Breaking the silence on gender-based violence in Nigeria

Despite enacting the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act in 2015, violence against women and girls continues to increase in Nigeria. In 2018, 9% of women between the ages of 15 and 49 had experienced sexual violence, 31% had experienced physical violence and 36% of married women had experienced physical, sexual or emotional abuse from their spouse.¹

The VAPP Act prohibits and criminalises all forms of gender-based violence and protects women’s rights. However, some states have failed to adopt the law altogether while others are not implementing it properly. Overall awareness among Nigerians about the provisions of the Act is disappointingly low.
Thanks to this intervention, Amina is now back to school, determined to pursue her education and attain her full potential.

The practices of child, early and forced marriage are common in Nasarawa State and are widely accepted. Since child marriage is strongly rooted in cultural and religious values, most cases are not reported. The radio programmes helped create awareness and encourage women and girls to speak out. And having the committees in place when women and girls reported their experiences ensured that their courage was met with a response. Addressing violence with the support of religious and traditional leaders is a huge achievement, enabling more adolescent girls and young women to speak out and be supported.

USING RADIO TO SPEAK OUT ON FORCED MARRIAGE

In 2020, EVA hosted 12 radio programmes in Nasarawa State to increase awareness on gender-based violence and the VAPP law. In one of the programmes EVA staff and the chairperson of the Child Protection Network discussed how keeping silent on gender-based violence has helped to perpetuate violence, and the importance of breaking this cycle. Listeners were encouraged to call in to share their stories.

A 17-year-old student, Amina (not her real name) called in after the show to talk about her experience. She described how her parents had arranged for her to marry a 51-year-old man she had never met before. In her community, girls are often forced to leave school and then married off to older men. They are also socialised to see marriage and motherhood as the highest attainment in life.

Amina’s case was reported to a committee established by EVA in various communities to respond to cases of gender-based violence. The committee brings together the local governments Social Welfare Department, Department of Health, religious leaders, traditional leaders and law enforcement agents. The committee summoned Amina’s parents and instructed them to return all the gifts and money they had received from the man and to ensure that Amina completes her education.
HARNESSING ART TO CHANGE HEARTS AND MINDS

EVA is tackling gender-based violence in innovative ways. In March 2020, EVA the organisation hosted an art display in Gombe State to highlight sexual violence. To illustrate the theme of blaming and shaming women for sexual violence, the exhibition was called “What Was She Wearing?” The eye-catching exhibits were collected by EVA to communicate the stories of survivors of sexual violence and pictures of what they wore when they were violated. The testimonies were mostly of children living in rural communities with the youngest abused at the age of four. This approach aimed to personalise the issue of sexual violence and break the culture of acceptance through anonymous storytelling. In particular, the exhibition was a creative way to challenge social norms that blame survivors and excuse perpetrators.

Politicians, religious leaders, community leaders and CSOs attended the exhibition. One important government stakeholder, who is critical to implementation of the VAPP legislation in the state, admitted that he had always blamed survivors of sexual violence as he believed the way they dressed had provoked what had happened to them. He explained that, he was leaving the exhibition with a new mindset on sexual violence and pledged to challenge gender-based violence in the state. He also committed to engaging with members of the Gombe State House of Assembly to speed up the process for adoption of the VAPP legislation which had not yet come into force.

Another government stakeholder commented:

“To address the issue of silence and covering up of cases of sexual violence by parents and guardians when their children are sexually violated, we would ensure that such parents and guardians are prosecuted for obstruction of justice”

These powerful stories catalysed more support and buy-in from key stakeholders whose belief systems needed to be addressed in creative ways. With further advocacy and follow up, it is hoped this shift will lead to the acceleration of legislative processes, the enactment of protective laws, and a more effective response from government in addressing violence against women and girls in Gombe State.
Zero Violence was a six-month project (October 2020 to March 2021) that built and strengthened sustainable legal capacity to address and reduce violence and discrimination against women and girls and LGBT people across the Commonwealth. It was a joint partnership between Frontline AIDS and ActionAid, and was funded by the UK Government Conflict, Security and Stability Fund (CSSF), under the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.