

# **Unsafe Spaces: Dodgy Friends and Families**

Report on the

Survey of the Incidence of Sexual Violence and Abuse Against Young Girls  
and Women in High Schools and Tertiary Institutions in Osun and Oyo  
States, Nigeria

By

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For

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## Executive Summary

About twelve years into our work of protecting children, girls and women from sexual violence and abuse, and helping them to cope when abuses have occurred, we felt a need to work with evidence about the phenomenon, that derives from a systematic process of inquiry, that would allow us: recommend specific policies or policy directions to education, health and social welfare authorities, and the system of administration of justice; map the nature and direction of future advocacy work; plan further education intervention in the education sector; and be more strategic about our intervention efforts. We therefore proposed a feminist action research, and asked the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF) for support. The AWDF provided support in 2011, and the ground work for the study reported here began in the last quarter of 2011.

Our study, a feminist action research, had descriptive, explanatory and action components, and we adopted a narrative approach to the study. In January, February and May 2012, through open ended questionnaires that we converted to interview guides depending on the literacy level of respondents, we collected short narratives from 2, 281 girls in high schools and 837 young women in tertiary institutions in Oyo and Osun states, in South west Nigeria. We examined the incidence and dimensions of sexual violence and abuse, and sought explanations for the phenomenon through qualitative and quantitative analyses of the narratives of our respondents.

We found that:

- 23% of our respondents, that is 717 of 3, 118, had experienced SVA and that there were differences in extent by rural areas and urban centres, and by educational level
- Rape was the most common form of SVA that respondents had experienced, and 28% of those who had experienced abuse had suffered more than one form of abuse
- About 31% of respondents who had experienced SVA had the experience before age 13, and 80% before age 18; and 1 out of 4 had experienced SVA more than once
- While half of the respondents who had been abused were abused by persons whom they were supposed to trust minimally, 1 out of 5 respondents (20.94%) were abused by persons whom they would ordinarily trust, absolutely. Persons whom they would usually trust the least were the least dangerous. Forty eight point four seven per cent (48.47%) of our respondents were abused in environments that we thought of as low level safe space, while 46.49% were abused in environments that we considered to be high level safe space
- The assailants' homes topped the list of environments where respondents were abused in our assumed low level safe space with 142 respondents (or 1 out of 4) abused in assailants' homes. The assailants who attacked the respondents were: their relatives; a few teachers and religious leaders; family friends; neighbours; male friends/boyfriends, and persons they knew from afar. In our assumed high level safe space, the respondents' home topped the list of place of abuse, with 189 (or 1 out of 3) respondents suffering abuse in their own homes. Relations, neighbours and fellow students, and persons they knew from afar were most guilty of attacking the respondents in their own homes. Still on our assumed high level safe space, school premises came up for mention next as the environment where 61 respondents experienced sexual abuse.

- Respondents suffered shame, fear, aches and pains, cuts and injuries especially to their vagina, bleeding, loss of virginity, pregnancy and ostracism as a result of sexual violence and abuse. Some hate men, had death wishes, and or felt murderous
- At least one third of the girls and young women who had experienced sexual violence and abuse defended themselves vigorously; verbally, physically, and at times violently
- About half of the respondents did not tell significant persons around them about their abuse. A few significant persons were told but did not, or could not act in favour of the respondents, although some of them were deeply pained about the abuse of their children. Some mothers rebuked their girls for lurking around danger, and for 'allowing themselves to be raped.' They therefore either beat the girls thoroughly, or told them to shut up
- Most parents however, acted swiftly when their children/wards told them they had been abused. They reported to parents of young assailants, school authorities, and the Police. School authorities sacked a teacher, expelled a student, and took disciplinary action against some teachers. We do not have details of those disciplinary actions. Police did one or two, or in some cases, three of the following: beat the assailant thoroughly and set him free; got the assailant to sign an undertaking that he would not repeat the misdemeanor again; kept the assailant in Police detention for days; or let the assailant off once he had begged for forgiveness.

The major explanation that we have for the incidence and dimensions of sexual violence and abuse in this study is that girls and young women who were *alone with particular types of men* became vulnerable to sexual abuse because such men turned the spaces that they shared with the girls and women into unsafe spaces. The contributory factors to sexual violence and abuse that we identified in this study were: girls being alone in the company of potential abusers; men who do not mind abusing trust and power and those who behaved according to dictates of patriarchal beliefs and attitudes; differing assumptions made about relationships by all including parents; impunity; warped values; poverty; parents/guardians' work day and working hours, and fenced homes.

We raised concerns about: the scale of the abuse of trust and power in homes and school environments; the inattention to proper medical attention and counseling of respondents after an incident of SVA, especially rape; the strident calls for girls to remain virgins when many of those who reported experience of SVA had experienced rape, most of them before they reached age 18; and the lack of recourse to judicial processes in Police handling of cases reported by respondents.

We suggested among others: mass sensitization and education of girls and young women, their parents, and other stakeholders on the breadth and depth of the problem of SVA; strengthening the capacity of social welfare departments and establishing toll free hot lines that children can call to report SVA by relations and other adults; enactment of GBV or VAW laws by the people and governments of Oyo and Osun states; re-professionalization and motivation of the criminal investigation department of the Police and the entire Police force; adoption of sexual harassment policies and procedures in educational institutions; and establishment of trauma centres, to be located in a general hospital, in each of the education zones of the two states. We also suggested

an alternative discourse of virginity; one that focuses on those who take the virginity of children by force and fraud.

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