

Women Against Rape, Sexual Harassment and Sexual Exploitation (WARSHE)

Press Release

Don't Abuse Your Office. Drop the Bill on Indecent Dressing

Our attention has been drawn to a bill that has been scheduled for public hearing on July 2, 2008: A bill for an Act to prohibit and punish public nudity, sexual intimidation and other related offences in Nigeria. We think that this bill is actually a bill prohibiting what the proponents consider to be “indecent dressing.”

We think it is interesting that the prohibition and punishment of: 1) nudity and indecent dressing in public places; and 2) sexual intimidation are being proposed as one act of parliament. Clearly, the underlying assumption that informed this bill is that if you want to stamp out sexual intimidation (that is, sexual harassment), you must stamp out the “cause” of sexual intimidation which is nudity and indecent dressing. We sure won't be making any revelation when we say that most of the Nigerians who are accused of sexual harassment are men, while all of those who are accused of indecent dressing are women. We also are not making any earth shaking statement when we say the subtle (and also brazen) forms of sexual harassment that occur mostly in work places and institutions of learning are insidious, they are debilitating, and are at the beginning of the continuum of the different degrees of sexual violence and abuse that girls and women experience. Men who sexually harass girls and women go on to (attempt to) rape those women, or other girls and women, and take advantage of others, in their places of worship and in their homes, when they think they will not be caught and or punished.

This bill started its march on us a long time ago. When we receive reports of, and we talk about: “uncles” who rape their 2, 3, and 12 year old nieces and neighbours; fathers who continuously rape their daughters to submission; daddies of the home who take advantage of household helps; teachers who take advantage of their female students; girls (including the ones who wear the Hijab) who are raped in their hostels; religious leaders who take advantage of women, and when rape is used to settle intra-familial and political scores, we are told that the problem is caused by indecent dressing! Clearly, the presumed relationship between “nudity”, “indecent dressing” and sexual violence and abuse does not derive from available quantitative and qualitative data about sexual harassment, rape and other forms of sexual abuse in Nigeria. At best, that relationship is hypothetical, and our legislators should not legislate based on hypothesis.

We know men (and women) who feel genuinely upset by what they consider to be indecent dressing. Such men do not sexually harass and rape women. We also are aware of the fact that many of those who sexually intimidate women and claim that it is because women were indecently dressed that they experienced sexual abuse, also make other claims: that women seduce men by the way they talk, look, walk, shake their bums, and by covering up their bodies as nuns and some of our Muslim sisters do! We predict that

sometime soon, these men and some women will try to get legislators to make laws on indecent talk, walk, etc.

For those of us at WARSHE, we believe that co-joining the manner of women's dressing with the problem of sexual harassment is problematic, and unacceptable, because it excuses all manner of sexual crimes that are perpetuated against women. If the bill becomes an act of parliament, even those well meaning Nigerians who genuinely feel unease at the sight of women whose breasts are not all covered, (whose photographs were taken at parties and plastered on pages of newspapers) will find that women and girls who accuse their bosses and teachers of sexual harassment will also be arraigned for nudity and indecent dressing.

If the legislators pass this bill to law, they will be foisting their beliefs about what constitutes decent dress on Nigerian girls and women. They will also be pandering to the indiscretions, lack of self restraint and fears of sexual abusers and their unsuspecting wives, and they will be writing them into law. This, no doubt will be abuse of power. We want the legislators to think about this excerpt from Alvin Gouldner (1970). He said: "Power is, among other things, the ability to enforce one's moral claims. The powerful can thus conventionalize their moral defaults."

What to do?

Drop the bill for an Act to prohibit and punish public nudity, sexual intimidation and other related offences in Nigeria.

- Let religious leaders, parents, and groups that consider the manner of women's dressing an issue take the lead in the crusade against whatever each group and household consider to be indecent dressing among members.
- Let the national human rights commission begin serious dialogue and action with labour leaders, the leadership of higher institutions, women's organizations and other civil society groups on the formulation of sexual harassment policy and procedures for adoption and use in formal institutions.
- The proponent of the bill, Senator Ekaette should work with civil society organizations to propose and effect reforms to existing laws on rape and other sexual offences.

Signed

Dr Olutoyin Mejiuni

Coordinator, WARSHE

and

Signed

Dr Oluyemisi Obilade

Treasurer, WARSHE

for the

Coordinating Council of WARSHE

Rms 1,2,3, Conference Centre Shopping Complex, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.