

Overcoming Sexual and Gender-Based Violence: Lagos State's Experience, by Lagos State Domestic and Sexual Violence Response Team (DSVRT)

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Domestic and sexual violence are twin societal vices that have ravaged humanity since the beginning of time. Unfortunately, with the passage of time, they have become increasingly more regular and widespread. The consequences, which include physical, psychological, social and health risk factors, are quite devastating for both the victims, and their families and friends. Available recent statistics show that:

- a. One in three women and one in four men experience violence from their partners in their lifetimes.
- b. One in three teens experience sexual or physical abuse or threats from a boyfriend or girlfriend in one year.
- c. One in five women are survivors of rape.
- d. One in two women and one in five men have experienced some form of sexual violence in their lives.
- e. One in four women and one in six men were sexually abused before the age of eighteen.¹

¹ Know the Facts <<https://nomore.org/learn/resources/>> accessed 25 July 2019.

Global and national efforts have been made at different times to tackle this menace with minimal, but encouraging results. With specific reference to Lagos State, Nigeria, the trail blazer in pursuit of excellence at different fronts, various policies and laws have been put in place to provide an enabling environment for the prevention and cure of domestic and sexual violence in the State. One of the most recent efforts was the establishment of the Lagos State Domestic and Sexual Violence Response Team (DSVRT) in September 2014. The Team's goal is to increase victim safety and offender responsibility by providing a cross jurisdictional approach in the handling of rape, domestic violence and child abuse cases.

In the past three years of its existence, the DSVRT, working in collaboration with the Lagos State Government and relevant non-governmental organisations, has, through its activities, not only achieved an increased reporting of domestic and sexual violence cases, but has provided succour and redress to many victims and seen to an appreciable reduction in cases of domestic and sexual violence in Lagos State. In a bid to share its experiences and success stories, the DSVRT has published this resource tool, which qualifies as a best practice tool for other stakeholders and responder teams within and outside the Lagos jurisdiction. This is a commendable step. It is an indication of the selfless outlook of the DSVRT towards resolving the problem of domestic and sexual violence beyond the boundaries of Lagos State.

Overcoming Sexual and Gender-Based Violence: The Lagos State Experience, a 143-page resource tool, unravels Lagos State's approach to confronting domestic and sexual violence, the various challenges faced and the innovative, but practical solutions employed to tackle the issues from the root. It contains 11 chapters, written by experts in the relevant fields.

Understanding the ideology of sexual abuse and domestic violence in Africa is key to resolving the problem. Adults generally do not take into consideration the great potential of children; they merely take mental notice of them without a corresponding actual notice. For example, domestic violence is rooted in the culture that promotes marriage based on marriageable age rather than maturity in character, self-leadership and self-discipline. By implication, it is the peoples' cultural values that get married and not the couple. The culture of silence compounds the problem, resulting in a near total neglect, especially of children and their well-being. The solution to both the sexual abuse of children and domestic violence lies in changes in the perceptions of people. Consequently, any strategy for the successful implementation of ideas regarding domestic and sexual violence must take cultural beliefs into consideration. One needs to read Taiwo Akinlami's thoughtful contribution in **Chapter One** to fully appreciate these issues and his suggested solutions.

Of course, there is also a psychology of domestic and sexual violence; and there are a plethora of theories—developmental, feminist and self-control. There are also theories

underpinning the perpetrator's reason for victims' abuse, among them attachment, social learning and cognitive behavioural theories. Whatever the theory, gender-based violence affects survivors in a variety of ways, including depression and suicidal ideations. Its impact on the child include its negative effect on the cognitive, emotional and social development. Olive Ogedengbe interrogates these issues in her rich contribution in **Chapter Two**, though she failed to suggest possible solutions to the problems she outlined.

The role of religion in addressing the menace of sexual and gender-based violence is critical. Both the Bible and Koran strongly condemn all ramifications of sexual and gender-based violence as they absolutely oppose God's plan for families. God expects couples to live in love and mutual respect for each other and to care for and properly raise their children in the confines of a loving family. The Church and Mosque have a responsibility to prevent the problem of sexual and gender-based violence by, among other things, teaching the adherents of their faith the values and rewards of good behaviour as well as the consequences of bad behaviour as enunciated in the Bible and Koran respectively. Where cases of sexual and gender-based violence occur, they should provide adequate therapy and counselling for victims. These and more are the perspectives of Pastor Fredrick Thomas and Alhaji Imam Luqman in **Chapter Three**, which though well presented, generally assume that domestic violence occurs only to women.

Although Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) is a criminal offence which is currently being addressed by the Criminal Law of Lagos State 2015, a more holistic approach is required since it is not all matters of sexual and domestic violence that deserve the hammer of the law. Research has shown that many perpetrators of domestic and sexual violence have often, as children, been victims or witnesses of such acts. This, in turn, has had such negative psychological effect on such children who have now grown to be perpetrators themselves. Such children need help, not punishment. The adoption of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), which focuses on restorative justice, as is now being done in jurisdictions such as Australia and Canada will better serve the interest of this class of perpetrators. The direct on point and very well written contribution of Omotilewa Ibirogbu in **Chapter Four** fully encapsulates this viewpoint.

Policy and law are basic tools for addressing societal vices. Lagos State has characteristically deployed these tools in addressing the menace of SGBV. **Chapter Five** of the book, which is not ascribed to any specific author, outlines these relevant tools and their positive impact on the resolution of SGBV in the State.

Beyond law and policy, effective resolution of endemic vices often requires coordinated effort. Recognising this fact, the Lagos State Government in 2014 set up the Lagos State Domestic and Sexual Violence Response Team, a collection of professional service providers and officials that respond essentially as a group to the various needs of

domestic and sexual survivors in a judicious manner. The main goal of DSVRT is “to encourage and create unprecedented levels of collaboration among professionals working to end gender and sexual based violence in Lagos State. In **Chapter Six** of the book, Titilola Vivour Adeniyi outlines the Team’s vision, mission and core values as well as the roles of its wide-ranging collaborating responder agencies, in addition to some success stories of the Team. In a world where individualism and personal egoism hold sway, even among professional bodies and organs, which has been the bane of countless lofty ideas, this is a refreshing move.

The system of administration of criminal justice in Nigeria is fraught with challenges, many of which have become perennial. Lagos State still witnesses its fair share of these challenges, despite the enormous efforts and resources it has deployed into the system. Whilst giving credit to the DSVRT for the improvement in the reporting rate of sexual and domestic violence cases, Olayinka Akodu, ACP Monday Agbonika and Hon. Justice Solebo articulately provide perspectives on these challenges from the prosecutor’s, police and judge’s points of view, respectively, in **Chapter Seven**. These perspectives provide an interesting insight on the issue.

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the leading international programme devoted to the protection and defence of the rights of the child often collaborates with governments and relevant stakeholders at national and state levels for this purpose. In this regard, it has in collaboration with the Lagos State Ministry of Youths and Social Development, which is charged with the primary and statutory responsibility to deal with cases of child abuse and other vices against children, along with other child protection stakeholders, developed the Child Protection System Strengthening Model (CPSS). This and how the CPSS and other relevant models have assisted the Ministry of Youths and Social Development (MYSD) in carrying out the preventive and protective services relating to its mandate is the thrust of Modupeola Sahid-Adebambo’s contribution in **Chapter Eight**.

The significant contribution of Civil Society Organisations’ to the development of the society, especially when done in partnership with the government, cannot be gainsaid. This is evident in the partnership efforts of Mirabel Centre, the first referral centre that provides support to victims of rape and sexual assault in Nigeria, with the Lagos State Government. Established in 2013, the Centre had, as at August 2017, provided services to 2,655 clients. The centre’s success story buttresses the need for more of such collaboration between the government, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and other stakeholders in other critical areas of need for the greater benefit of the State. This success story did not come easily. One needs to read **Chapter Nine** on ‘Civil Society Organisations working with Lagos State Government (A Case Study of Mirable Centre)’ by Ito Eze Anaba for the well-chronicled analysis of the unique journey, challenges and victories of the Centre and the attendant lessons from it.

The DSVRT, in addressing the menace of SGBV in Lagos State, adopts a three-pronged approach – the provision of medical services; awareness and sensitisation; and quick dispensation of justice. In doing this, the Team has encountered various challenges to which it has developed innovative solutions. These challenges and strategic interventions of the Team are explored in detail in **Chapter 10** of the book. Having travelled this uncharted and challenging, but fulfilling route, the DSVRT looks into the future with a projection of its expected achievements in the next two years as a way of institutionalising its reform effort in the fight against SGBV in the closing **Chapter, 11**.

The book ends with an appendix of Survivors Stories/Memoirs, graphic trends in domestic violence and worrisome current statistics on domestic and sexual violence in the various local governments and Local Council Development Areas (LCDAs) of Lagos State. Apposite recommendations are equally made, based on the overall analysis of the report findings.

Overcoming Sexual and Gender Based Violence: Lagos State’s Experience, with its attractive pictorial illustrations, contains a rich resource of information. It is a hands-on resource tool on sexual and gender-based violence. It is well structured, generally well written, factual, revealing, instructive, and challenging. The book could have been made more reader friendly, though, with a bolder font size; and the quality improved with a more rigorous editing, which could have cured some of the syntactical and punctuation errors in it. Also, some of the discussions in the first few chapters should have been more factually explored rather than being more focused on personal opinions, some of which are not quite balanced. Notwithstanding, the book fully fulfils its objective of providing ‘an invaluable resource tool that all stakeholders, responder agencies and other jurisdictions can learn from.’ It is highly beneficial and recommended for all such stakeholders and agencies, individuals in and outside of government circles, parents, guardians, educational institutions and everyone interested in gaining insight into the issues of SGBV.