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Sexual Violence-An Emergent Epidemic

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Sexual violence, especially against women, has been a perennial problem that has lingered across ages and generations, including Biblical times [1]. It appears to have defied models of prevention or interventions [2]. From an isolated rural community in a developing country to a megacity in a developed economy, the basic ingredients of sexual violence remain constant. The principal targets are female adults and children, with girls being at greater risk [3]. Different levels of success have been achieved in different parts of the world in tackling this issue but such measures tend to address mainly punitive aspects of it. There is obviously increased reporting of incidents in the developed world unlike what obtains in developing countries where issues of basic rights of women and children are still debatable. In these developing countries, socio-cultural and religious factors influence orientation and practice. This makes it difficult to achieve any common template upon which a definition of sexual violence applies.

Sexual violence is defined as any sexual act, attempt to engage in a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or 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 any setting, including but not limited to home and work [4]. There is no universally accepted definition of sexual violence. For example, some culture may not regard certain forms of sexual violence, like rape within marriage, as such. This creates inherent problems with definition and recognition of sexual violence across different cultures and religions. There is also paucity of research in this area as many victims of sexual violence may fail to report to appropriate authorities due to fear of stigmatization and further victimization [5].

To the public, the commonest and most widely publicised form of sexual violence is rape. Rape is defined as the forceful engagement of another person in a sexual activity. The definition of rape varies between countries. In the United States of America, the definition varies between the States in the Union. Recently, the definition has included all genders as potential victims [6,7]. It is acknowledged world wide as a crime. There are a few types of rape including date rape [8] and gang rape [9] . A new variant of rape, gang rape, when several individuals serially rape a victim, has been reported in India and Nigeria. It is widely believed that rape is under- reported. However, the perception of rape on the enormity scale varies between countries. In Saudi Arabia, Cuba, Taiwan, China, etc, it is punishable by death while in some developed countries the guilty may get away with community service.

In recent times, news reports have been awash with peculiarly daring and distressing episodes of rape, from India, through Kenya to West Africa. The prevalence has now reached a proportion at which it can be classified as an epidemic. Rape has been reported among all social classes from kings, professors, religious leaders, students, applicants and artisans [10]. Most perpetrators of rape are males on females. This is heterosexual rape. There can also be homosexual rape. A married person can be guilty of raping the spouse.

A devastating case occurs when the victim dies from physical complications of the criminal act.

In several countries, for religious and cultural reasons, prosecution of cases is encumbered with difficulties. Up to four male witnesses are required to prove a case of rape of a woman by a man in some cultural cum religious settings. Court processes discourage female victims from reporting cases and pressing charges. Smart lawyers often cite seduction of the male defendant by the female appellant. Embarrassing questions are thrown at the female victim.

Rape is a criminal and antisocial act. It should be prevented and deterred. Potential victims should adopt preventive life styles. Individuals should avoid being alone in dark environments. Wards should be protected by their parents and guardians. Just as paedophiles are registered, people found guilty of rape should be logged.

Stemming the tide

The first major assignment is to ensure that practitioners and community speak the same language about the meaning and understanding of sexual violence. There is significant discrepancy between what physicians, the police, the justice system and the community understand about what constitutes sexual violence. It will be merely an academic exercise to reel out a textbook meaning or understanding of sexual violence when such meaning is alien to the law existing in a community and where members of the community share a different ethos and orientation. Researchers worldwide may need to focus on documenting views of distinct communities on the meaning of sexual violence across the various strata of the society. Incidentally, sex topics are generally repressed in many cultures and it is almost impossible to determine with any reasonable degree of certainty the innuendoes of sexual dynamics behind the scene. There may be only a thin line between “wanted” and “unwanted” sexual activity in a particular context?

Second, there is need to rethink the way and manner sex topics or subjects are conveyed from one culture to another. There will be little or no progress made in addressing the problems of sexual violence if practitioners fail to learn specific languages or peculiar expressions acceptable to a particular community or culture in discussing the issue. In the western world there are quite some liberal expressions due to prevailing culture of individualism and assertiveness. In Africa, Asia and

other developing regions, the concept of personhood is in the sense of a strong relationship with family and the community. In essence people belong to one another and to the community, and not to individual self. It is therefore difficult or impossible to transpose Western orientation on sexual matters unto other cultures. Cultures that promote and condone forced marriages obviously create the environment in which rape may prevail. Most of the texts and researches on sexual violence are from the West and this obviously poses some significant problems in applying certain principles, processes and procedures to the rest of the world. Rethinking how these topics are conveyed in a foreign culture and different religions will go a long way in facilitating acceptance of prescribed measures for the prevention or management of sexual violence.

Third, there is need to match increasing expertise and innovations in the field of forensic management of sexual violence with enabling laws in various jurisdictions. It is rather frustrating that despite all the knowledge and expertise available, evidence may not be acceptable in court due to restrictions imposed by existing provisions in law in a particular jurisdiction. An example is the Evidence Act which may place stringent conditions on what is admissible in court as evidence and how such evidence can be tested to be true. Potentially, this discourages victims of sexual violence from reporting cases and thus diminishes the role of investigators who may really be working hard in this field. The heterogeneous mix in most of our societies and competing interest groups, usually laced with background factors, makes changes in existing law a difficult venture. This calls for more active and wide ranging engagements by stakeholders. Concerned forensic professionals, civil society groups, Human Rights activists and relevant nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) will need to work on one the hand for the improvement of expert response to cases of sexual violence and on the other hand, advocate for relevant changes in the legislature to accommodate the implementation of such advancement in expert care. This has been a limiting gap in the fight against sexual violence especially in the developing world where a gulf still exists between the provisions of the laws and contemporary practice in the forensic management of sexual violence [11].

Fourth, there is need for training and retraining of persons involved in prevention and management of sexual violence. Lots of emphases need to be put into the multidisciplinary nature of this field of practice. Currently, there is a lot of disconnect among NGOs, social welfare agencies, medical practitioners, the police and other concerned groups on this issue. This situation has therefore created a loophole in the management of sexual violence as victims are deprived of critical care and attention that would have come with a coordinated multidisciplinary approach that is accepted as best practice in this field. In addition to impacting knowledge and skills, roles and responsibilities should be streamlined and boundaries clearly defined for each of the agencies as they work together to prevent incidents, protect victims and manage cases with professionalism. The ultimate goal is justice.

Fifth and finally, the notion of victims moving from one police station to some distant hospital for medical evaluation and to yet another centre for some other form of triaging is outdated. It is a disincentive for victims and others working in this field. ***One Stop Centre*** has emerged as a veritable means of providing a comprehensive service to victims in one location. A purpose built service centre will facilitate a timely, empathic, acceptable and professional service to survivors of sexual violence. Huge success has been reported in jurisdictions where there has been the application of this concept in the management of sexual violence [12].

Victims or survivors of sexual violence including rape should find it easy to report cases and press charges. There are societies and agencies in several countries that make it easy for victims to seek redress. Society must enact penalties that are deterrent. Sentences that appear to pat the perpetrator on the back should be rejected. Rapes that result in the death of the victim should be treated as first degree murder.

Sexual violence is a complex subject. This is more so in the developing world where peculiar factors make it difficult to adopt some “universal” or simple measures. It is therefore important that policy makers, practitioners, governmental and non governmental agencies as well as other stakeholders appreciate the challenges in understanding, preventing and managing sexual violence in the developing world. This may well be a veritable step in stemming the tide of this emergent epidemic.

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