

ASSERTIVE SKILLS AS ANTIDOTE AGAINST SEXUAL ASSAULT AMONG ADOLESCENTS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Sexual assault is a severely traumatic experience that disproportionately affects women and girls. Adolescents should acquire assertiveness skills against sexual assaults. They may appropriately employ assertiveness instead of passivity when attempting to make their own wishes known and honoured. Low self-esteem predisposes them to victimization, teaching assertive skills helps to prevent sexual assault if the potential victim feels he/she can stand up for his/her rights. Health practitioners need to provide assertiveness skills and training to adolescents in both individual and group settings. Assertiveness displayed could prevent escalation of the issue and promote peaceful co-existence in the neighbourhood between families of the potential assailants and potential victims. It is therefore suggested that health education should be further strengthened in schools all over Nigeria. Assertiveness skills should be taught to adolescents in all settings. Sexual Harassment Act 2016 should also be applicable to students to forestall potential assailants and help adolescents to be safe from sexual assault.

Key words: *Assertiveness, Assertive behaviour, Peace, sexual assault, sexually assertive communication training, adolescents*

Introduction

Sexual assault is an act in which a person intentionally sexually touches another person without that person's consent, or coerces or physically forces a person to engage in a sexual act against his/her will. It is a form of sexual violence which includes rape (forced vaginal, anal or oral penetration or drug facilitated sexual assault), groping, child sexual abuse or the torture of the person in a sexual manner (Cameron, Jelinek, Anne-Maree, Brown, & Little, 2011). It involves lack of consent; the use of physical force, coercion, deception or threat; and/or the involvement of a victim that is asleep, unconscious, under aged, mentally incapacitated or physically impaired as a result of voluntary or involuntary alcohol or drug consumption (Adeleke, Olowookere, Hassan, Komolafe, & Asekun-Olarinmoye, 2012).

Sexual assault is a much broader term than rape. While rape is always sexual assault, sexual assault is not always rape. Sexual Assault involves a variety of sexually related crimes like forced kissing, anal and oral penetration, touching of private areas of the body (Weinstein, 2017). Although penile vaginal penetration or attempted penetration is the commonest form of sexual assault, penile penetration or attempted penetration of the anus or mouth without consent

is increasingly being reported (Akinlusi, Rabi, Olawepo, Adewunmi, Ottu, Akinola, 2016). Breast or genital fondling, forced or coerced touching of another's genitalia and forced or coerced anal or vaginal penetration with other body parts or object are other forms of sexual assault (Kilpatrick, Ruggiero, Acierno, Saunders, Resnick, & Best, 2003).

Sexual assault is a pandemic crime that is characteristically underreported, more especially in the low income countries, because of the enduring culture of male dominance, female social and economic disempowerment and poor or non-prosecution of sex offenders (Badejoko, Anyabolu, Badejoko, Ijarotimi, Kuti, & Adejuyigbe, 2014). According to World Health Organisation reports, one in every five women is a victim of sexual assault (Garcia-Moreno, & Watts, 2011) and globally, 35% of women have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence (World Health Organisation, 2013). The reported figures are said to be inaccurate and often underestimated as most cases of sexual assault are under-reported by the victims because of the associated stigma (Kullima, Kawuwa, Adu, Mairiga, & Bukar, 2010).

Data available suggests that in some countries one in five women report sexual violence by an intimate partner and up to a third of girls report forced sexual initiation (Olle, 2004). Sexual assault encompasses a range of acts, including coerced sex in marriage and dating relationships, rape by strangers, organised rape in war, sexual harassment (including demands of sex for jobs or school grades), and rape of children, trafficking of women and girls, female genital mutilation, and forced exposure to pornography. Studies (Holmes & Slap, 1998; O'Donohue & Fisher, 2008) have documented female offenders of sexual assault whose victims may be of male or female gender including children, adolescents and adults; the motivation for the female offender being the same as that of their male counterparts: power and control.

Sexual assault is common in Nigerian setting and its prevalence is increasing with changing pattern. Males are increasingly been assaulted, but female victims are still in the majority. In Nigeria, only 2 of 40 cases of rape are reported, attributing this amongst other reasons, to the arduous legal requirements needed to prove the cases and the associated stigma (Akhiwu, Umanah, & Olueddo, 2013). The reported incidence of sexual assault in Nigeria ranged from 13.8% among female students in Maiduguri (Kullima, Kawuwa, Adu, Mairiga, & Bukar, 2010) to 15% among young females in Ibadan (Ajuwon, 2005). In the study of Ezechi, Musa, David, Wapmuk, Gbajabiamila, Idigbe, Ezeobi, Ohihoin, and Ujah, (2016), the place of assault in most cases were the assailant's home or office, in others the assault took place at victims home, uncompleted building, street corner, friend's house, taxi/bus or hotel/guest house

in Lagos State. The method of overcoming the victim ranged from physical force, threat of violence, deceit, drug/alcohol or money and fifty five out of the 196 victims sustained physical injuries and anogenital injuries.

The recently enacted Sexual Harassment in Tertiary Educational Institutions Prohibition Act 2016 (the Act) known as Sexual Harassment Act, only protects students in tertiary institutions, and not women (or men) in the workplace. Section 4 of the Act defines sexual harassment inter alia as 1) sexual intercourse between an Educator and a Student usually less than 18 years or an imbecile or person of low mental capacity 2) unwelcome sexual attention from an Educator 3) unwelcome remarks from an Educator to a Student 4) implied or expressed promise of a reward by an Educator to a Student or express or implied threat of reprisal or actual reprisal, if the Student refuses to comply with the sexual demands. Grabbing, pinching of breasts and so on, are prohibited. The offence carries a penalty of between 2 and 5 years imprisonment, with no option of fine (Weinstein, 2017).

This legislation is restricted to only tertiary institutions, and not secondary institutions and the work place. After all, there was the recent case of a male teacher at my alma mater, Queens College, Yaba, Lagos, who was accused of sexually harassing some of the students. Apparently, the students were threatened with all sorts of reprisals like expulsion, and were afraid to pursue their allegations to the logical end. Likewise, in the Nigerian workplace, sexual harassment is a daily occurrence. Even domestic staff is not excluded from the menace; and because they are seen to have little or no voice, they are not only sexually harassed, but in many instances, raped, impregnated by their employers, and then evicted from the work place (Weinstein, 2017).

Sexual Assault against Adolescents: The Need for Primary Preventive Intervention

A non-governmental organisation known as Women at Risk International Foundation (WARIF), has condemned the high incidence of sexual assault, rape and human trafficking amongst young girls and women across Nigeria, disclosing that the country records 10,000 of the menace daily. Speaking at the launch of the initiative 'The Gate Keeper's Project' in Lagos recently, the Founder, WARIF, Dr. Kemi Da-Silver Ibru, who partnered with Aspire Coronation Trust (ACT) Foundation on the project, said cases of sexual assaults in the country have been alarming, consequently, destroying the future of young girls (Ake, 2017).

The recently enacted Sexual Harassment in Tertiary Educational Institutions prohibition Act 2016 (the Act) known as Typical reports of sexual assault in Nigeria include; a one-year survey conducted at Enugu State University

Teaching Hospital between 2012 and 2013 revealed that 70% of sexual assault victims were under the age of 18 (Ohayi, 2013).

In Nigeria today, statistics have shown that one in four girls by the time she reaches 18 would have experienced at least one form of sexual assault in Nigeria. Nigeria has a population of over 160 million and half of the populations are women, and half of the women are under the age of 24, that is 10,000 girls everyday are survivors of this horrific crime. Many of these girls according to Ake (2017) have attended multiple events and they are not aware that this problem can be addressed. Ake (2017) further noted that the assertiveness training will target over 550 Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs) across all local government areas in Lagos State to inform and educate them on sexual assaults.

Adolescents constitute a vulnerable group deserving special attention (Saewyc, Pettingell, & Magee, 2003). Ezechi, Musa, David, Wapmuk, Gbajabiamila, Idigbe, Ezeobi, Ohihoin, and Ujah, (2016) asserted that young persons aged less than 20 years constituted majority of the victims with persons known to them being the perpetrators in most cases. It is often associated with psychological, physical, social distress and occasionally result in fatality either from shock, severe injury or murder by the perpetrator in an attempt to conceal his identity (Adeleke, Olowookere, Hassan, Komolafe, & Asekun-Olarinmoye, 2012; Badejoko, Anyabolu, Badejoko, Ijarotimi, Kutu, & Adejuyigbe, 2014). This is not different from the reports of sexual assaults in Lagos State.

A study (Akinlusi, Rabi, Olawepo, Adewunmi, Ottun, & Akinola, 2016) conducted in Nigeria disclose that young girls are victims in majority of reported assault cases in hospitals. A four-year review of sexual assault cases at LASUTH that began in 2008 and ended in December 2012, showed that out of a total 287 reported cases of sexual assault, 83% of the victims were below the age of 19. A one-year survey conducted at Enugu State University Teaching Hospital between 2012 and 2013 revealed that 70% of sexual assault victims were under the age of 18. In the Enugu survey, majority of the victims knew their perpetrators and the assault occurred inside uncompleted buildings and the victims or perpetrators residence (Ohayi, 2013). Hence, there is need for preventive mechanisms for this population.

In some cases of sexual assault, victims of rape are sometimes blamed for the assaults against them in Nigeria. There is greater tendency to blame victims of rape. A victim of sexual assault is found at fault for performing actions which reduce their ability to resist or refuse consent, such as consuming alcohol (Whitaker, 2015). Rape and sexual assault survivors are asked about what they wore and how they fought back. Conversely, theories regarding the sequence of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) and other victimization have proposed that experiences from which one is unable to escape or avoid can result in feelings of

powerlessness or learned helplessness, potentially leading the victim to believe that it is impossible to avoid or prevent future victimization (Finkelhor, 1987; Peterson & Seligman, 1983).

Also, it is logical to assume that women who are low in assertiveness have a difficult time refusing unwanted sexual advances and may be targeted by aggressive men. Not being assertive sometimes leads to being taken advantage of by people who are not as nice or considerate. Lack of assertiveness in sexual situations may contribute to sexual assault. Low sexual assertiveness has been proposed as a possible mechanism through which sexual assaults occur (Livingston, Testa, & VanZile-Tamsen, 2007). These further emphasise preventive intervention for aiding adolescents' escape of sexual assault.

The modality of pre-assault intervention training stems from the summary of findings of progress and challenges in creating safe and healthy environment for Victorian women in a study of community attitudes to violence against women (Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, 2006). The document highlights different strategic levels that apply in the prevention of violence against women. This strategy seeks to prevent sexual assault before it occurs by changing environments so that they are safer for women, building the skills and knowledge of individuals or changing behaviour. Primary prevention addresses its underlying causes (such as gender inequality and poverty), and are effective prevention strategies (Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, 2006; America College Health Association, 2009). In addition to the pre-assault intervention training, a practicable modality is needed to prevent sexual assault and for peaceful co-existence among adolescents in Nigeria.

Assertiveness: A Preventive Mechanism for Sexual Assault and for Peaceful Co-existence among Adolescents

Assertiveness connotes a healthy way of communicating. It concerns being able to express feelings, wishes, wants, and desires appropriately and is an important personal and interpersonal skill. It is expressing your opinions, needs, and feelings, without ignoring or hurting the opinions, needs, and feelings of others. It requires not saying yes to others if one does not agree to what they are saying irrespective of their designation and level in the hierarchy.

Assertiveness is a skill regularly referred to in social and communication skills training. Assertive communication involves respect for the boundaries of oneself and others. According to the textbook *Cognitive Behaviour Therapy* (2008), "Assertive communication of personal opinions, needs, and boundaries has been conceptualised as the behavioural middle ground, lying between ineffective passive and aggressive responses". Assertive communication involves

respect for the boundaries of oneself and others. It refers to a positive trait of an individual where he/she knows what needs to be spoken or discussed without hurting or insulting the other person (Juneja, 2018). This is a key to prevent sexual assault among adolescents in the country.

Several research studies (O'Donohue, 2003; and Livingston, Testa, & VanZile-Tamsen, 2007) and psychological skills in general including assertiveness and social skills have been posed as intervention for sexual assault with some empirical support. Potential victims may appropriately employ assertiveness instead of passivity when attempting to make their own wishes known and honored (Parrot, 1996). This will thereby lead to security and peaceful mediation among the parties (assaulter and victim).

Awareness and assertive behaviour may be the best defense against becoming an "easy target". Assertive Behaviours that can be taught to adolescents and should include;

1. Hold your head up; walk confidently, directly and at a steady pace.
2. If you feel you are in danger of being attacked try to escape the situation by running away from it if you can.
3. Try in any way you can to attract attention to yourself. Screaming "Call 911" or "Fire" is a good way to accomplish this.
4. If you are being followed, head for a well lit area where you think there will be other people who may be able to help you.
5. Stay alert and aware. Know where the exits are if you are in a building. Always let someone know where you will be. Do not go to isolated places in a building, if you must go, take a friend. Always turn around and look at whoever may be behind you.
6. If you walk or jog for exercise, try to vary your route and time on the street. To be predictable is risky.
7. Take a self-defense course.
8. Trust your "gut instincts." If a person, place or situation makes you uneasy, leave or change it immediately.
9. Use the emergency call boxes on campus. If you are on campus and do not have access to a phone, locate the "emergency call box" on campus to contact University Police whenever you feel unsafe.
10. If you are in an emergency situation and have access to a telephone, contact the Police at or local law enforcement at 121.
11. Report any suspicious activity or persons on campus and/or off campus to the proper authorities immediately. Report any situation that is unsafe such as insufficient lighting, high bushes, broken locks and propped doors (Nicholls State University, 2018).

There is a thin line of difference between being assertive and being rude. An individual do not have to shout or fight with the other person just to prove his/her point. Some people communicate in a way that is too passive. Other people have a style that is too aggressive. Responding in a passive or non-assertive way tends to mean compliance with the wishes of others and can undermine individual rights and self-confidence (SkillsYouNeed, 2018). An assertive style is the happy medium between these two. It is often seen as the balance point between passive and aggressive behaviour. Those who behave assertively always speak their mind; respect the thoughts, feelings and beliefs of other people as well as their own without being rude and aggressive (Lyness, 2015, Juneja, 2018).

Adoption of assertiveness skill by adolescents against sexual assault would go a long way in preventing the potential victim from the aftermath effect of sexual assault, add self esteem and respect to the young adolescent and provide a platform for peaceful co-existence. In instances where a potential sexual assault victim notice the reaction of a potential assailant, reporting to parents and elderly ones who may not possess good communication and conflict resolution skills might escalate the issue leading to stigmatisation of the potential assailant thereby, build grudge in his/her mind against the potential sexual assault victim. But if the potential victim of sexual assault is endowed with good mechanism and usage of assertiveness, he/she would be able to control the situation. By this, peaceful co-existence will be ensured and both parties will maintain caution to avoid the involvement of security agents.

Finally, the enacted Sexual Harassment in Tertiary Educational Institutions Prohibition Act 2016 (the Act) known as Sexual Harassment Act, only protects students in tertiary institutions, and not primary and secondary schools' students. The inclusion of primary and secondary schools' students in the 2016 Sexual Harassment Act will help to forestall incidences of sexual assault and help adolescents in the country to be safe from sexual assault.

Conclusion

The high rates of sexual assault experienced by young people suggest there is an urgent need for preventive initiatives, which target young people population to be developed and to focus on adolescents using schools as prime sites of disseminating such prevention initiatives, with an increased emphasis on negotiating ethical and consensual relationships (Keel, 2005). Since lack of assertiveness in sexual situations contributes to sexual assault, young adolescents need to receive sexually assertive communication training. Teaching assertive skills may prevent sexual assault involvement if the potential victim (young adolescent) feels she can stand up for her rights, and health practitioners need to

provide assertiveness skills and training to young adolescents in both individual and group settings. Also, there is need for the inclusion of primary and secondary schools' students in the Sexual Harassment Act of 2016 will help to forestall sexual assault among adolescents in the country.

Health education incorporating assertiveness skills should be taught to adolescents in schools as a defensive mechanism to prevent sexual assault as well as in seminars and workshops as an intervention or programme in all settings where adolescents are present. Health education should be further strengthened and be made compulsory or more encouraged in primary and junior secondary schools all over Nigeria since in the existing curriculum assertiveness skills is taught only in health education professionally and effectively.

Primary and secondary schools' students should be included in the Sexual Harassment Act 2016 to forestall potential assailants and help adolescents in the country to be safe from sexual assault.

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