

The upsurge of rape during the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria and its effects on survivors



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As one of the global measures for containing the spread of the dreaded coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), the Nigerian government imposed a total lockdown from 30 March 2020 to 15 May 2020. This exposed a lot of women and children to a greater level of sexual violence such as rape, which has persisted even before COVID-19. On 14 July 2020, the Nigerian Minister of Women Affairs and Social Development, Pauline Tallen, reportedly said that over 3600 rape cases were recorded across Nigeria during the lockdown. The sudden rise in cases of rape in the country calls for urgent attention. The article explores the effects of rape during the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria using expository and phenomenological designs. It used data obtained from: (1) articles and commentaries on the websites of various newspapers in Nigeria, (2) existing works and (3) interviews with women and girls who were either survivors or connected to the victims of rape during the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria. The findings corroborate the notion that rape, especially during the COVID-19 lockdown, is a very traumatic experience that has negative effects on the survivors in a physical, psychological and sociological way. The data also indicate that the upsurge of rape incidences in Nigeria is an epidemic that should also be treated as a public health emergency.

Contribution: This research revealed diverse health and safety approaches that should be adopted to mitigate further escalation of rape, which includes enforcement of anti-sexual harassment bills, intensified orientation and awareness through campaigns.

Keywords: COVID-19; rape; effects of rape; women; children; Nigeria.

Introduction

The word rape is one of the commonest social problems that has been given several definitions by different scholars across the globe. This shows that rape incidents cut across different cultures and countries in the world. Unfortunately, it is under-reported and under-persecuted. Rape is a form of sexual violence involving sexual intercourse or other sexual penetration, done against a person's will or consent. The act may be carried out by threats, physical force and abuse of authority or against an individual who is incapable of giving valid consent, such as one who is unconscious, incapacitated, has an intellectual disability or is below the legal age of consent (Alao 2018). This implies that rape is a criminal offence and assault because it often results in physical injuries and severe mental, sexual and reproductive health problems and in most cases, death of the victims.

Rape remains as one of the major global public health issues that are on the increase as the survivor's health, according to the World Health Organization, WHO (2020), is faced with diverse sex-related threats. As the prevalence of rape incidents surges, records of such violence perpetrated by trusted individuals are becoming a common phenomenon. The data of frequency of the occurrence of sexual crime in Eze (2013), indicates that one out of every five women has experienced at least one form of rape or the other. However, new findings by WHO (2020) shows that one in three women worldwide has experienced sexual-related violence being perpetrated by either an intimate person or someone else in their lifetime. Nigeria's Minister of Women Affairs and Social Development, Pauline Tallen, allegedly estimated that about two million women and girls are raped every year in Nigeria (Adebajo 2019). This is unacceptable and something needs to be done to remedy the situation.

Although cases of rape have been occurring even before the outbreak of COVID-19, studies have shown that this sexual violence has assumed a threatening dimension during the period of lockdown where the targets (victims) and sexual predators (rapists) were trapped in the web of COVID-19 restrictions (Fraser 2020; Lennard 2020; Townsend 2020). Although Nigeria has no

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reliable statistics that could depict the crime's extent and prevalence during the COVID-19 lockdown, some efforts have been recorded. There have been uncoordinated but frequent reports of rape cases from different parts of the country during the COVID-19 lockdown. The culprit, according to Akinade (2001), is usually male, but sometimes males are victims too. During the COVID-19 lockdown, all the reported cases of rape the researchers came across were carried out by men against women.

Familiar sources such as existing research, media reportage, telephone interviews and official reports from law enforcement agencies such as the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) unpacks the complex reality of this social crime and provides insight into the magnitude of the phenomenon. Between January 2020 and May 2020, for example, Nigeria's Inspector General of Police stated that the NPF arrested 799 suspects associated with 717 cases of rape. Of this figure, about 631 of these cases have been charged at court while 55 cases were still being investigated (*The Guardian*, 16 June 2020).

The given statistics show that the COVID-19 lockdown heightened rape incidents in Nigeria. The process of staying at home disrupted social and protective routines that often enable people to leave their homes and be at school or their workplace; thereby maintaining the gap of the common occurrence of rape incidents. In this case, the chances of women in abusive relationships and unprotected children being exposed to sexual violence, is astronomically increased.

Considering the degree of traumatic experiences the survivors experience at the hands of their perpetrators, the overall health impact of rape on the survivors are hard to imagine. Against the study of existing works, the researchers examined the rise of rape incidents during the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on the survivors. This would ultimately assist in advancing some modest panacea in preventing its further occurrence and reducing it to its barest minimum.

The COVID-19 lockdown and rape outbreak in Nigeria

The COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria is part of the worldwide COVID-19 outbreak caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The first confirmed case in Nigeria was announced on 27 February 2020, when an Italian citizen in Lagos tested positive for the virus (Amzat et al. 2020). On 09 March 2020, a second case of the virus was reported in Ewekoro, Ogun State, and the victim was a Nigerian citizen who had contact with the Italian citizen (Apuke & Omar 2020). As the cases of positive patients continued to surge, the Nigerian government imposed a 14-day lockdown in Abuja, Lagos and Ogun State on 30 March 2020. By 02 April 2020, the Bauchi State government issued a similar sit-at-home order and gradually other Nigerian states followed suit, resulting in a total lockdown of the country.

The sit-at-home order lasted for two months and by 01 May 2020, the Federal government began to ease lockdown

measures, probably because of the resultant economic hardship across the country. Meanwhile, in what the researchers regarded as a 'silent pandemic' or 'shadow pandemic', the sit-at-home order exposed millions of women and girls to greater levels of sexual violence that persisted even before the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Iroanusi (2020), Minister Tallen allegedly stated that more than 3600 cases of rape were reported in Nigeria during the lockdown.

For instance, Odunsi (2021) reported that after a 5-year-old girl named Hamira was drugged and raped by her neighbour in April 2020, the injuries sustained from the incident damaged her bladder. In May 2020, another report stated that a 19-year-old girl was raped by Elijah Orhonigbe, a bishop and the founder or general overseer of Victory Revival Fasting and Prayer Ministry inside his church in Warri (*The Nation* 2020).

Unfortunately, most rape victims during the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria often died during or shortly after the incident. For example, Uwaila Vera Omozuwa, a 22-year-old microbiology student of the University of Benin, was raped and murdered inside a church in Edo State during the COVID-19 lockdown. Tade (2020), while giving a detailed account of the story, stated thus:

She was studious and a choir [member] of the Church where she was raped and murdered. Due to the lockdown which brought many people home, Uwa had complained about the disturbance of family members to her reading because of their noise and sought to continue using the Church to read. This became a normal [routine] to her. On May 27, she was met inside the church in [a] pool of her [own] blood. She was raped, beaten and hit with [a] fire extinguisher on her head. She would later die in the hospital. (n.p.)

Uwalia's death was part of the major spate of rapes during the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria. Just a few days after Uwalia's death, another similar incident was trending on Nigerian news media – this time a young female student named Barakat Bello was allegedly raped and murdered at her family home (*Nigerian Tribune* 2020; *Premium Times* 2020; *SaharaReporters* 2020). According to Obiezu (2020), most of these heartless perpetrators usually leave no traces for security agents.

The continuous increase in rape cases during lockdown sparked a national outcry and prompted the Nigerian government to declare a state of emergency and renewed commitments towards tackling the issue of rape (Adebayo 2020). The COVID-19 outbreak has worsened the prevalence of sexual violence in Nigeria. Its effects become even direr because of high levels of poverty and corruption, coupled with poor legal mechanisms that permit the proliferation of rape cases as culprits evade punishment.

Why rape incidents escalated during the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria

Prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been several pre-existing factors responsible for the rape endemic in Nigeria. Some of them include poverty, lack of sex education, discriminatory gender norms and inadequate institutional and legal frameworks. For instance, the Nigerian

legal system according to the survey carried out by UKAID (2020), lacks the adequate mechanisms to protect its citizens against sexual violence. In fact, as recently as July 2020, Nigerian senators, according to the report by Toromade (2020), voted against an amendment that would have recognised marital rape within the *Criminal Code Act* in the country. This is disheartening.

The sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent sit-at-home order implemented by countries across the world, including Nigeria, exacerbated the above pre-existing triggers of rape. Lamenting on the issue of the rape epidemic during the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria, Uroko and Enobong (2021) observed that:

The married, the unmarried, teenagers, children and adolescents, as far as the person is female, were affected. Some were raped in their parents' house; others were raped in their own room. Unfortunately, some were raped in the church, the supposed house of God. Others were raped in streams and farms. No time of the day was safe for girls: morning they were raped, afternoon they were raped and night they were raped. (pp. 4–5)

The given observation underscores the notion that the COVID-19 outbreak brought in a terrifying phase of rape incidents in Nigeria. For example, the closure of schools and workplaces as part of measures to curb the spread of the coronavirus in the country trapped the victims with their abusers. The restriction of movements during lockdown further exacerbated the issue as the victims were unable to access shelter or refuge in another locality.

More so, the heightened economic impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on women and children rendered them vulnerable to their abusers. Young and Adib (2020) observe that over 80% of Nigerian women in the labour force are employed in the informal sector with little or no social protection and safety nets. As a result of economic difficulty and loss of livelihood during the COVID-19 lockdown, there was a high rate of vulnerable women in the country.

Furthermore, there was a high rate of child labour in Nigeria during lockdown as parents use underage children to carry out vocational jobs. Some of these children, in most cases, became the primary economic provider and this heightened the rate of rape. For instance, in a telephonic interview with Mrs Chinaza on 17 April 2020, she accused her landlord of raping her 13-year-old daughter every time she brought roasted plantain to him for patronage. Hence, the stark rise in rape cases during the COVID-19 lockdown strongly points to a positive correlation between lockdown and the upsurge of rape in Nigeria incidents.

Effects of rape on survivors

Rape is a traumatic experience that often affects the survivor in a physical, psychological and sociological way. Despite the fact that the effects and aftermath of rape seem to differ among survivors, they, however, tend to suffer from similar issues found within the following three categories: physical, psychological and sociological.

Physical effect

Rape has many negative effects on the survivors, especially on women and children. In fact, children who are raped are more likely to experience physical injuries that may leave a long-lasting impact associated with pain and trauma. A well connected example is the case of the 5-year-old girl named Hamira whose bladder was damaged as a result of her rapist in April 2020 (Odunsi 2021). Arguing that many rape cases were persistently unreported during the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria, Mrs Chika (interview, 16 August 2020) explained that the two survivors of rape in her compound during the lockdown experienced vaginal bleeding and infection which persisted due to inaccessibility to modern medical attention as a result of the lockdown.

Precious (interview, 19 August 2020) whose 9-year-old sister, Fedora, was raped by her uncle during the COVID-19 lockdown observed that her sister experienced severe chronic pelvic pain and bleeding for days without appropriate medical attention because of lockdown of clinics. Mrs Nnenna (interview, 24 January 2021) tearfully stated that she is battling with HIV infection coupled with unplanned pregnancy as a result of rape that happened to her in her home during the COVID-19 lockdown. According to the interview, she explained:

'I have never had sex since my husband died in 2019. I am a devout Christian ... After the incident, I could not go to the hospital for the fear of contacting coronavirus ... I felt changes in my body some months later, I went to hospital and doctor said this is not ordinary sickness ... that I am not only pregnant but HIV positive. I am finished!' (Mrs Nnenna, interview, 24 January 2021)

Psychological effect

Most rape survivors during the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria experienced a stronger psychological impact in the initial period after their assault, while some complained of long-lasting psychological harm. For instance, after going through a severe traumatic ordeal, Maureen (interview, 19 August 2021) who was a virgin until her father raped her on 17 April 2020, stated that she has been depressed since then, until recently. According to the interview, she explained:

'After my mother was remanded in the isolation centre for showing signs of the virus, my father asked me to leave my room for his, and I did...and he raped me. When I informed my mother, she told me never to mention it again, else our family be shamed and I will never find a husband. Life became meaningless to me after the incidence. I was depressed and traumatized for months.' (Maureen, interview, 19 August 2021)

Sociological effect

Apart from severe physical injury and psychological trauma that affects rape survivors during the COVID-19 lockdown, other traumatic conditions most of the survivors experienced were sociological. Such issues range from labeling, victimisation, avoidance of others and other effects that have to do with loss of privacy. For example, Nwanneka (interview, 04 November 2020) explained that:

'After my 13-year-old daughter was raped by our landlord on 30 April 2020, she and I have been subjected to various degree [sic] of stigmatization to the extent that we hardly go out during the day.' (Nwanneka, interview, 04 November 2020)

Moreover, most of the rape incidents during the COVID-19 lockdown resulted in divorce, health hazards and even destroys the survivors' futures, especially when they are emotionally weak or do not have access to professional counsellors and psychotherapists.

Recommendations

1. **Awareness campaign:** Local authorities, with the aid of governmental and non-governmental agencies, should create and implement effective awareness campaigns especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. This awareness campaign should focus primarily on the consequences of rape and the importance of avoiding the stigmatisation of rape survivors. This campaign can be created through various means such as media fliers, radio jingles and other related programmes.
2. **Public education programmes:** Government and non-governmental organisations should formulate and implement educational programmes both at school and at community level that will focus on issues such as sex education, respect of human rights, decency in dressing, constitutional criminal charges and stipulation. More so, the penalty should be explained to the students and the public, as most rape perpetrators in these settings may not know the gravity of the offence of rape.
3. **Formulation of processes for reporting and documentation of rape cases:** Government especially at the local level should create a quick, functional, comprehensive and responsive channel for reporting and documenting rape cases. It is equally important to make the information easily accessible to the appropriate law enforcement agencies for quick intervention.
4. **Provision of essential sexual and reproductive health services to the rape survivors:** Government at various levels should make provisions for rape survivors to freely access essential sexual and reproductive health services easily and in a timely manner. They should also put service oriented and experienced medical facilities and staff in place to enhance efficiency and quality service.
5. **Legal action against offenders:** The Nigerian governmental arms, particularly the judiciary, with its legal officials, law enforcement agencies and various civil society groups should come together and formulate effective policies on prevention of rape. Policies such as anti-sexual harassment bills, and so on, will ensure the protection of women and girls from rape and make sure that anyone who infringes on the rights of another person will definitely face the penalty.

Conclusion

The truism that rape is clearly a crime not only to the victims, but the entire society, needs no contention. It often traumatises and overwhelms the survivors with great psychological pain, physical injuries and emotional

detachment. During the COVID-19 lockdown as one of the global measures designed to mitigate the spread of the pandemic, incidences of rape was occurring at a terrifying frequency in many countries, including Nigeria. This is largely because most hotels and clubs ceased operation, hence rape perpetrators, already addicted to sex and drugs, took advantage of women and children within their reach. This article observes that the health implications of rape on the survivors are numerous. For instance, rape can result in injuries and severe physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health complications, including suicidal ideations, depression, sexually transmitted infections, HIV and unplanned pregnancies, and so on. Thus, the COVID-19 lockdown contributed to the astronomical increase in the high rate of rape incidences in Nigeria and elsewhere.

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Authors' contributions

K.I.U. and D.C.U. contributed equally to the design and implementation of the research, to the analysis of the results and to the writing of the manuscript.

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This article followed all ethical standards for research.

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Data availability

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