

Sexual Abuse: Perspective on a Despicable Social Scourge

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Abstract

Sexual abuse is an issue of significant concern the world over. There may not be any limit to situations or circumstances where this despicable act can occur. It thrives especially on colleges, campuses and indeed across the entire strata of society. Among several other situations, sexual abuse can happen in the home by someone the victim knows, on a date, or by a stranger in an isolated place. Men, women, and children are all susceptible to sexual abuse or assault. Sexual abuse therefore emphasizes any unwanted sexual activity, with perpetrators using force, making threats or taking undue advantage of victims. It could also be seen as any form of non-consensual physical contact which includes rape, molestation, or any sexual conduct with a person who lacks the mental capacity to exercise consent. Although majority of identified victims of sexual abuse are women, men have equally been sexually abused in both domestic and institutional settings. This paper critically examines this social scourge called sexual abuse as well as its ramifying implications as a way of enlightening the public in general about this dehumanizing phenomenon. It also offers useful hints as a guide to forestall its occurrence, with recommendations too that could help a victim to be restored back to a healthy, fulfilling and productive living.

Keywords

Sexual Assault, Sexual Abuser/Offender, Social Menace, Physical/Psychological Effect

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1. Introduction

1.1. Understanding Sexual Abuse

Basically, sexual abuse is the forcing of undesired sexual behaviour by one person upon another, perhaps “through coercion or threats”, as cited in Bejide (1 p.84). It refers to any unwanted sexual activity, in which a perpetrator uses force, threatens or takes advantage of a victim – young or adult – because such a victim has declined to give consent. Badejoko *et al.* (2 p.254) see it as a “shattering malevolence” against victims. It could also be seen as any form of non-consensual physical contact which includes rape, molestation, or any sexual conduct with a person who lacks the mental capacity to exercise consent. As already stated, this can occur in as different situations and circumstances

alike. It can happen at home – and perpetrated by someone so familiar, on a date, or even by a stranger in an isolated place. Inclusive in the above definition also is any action by which an adult person tries to influence a child unto stimulation or to stimulate the adult sexually. Hence, when the victim is a much younger person and not up to a statutory age of consent, “fragile, frail, innocent, naïve, defenseless and often oblivious of danger” (3 p. 28), the act is regarded as child sexual abuse.

The term also emphasizes all forms of indecent exposure, masturbation in front of a child, exposing a child to the act of sexual intercourse, exposing a child to pornographic material, fondling a child, making a child touch an adult's sexual organs, any penetration of a child's vagina or anus by any object that has no valid medical necessity, no matter

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how slight, sexual exploitation for purposes of prostitution or pornography. Corroborating the foregoing, *Child Maltreatment*, cited in Clark *et al.* (4 p.57), highlight sexual abuse as the involvement of the child in sexual activity to provide sexual benefit to the perpetrator, including contacts for sexual purposes, molestation, statutory rape, (child) prostitution, (child) pornography, exposure, incest or other sexually exploitative activities.

A synopsis of the foregoing reveals therefore that any form of sexual activity that one does not agree to, which includes inappropriate touching, vaginal, anal, or oral penetration, sexual intercourse that one says no to, rape, attempted rape or child molestation is sexual abuse. An offender is therefore referred to as a sexual abuser or molester. The culprit could be either a male or female (commonly adult); although it has been alleged that in most cases, males are more prevalent offenders (5).

Sexual abuse, also often referred to as sexual assault can be verbal, visual, or anything that forces a person to join in unwanted sexual contact or attention. Voyeurism, which describes the act of watching private sexual acts by someone; exhibitionism, which also describes the act of exposing oneself in public; incest, which describes the act of sexual contact between family members; as well as sexual harassment are all forms of sexual abuse.

1.2. Reality of Sexual Abuse

It is instructive to note that majority of victims of sexual abuse have one form of relationship or the other while less are only committed by strangers. The point is that most victims and perpetrators of sexual abuse know each other. These perpetrators may be in the range of attendants, employees of care facilities, family members – spouses inclusive, cohabitating partners, a friend, or date among others. There are also incidents of facility residents occasionally assaulting fellow residents. The experience of sexual abuse always fills victims with immediate reactions of shock, fear or disbelief; while it leaves a haunting scare on such a victim. Long-term symptoms include anxiety, fear or post-traumatic stress disorder. Women most often than not are victim of sexual abuse and may suffer serious health problems, ranging from sexually transmitted infections to stomach problems and ongoing pains. They also are at risk of emotional problems like depression, anxiety as well as post-traumatic stress disorder which greatly overwhelms a victim's ability to cope with such traumatic experience.

1.3. Types of Sexual Abuse

There are as many types of sexual abuse as there are situations and circumstance under which sexual abuse can occur. A number of the different types are enumerated and

described below. The approach of the aggressor or sexual abuse offender can include but not limited to the following:

1.3.1. Incest

Incest refers to sexual contact occurring between family members. The sexual abuse of a child by other family members appears to be the most common type of incest. This mostly occurs between older male relatives and younger female children in the families. This category of perpetrators also includes step-parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. They are often trusted family members who use their powers, as well as the victim's love and dependence, to initiate sexual contact and often to ensure that the relationship continues and remains secret.

1.3.2. Molestation

This is a sexual abuse involving sexual stimulation to the body of victim and genital areas, and which may also involve penetration. Sexual molestation can happen to anyone at any age and be committed by a perpetrator of any age or gender.

1.3.3. Stranger Rape

Stranger rape refers to a nonconsensual or forced sex on a victim who does not know his/her attacker or assailant. Power and control is usually sexually expressed in an attack on a victim. Stranger rape can happen to anyone of any age or gender. Stranger rape can further take the form of *blitz assault*, where the perpetrator swiftly and brutally assaults the victim without any prior contact. This form of sexual assault usually occurs at night in a public place. It may also be a *contact sexual assault* where the assailant contacts the victim and tries to gain trust and confidence before assaulting. Contact perpetrators usually pick their victims in bars, lure them into their cars, or otherwise and try to coerce the victim into a situation of sexual assault. Stranger rape may also take the form of home *invasion sexual assault* where a stranger breaks into the victim's home to commit the assault.

1.3.4. Acquaintance or Date Rape

Acquaintance or date rape is by far the most prevalent form of sexual violence among college and campus students due to their high rate of interest in sexual relationships. Young women are at considerable risk of becoming victims of date rape while in college or campus. It might be instructive in the light of the above to recall the alleged September, 2011 'viral' incidence on the internet of a south-eastern Nigerian lady being gang-raped, which also sparked off a global outrage, thereby drawing the attention of the Nigerian authorities to the alarming status of rape in the country (2 p.254, citing a newspaper report). Acquaintance or date rape, therefore, occurs when someone is assaulted by somebody that they know, indicating therefore the absence

of mutual consent. The attacker is often a peer in a trusted social relationship, while the assault may involve physical and verbal threats, emotional blackmail, or alcohol and drugs to force or trick a victim into having sex. Therefore, date rape can occur between people who are dating and have had consensual sex in the past, between two people who are starting to date, between people who are just friends, and between acquaintances. While majority of victims are usually women, guys can be victims of date rape too.

1.3.5. Sexual Assault

This is rather a broad term covering a wide range of violating activities. It includes physical attack to the victim's sexual body parts, often involving force or violence. Sexual assault is any sort of sexual activity between two or more people in which one of the people is involved against his or her will. The activities involved in a sexual assault can include many different experiences such as unwanted touching, grabbing, oral sex, anal sex, sexual penetration with an object, and/or sexual intercourse. It is also the use of a position of trust to compel otherwise unwanted sexual activity. Oftentimes, some women are forced or pressured into having sex with someone who has some form of authority over them; for instance, a doctor, teacher, and boss among others. This might also involve a student submitting to the sexual advances of a person in authority because of fear of being punished.

1.3.6. Self Exposure or Exhibitionism

Self exposure or Exhibitionism can be carried out in a number of ways which include but not limited to flashing, exposing the naked body, displaying ones sexual organs and or Masturbation in an effort to shock, scare, intimidate, or sexually arouse a victim. Self exposure or Exhibitionism is described by *Encyclopedia of Mental Disorders* (6) as a mental disorder since the act is always driven by a kind compulsion to display one's naked body or genitals to an unsuspecting stranger.

1.3.7. Voyeurism

Voyeurism is the act of observing an unsuspecting person who is naked, in the process of disrobing, or engaging in sexual activity or other actions considered to be of a private nature, that provides sexual arousal. The *Encyclopedia of Mental Disorders* equally (6) describes voyeurism as a psychosexual disorder. Obviously, it is an invasion of a victim's privacy when done either secretly or openly with the intent of gaining self sexual gratification. Also, this can happen to victims of all ages and genders. Voyeurism tends to be more common in men, though it does occasionally occur in women.

1.3.8. Exposure of Children to Pornography

This act includes but is not limited to exposing a child to adult sexual activity, pornographic movies, magazines and or photographs. It may also include having a minor child/children pose, undress or perform in a sexual fashion on film, video or in person. Child pornography is basically the exploitation of a child's trust for the sexual gratification of an adult. The exposure of children to pornography and adult sexual behaviour is nothing but sexual abuse.

2. Signs of Sexual Abuse

These are clues that an abuse has occurred. These include Physical indicators which involves injuries or bruises, while behavioural indicators are ways victims and abusers act or interact with each other. Genital or anal pain, irritation, or bleeding, bruises on external genitalia or inner thighs, difficulty in walking or sitting, torn, stained, or bloody underclothing, sexually transmitted diseases among others are included in the physical indicators to sexual abuse. Although there is no single indicator that can be taken as a conclusive proof, one should however look out for patterns of indicators that may suggest the presence of a problem.

3. Safety Hints to Curb the Risk of Sexual Abuse

Staying safe from sexual assault is very important. There are things to do to reduce chances of being sexually assaulted or abused. The following steps can be taken to reduce chances of being sexually assaulted.

- I. Be aware of your surroundings — who's out there and what's going on.
- II. Walk with confidence. The more confident you look, the stronger you appear.
- III. *While it is not to be recommended*, Know your limits when it comes to using alcohol.
- IV. Be assertive — don't let anyone violate your space.
- V. Trust your instincts. If you feel uncomfortable in your surroundings, leave.
- VI. Don't prop open self-locking doors.
- VII. Lock your door and your windows, even if you leave for just a few minutes.
- VIII. Watch your keys. Don't lend them. Don't leave them. Don't lose them; and don't put your name and address on the key ring.
- IX. Watch out for unwanted visitors. Know who's on the other side of the door before you open it.

- X. Be wary of isolated spots, like underground garages, offices after business hours, and apartment laundry rooms.
- XI. Avoid walking or jogging alone, especially at night. Vary your route. Stay in well-travelled and well-lit areas.
- XII. Have your key ready to use before you reach the door — home, car, or work.
- XIII. Park in well-lit areas and lock the car, even if you'll only be gone a few minutes.
- XIV. Drive on well-traveled streets, with doors and windows locked.
- XV. Never hitchhike or pick up a hitchhiker.
- XVI. Keep your car in good shape with plenty of fuel in the tank.
- XVII. In case of car trouble, call for help on your cellular phone... *(otherwise, lock the doors and ensure that other precautionary alerts are in place, before leaving to access help: Additional Emphasis).*

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health (7).

Also, always ensure that you do not get yourself isolated with someone you do not know well, and to use discretion even with the one you know well. It is also instructive not to leave a social event with someone you just met. One other important way to stay safe at clubs and parties is to learn more about date rape drugs. These are drugs that are sometimes used to assist a sexual assault. They can be slipped into a victim's drink when the person is not observant. Such drugs often have no colour, smell, or taste, so that the victim is not able to dictate the action of being drugged. Often sedative, hypnotic, dissociative and of amnesiac effect, date drugs can make one become weak and confused, or even pass out, and unable to refuse sex or defend oneself. They are used to make it hard for a victim to fight off a rape or to remember what happened in the process. Date rape drugs are used on both females and males. The overwhelming influence of this date rape drug draws attention to the rising accusations against Bill Cosby, the celebrated American TV idol, who has most recently re-emerged on the news as more and more women, with their number soaring by the day, have come up to claim that they were once sexually assaulted by the comedian, sometimes after he had slipped them a drug to sedate them (8).

Another important way to avoid sexual abuse is to leave a relationship that is becoming unhealthy. Remember, no one has a right to pressure you into sexual activities you do not want to do. If you think your relationship may be abusive,

quit. However, you need to be acquainted with the knowledge of the signs of a potential sexual abuser. *Awake* (9) aptly tagged it, "Profile of a Potential Rapist":

- Emotionally abuses you by insulting you, ignoring your views, or getting angry or annoyed when you make a suggestion.
- Tries to control elements of your life, such as how you dress and who your friends are. Wants to make all the decisions on a date, such as where to eat or what movie to see.
- Gets jealous for no reason.
- Talks down about women in general.
- Gets drunk or "high" and tries to get you to do the same.
- Pressures you to be alone with him or to have sex.
- Won't let you share expenses on a date and gets angry if you offer to.
- Is physically violent even in subtle ways, such as grabbing or pushing.
- Intimidates you by sitting too close, blocking your way, touching when you've said not to, or talking as if he knows you better than he actually does.
- Can't handle frustration without getting angry.
- Doesn't view you as an equal.
- Enjoys weapon and likes being cruel to animals, children, or people he can bully.

4. Reactions after Sexual Abuse

After a sexual assault, victims no doubt respond differently. Reactions can include feeling terribly shocked, confused, and afraid. Some women experience denial or feeling emotionally numb. Whatever the experience, it is necessary for the victim to reach out to people who can care and help or get help from a mental health professional. The hospital usually can put such a victim in touch with a counsellor or support group. Even if the experience has taken quite a long time, it is no barrier for the victim to still access help.

4.1. Major Depressive Disorder (MDD)

Depression is a common reaction following sexual assault. Symptoms of MDD can include a depressed mood, an inability to enjoy things, difficulty sleeping, changes in patterns of sleeping and eating, problems in concentration and decision-making, feelings of guilt, hopelessness, and decreased self-esteem. For most victims, the depression can

last for a long period of time. There is also some level of tendency to attempt suicide by sexually abused victims especially among women.

4.2. Anger

This is a natural reaction to such a violating event. Many victims of sexual assault struggle with anger after the assault. However, prolonged and intense anger can interfere with the recovery process which may further disrupt the victim's life.

4.3. Shame and Guilt

These feelings are common reactions to sexual assault. Some victims blame themselves for what has happened or feel shameful about falling victim. These feelings can also get in the way of a victim's recovery, especially women by preventing such person from telling others about what happened and getting assistance.

4.4. Social Problems

Victims of sexual abuse, mostly among women can experience problems in their marital relationship or in friendships. Sometimes an assault survivor will be too anxious or depressed to want to participate in social activities. There are also difficulties in trusting others after the assault, which makes it difficult to develop new relationships. Performance at work, school and other places of importance can also be affected.

4.5. Sexual Problems

Victims of sexual abuse especially among women experience long-standing sexual problems. They are often afraid of and try to avoid sexual activity. They may experience an overall decrease in sexual interest and desire.

4.6. Alcohol and Drug Use

Victims may be prone to use of alcohol or drugs to control their emotions and feelings after an assault which can sometimes become problematic. The substances most likely used by victims include marijuana, cocaine, and other major drugs.

4.7. Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

This is a pattern of symptoms that some individuals develop after experiencing a traumatic event. Symptoms of PTSD associated with sexual abuse include repeated thoughts of the assault; memories and nightmares; avoidance of thoughts, feelings, and situations related to the assault; as well as increased arousal (e.g., difficulty sleeping and concentrating, jumpiness, irritability etc).

5. Helping a Sexually Abused Victim

Someone who is abused or who has been assaulted can be helped by being there to listen to the person and to offer comfort or safe place. Victims can be assisted or encouraged to report the matter to the police, go to hospital for medical assistance and for counselling. Also, it is necessary to reinforce the fact that the victim is not really the one at fault and that the feeling of anger and shame is only natural. It behoves on family members also to encourage and build a victim's self esteem and ensuring also that he/she is still loved and respected despite what has happened. Continued support, says *Awake* (5), is necessary as the survivor goes through what are sometimes lengthy steps to emotional recovery.

6. Recommendations to a Sexually Abused Victim

If you were sexually assaulted and are experiencing symptoms that are distressing to you, or symptoms that are interfering with your ability to live a fulfilling and productive life, you are encouraged to talk to a health professional. Depending on the nature of the problems that you are experiencing, a number of therapeutic techniques may be extremely helpful depending on the symptoms involved and which could be tailored to your specific needs. Some therapies involve talking about and making sense of the assault in order to reduce the memories and pain associated with the assault. Attending therapy may also involve learning skills to cope with the symptoms associated with the assault. Obviously, therapy can help survivors restore meaning to their lives.

Without doubt, rape is a common form of sexual abuse which is regarded as a very serious offence because it is an outrage on and a gross violation of the physical and emotional integrity of the victim. Still guided by *Awake* (9 p.9), the following recommendations that are tailored to the sexual abuse of rape, with women as the most affected species, have been given:

- Seek medical attention.
- If you wish, ask that a rape-victim counsellor accompany you through medical and legal procedures if one is available.
- Call the police as soon as you are able to. Counsellors recommend reporting for your safety and for the safety of other women. Reporting is not the same as prosecuting, but if you choose to prosecute later, your case will be weakened by a delayed report.

- Preserve evidence. Do not bathe, change clothing, wash or comb hair, or destroy fingerprints or footsteps.
- Medical personnel will collect evidence and will test for sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy...
- Do what you have to in order to feel safe – change locks, stay with a friend, block door – whether it seems that you are overreacting or not.

Most importantly, there is always a word of comfort from the Scriptures to every trying situation and circumstance; you are encouraged to search the Scriptures for the comfort you need if you can and be assisted in doing so if you cannot. Talk to God about your experience, and ask Him to comfort you. Always lean on the rallying support of close family members and brethren in your church if you belong to one.

7. Conclusion

There is no gainsaying the fact that sexual abuse is a despicable social scourge. It is only unfortunately that it has become an endemic social malaise in our society today. Although victims of sexual assault experience a wide range of post-assault effects, they do not have to suffer in silence; opening up on such experience is a sure step to recovery, especially to close family members and associates. They need as much encouragement and support as possible to be restored back to healthy, fulfilling and productive lives. It is hinted also that although sexual abuse thrives in colleges and university campuses, there is indeed no limit to situations or circumstances where it can occur. Therefore, as much caution as possible is needed also to reduce the chances of being sexually abused especially in the reality of its boundless prevalence. Most importantly, there is need to raise the consciousness of all classes of society, both in its condemnation and the awareness of the dangers associated with the scourge as a sure way of reducing the occurrence. All and sundry, therefore, have one role or the other to play in this direction, including the government, the Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), the various religious

organizations, the media as well as academic institutions, because of the high level of social interactions generated in these circles.

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