sub-Saharan African countries. According to Amnesty International (2007), rape by police and security forces is endemic in Nigeria as is the abject failure of the Nigerian authorities to bring perpetrators to justice. In their report, Amnesty international quoted a rape victim:

There were three men, I have pains even today, they used my daughter too, she is 12 years old. They also raped my sister. Another man raped a woman who was four months pregnant and she lost the child. They were military men. Everyone in the village saw them, they didn't hide, they didn't care, I didn't tell the police because I fear them.

Rape continues to be experienced by Nigerian women and girls on a daily basis. According to Adesewo (2012), a 14-year old girl was raped by a 45 years old police officer in police station in Abuja. The girl reported that she was arrested along with another girl for fighting. When they got to the police station, the police officer took her to an uncompleted building and promised to secure her release if she agreed to have sex with him.

When she refused, the police officer threatened, rough-handled and forcefully had sex with her. This is one of the many rape incidents in Nigeria. In fact, it is as if the police and many other men see raping women as a fringe benefit and entitlement which may explain the impunity with which they rape women.

Rape has serious health consequences for the victims, including unwanted pregnancy, abortion due to unwanted pregnancy which can result in death, sexually transmitted infections including HIV, and psychological trauma which can extend to the rest of the person's life. According to Peters and Olowa (2010), rape has serious aftermath effects which include physical and psychological trauma, gynaecological problems such as sex trauma, urinary tract infection and sexually transmitted infections. As such, rape should be handled by the state with all seriousness. However, what obtains in many countries is that the society and the legal system make it very difficult for rape victims to obtain justice. Often victims are stigmatized and are considered a public disgrace to their families and significant others which may have serious implications for future relationships such as marriage. As a result of this, rape victims and their families are silent about their ordeal, thereby helping the rapist to escape from being punished.

Many Nigerian women who have been raped suffer in silence without reporting the incident to law enforcement agencies. Onyejekwe (2008) corroborates this and maintained that a culture of silence aggravates this problem partly from humiliation and intimidation of victims by the police as well as the embarrassment of public acknowledgement. In addition to this, being ostracized by those who consider rape as bringing dishonour to the woman's family and community worsens the situation (Hutton et al. 2006). Onyejekwe concludes that this culture of silence reinforces the stigma already attached to the victim rather than to the perpetrator, as the dominant perception is that women have provoked the abuser to attack. As such, victims are often unwilling to testify about their experiences. Apart from the physical aspect, some of the rape victims suffer mental health problems and trauma and other health hazards such as sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDS.

It is against this backdrop that this commentary examines rape and its health implications in relation to the influences of gender, cultural beliefs and practices, discrimination, women's low social status and how these affect women's sexual health, health generally and quality of life. The paper therefore unfolds with a discussion of the theoretical framework, the health implications of rape and ends with concluding remarks.

Before I delve into the various explanations of rape, it is important to explain the term patriarchy because of its central role in how and why women experience rape. Patriarchy is the term used to explain the societal beliefs, stereotypes, value systems and cultural practices which are embedded in the social system and which determine gender relations and influence the life chances, experiences of men and women. According to Trull (1997), patriarchy, male domination, discrimination and sexism have characterized every civilization. Interestingly, when gender interlocks with other patriarchal values and practices, it becomes a double burden. This is because under patriarchal values and practices, females are regarded as inferior human beings and are expected to be pure and gentle which means that experiencing rape renders the woman impure and she becomes an object of laughter, stigma and humiliation. The culprit can even taunt his victim openly.

There are other explanations of rape which include sociological or psychological theories. Some psychological theorists have maintained that stagnation of the Oedipal stage of development in males makes them prone to having sexual problems later in life, such as the failure to handle competitive relationships, thereby contributing to acts of rape (Peters and Olowa 2010). The sociological theory of rape posits that rape is an evolutionary strategy for certain males who lack the skill to obtain sex from females through non-violent means (Peters and Olowa 2010). Some sociologists believe that rape is an expression of gender inequality while some other sociologists attribute rape to sexual permissiveness within the society (McGrath 2009). Under such circumstances, if a woman refuses a man sex, he can go the extra mile to take it by force.

There have been many explanations for rape but this paper argues that rape represents a weapon of power and intimidation between the rapist and the victim and that this power-gender relation stems from the patriarchal views and practices which render women second class citizens. It also makes it possible for discriminatory acquittals of the rapist. It is important to point out here that gender has always been a factor with regard to the treatment of individuals and collectivities. In the explanation of the phenomenon of rape, feminist theory can be used to shed more light on how women's low social status and subordinate position interacts with patriarchal gender relations to make them victims of rape and makes it possible for the victim to be stigmatized instead of the offender.

Cornell's theory of gender and power (1987) is in line with the above position. This theory posits that the gender division of labour, gender

differentials in the way men and women are perceived, and the cultural placing men above women, all play a great role in the subjugation of women. These factors translate into women's poverty, powerlessness and low social status which in turn affect women's life chances and colour their experiences. This could explain why women suffer in silence because if they complain or report their rape experience, they may suffer the stigma and humiliation, and at the same time be blamed for their inadequacies because the societal general perception is that the victim must have provoked the rapist to attack, perhaps through her 'provocative' appearance (Onyejekwe 2008).

The theory insists that women's experiences should be viewed from the angle of power and dominance which the social structure awards men. This is usually at all levels of the social institutions; the family, economy, health and educational systems. Feminists agree that something is amiss in the treatment of women – what Betty Friedan (1963) memorably described as a problem without a name. Feminism is not only a set of beliefs but also a set of theoretical constructions about the nature of women's oppression and the part this oppression is played out within social reality more generally (Stanley and Wise 1983). Feminists believe that rape is an expression of male dominance over women as a result of society's long time sexual inequality. Therefore rape is used to intimidate women and keep them in their place. As such, it is an expression of power and dominance over women (McGrath 2009).

It is this issue of gender relations skewed against women and the fact that women are seen by society as people to be exploited that also makes it difficult for rape victims to obtain justice. In fact, the court requires the victim to prove her innocence and in the process it acquits most rapists. Onyejekwe (2008) corroborated this difficulty and said that rape is a crime notable for placing the woman on trial, particularly for cultural reasons. She is either charged as a false accuser, a gold digger, a frivolous or a scorned woman. Furthermore, describing the Nigerian situation, Amnesty international (2007) said that poorly defined criminal laws and weak law enforcement also create an environment where rape is committed with impunity. This inadequacy of the law interacts with societal norms and stereotypes to turn rape victims into accused persons. According to Imokuede (2007), Nigerian law defined rape as a forcible unlawful sexual intercourse without a woman's consent. The same law also made it mandatory that for a rapist to be convicted rape victims must prove beyond reasonable doubt that they were forced and to provide evidence of rape by showing, for example, semen. Onyejekwe (2008)

concludes that the failure of Nigerian government to investigate and punish those responsible for these grave abuses is a violation of the general principles of the human rights charter.

In the prosecution of gender based violence, juries put female victims on trial for their compliance with gender roles. Studies show that one of the predictors of conviction in rape cases is whether the female victim behaves appropriately (Tetlow 2009). In the process of examining the appropriateness of a women's behaviour, many rape cases end up in the acquittal of the rapists. In this way, the victim is turned into the accused. This discourages rape victims from seeking redress, thus perpetuating the culture of silence. The weakness of the prosecution laws in Nigeria was corroborated by Amnesty International (2007) when it asserted that the harsh reality is that if you are a woman or a girl in Nigeria who had suffered the experience of rape, your suffering is likely to be met with intimidation by the police, indifference from the state and knowledge that the perpetrator is unlikely to ever face justice. According to Amnesty International, there is a near total failure of the Nigerian state to protect women and girls from these terrible crimes. The Nigerian government has taken no meaningful action to translate its international legal obligations towards women and girls into national law, policy and practice. Looking at how patriarchy, the long history of gender discrimination, gender relations and women's low social status have played out to affect the outcome of proceedings of rape cases, one could not fail to see that inequality in gender relationships, power and oppression are key issues in rape against women.

The implications of rape for women's health

When people talk about implications of rape for the victim, people hardly ever refer to health implications for these victims. Many rape victims have acquired HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections which can result in infertility. Indeed Peters and Olowa (2010), have reported that rape results in trauma, sexually transmitted infections and potentially unwanted pregnancy which itself constitutes a traumatic experience. Also in order to save themselves from public embarrassment and ridicule, many rape victims who become pregnant through rape attempt abortion. This is in line with Kilonzo et al., (2009) in which they submitted that sexual violence can result in negative short and long term health outcomes including physical trauma such as vaginal fistula, HIV infection, and in places where abortion is restricted, unsafe abortions. It is important to note that unsafe abortion goes with health consequences such as infertility, psychological trauma or even death.

Moreover, rape leaves behind a big scar on the mind of the victim. Many rape victims suffer trauma and depression and these affect their education and work and may have implications for how other people treat them. Some rape victims can develop perpetual fear or hatred of men and may not want to have any intimate relationship with men, which is an indication that the sexual health of such person is affected. Kilonzo et al., (2009), observe that psychological trauma can have a negative effect on sexual behaviour and relationships, the ability to negotiate safer sex and an increased potential for drug abuse. Importantly mental health issues as a result of rape are not seen as crucial and this is why little has been mentioned about them. According to Kilonzo et al., (2009), there is poor documentation of long term sexual and reproductive and mental health outcomes of sexual violence. Interestingly, this mental health outcome is the most important aspect of the health of victims, because it is usually the aspect that lasts for a very long time and in some cases till the death of the victim.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is evident that victims of rape suffer from enormous health problems. Women experience rape not only from strangers but also from intimate partners and people known to them. The stigma associated with rape creates the culture of silence as many women and their families do not want to disclose their experience. The hegemonic patriarchal practices and values and weak legislation make it difficult rape victims to obtain justice. The paper concludes that many health problems suffered by women in Nigeria are as a result of rape. This is especially so in regards to mental health problems because suffering in silence has rendered many of them sick without people knowing what their real health problems are which makes them very difficult to solve. This means that there are many women who may have to live with the trauma throughout their life span – should be a source of worry for public health practice and practitioners in Nigeria.

In spite of the frustration and discouragement arising from the outcome of many rape cases, it is still important to fight on. On the part of government, there is the need for a more practical way of implementing laws on violence against women. Also, women lawyers, women organizations and other Non-Governmental Organizations should continue to empower women for them to be able to speak up and their assailants brought to book. That is the only way that this cancerous worm called rape can be eliminated or reduced to the barest minimum in Nigeria.

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