

A 360-DEGREE CONVERSATION ON MALE SEXUAL ABUSE



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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

from a TweetChat on
sexual abuse of boys and men

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@InvictusAfrica

Guest:

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1. LET'S TAKE IT FROM THE TOP: CAN YOU TELL US WHAT MALE SEXUAL ABUSE IS AND HOW IT IS PERPETRATED?

Yinka Ogunnubi: Thanks. You see, right there is the first problem. There is nothing like male sexual abuse. It is simply sexual abuse. But I understand why we have need to qualify it as male because sexual abuse has always been characterised and seen only through the female perspective. While that is explainable because the preponderance of data points to more females as victims of sexual violence, data actually shows that there is a material number of victims that are males as well. Sexual abuse is gender neutral and the way it is defined for females is the same way for males. Sexual abuse, simply defined, is the forceful and abusive sexual behaviour of one person on another. This covers all gender from all ages ranging from children to adults. It can be statutory i.e., sexual relations with a minor before the age of consent or a pattern of sexual contact without the consent of the other person. It can also be in the form of sexual harassment by using a position of influence to force someone to commit to a sexual act in exchange for a benefit. When you look at this broad definition, you will realize that a lot of males have indeed been victims of sexual abuse but did not necessarily know they are being abused sexually. Hopefully, we will be educated, and that perception will change.

2. CAN YOU SHARE SOME EXAMPLES OF CONDUCT WITH MEN THAT ARE OFTEN OVERLOOKED, BUT MAY CONSTITUTE SEXUAL HARASSMENT?

Yinka Ogunnubi: Studies have shown that sexual abuse of males starts at an early age. A study by *Dube SR, Anda RF, Whitfield CL, et al* on the long-term consequences of childhood sexual abuse by gender of victim (2005) found that at least 1 in 6 boys is sexually abused before their 18th birthday. This number rises to 1 in 4 men who experience unwanted sexual events across their lifetime. Pause and think about that for a minute. It means that 16% of men have experienced sexual abuse before they are 18 and 25% of them will experience it at some form in their lifetime.

Examples of sexual abuse of males are:

- Inappropriate touches. For instance, being smacked in the bum. It is funny that we frown at a female being smacked in the bum and somehow think it is ok for males. If it is inappropriate for females, it is also inappropriate for males.
- Touching of genitals. Many pre-teen and teenage boys have experienced this from seniors with authority over them. I am talking about aunties, nannies, and even male teachers and uncles. Unfortunately, sexual contact with older females is made to look like the boy has conquered.
- Unwanted and unwarranted touching (such as a hand on chest or back).
- Making sexually explicit comments and jokes.
- Sexually suggestive gestures.
- Circulating photos of a man shirtless in the workplace.
- Sexting.
- Spreading sexual rumours about a male colleague.

I know these examples look like what we will naturally describe as sexual abuse to a woman, but it goes back to my first point; within the context of a gender-neutral definition of sexual abuse, it is also applicable to males as well.

3. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE MOST POPULAR MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS AROUND MALE SEXUAL ABUSE, SPECIFICALLY IN THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT?

Yinka Ogunnubi: There are many of them:

- *Men cannot be raped.* Most of the times this is spoken in the context of ego and not reality. Men can be raped, and men are being raped.
- *Men are always the aggressor and predator.* While it is statistically correct that a larger percentage of men are the abuser in sexual violence, it does not mean they are ALWAYS the aggressor and predator. Many studies have indeed shown that women have been known to use violent and non-violent means of being abusive.
- *Men cannot be physically abused by their wives.* There are many men who are suffering in silence and who because of stigma cannot talk about the physical abuse they are getting from their partners. To know how pervasive this is, you need to google “wife beat up husband” to see stories and videos of wives physically assaulting their men. These are the few out of the many that make it to the news and a very small fraction make it to court. When you read the comments, mostly from other men underneath the stories that make it online, you will understand why other men facing this kind of abuse would rather prefer to just suffer in silence. There have been instances where the abused men who take the courage to report their abusive female partners to the Police have been mocked and stigmatized by Police Officers themselves. Those stories abound and it is the reason why sexual abuse of men will largely go reported and continue. I can boldly say that the data out there depicting sexual abuse of males is under-reporting the reality.

4. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF MALE SEXUAL ABUSE WHEN SURVIVORS DO NOT GET THE HELP THEY NEED?

Yinka Ogunnubi: This affects males differently as per their age. Younger boys do not feel the effects of abuse until much later - probably when they are married or in employment. Older men tend to feel the impact immediately. For example, males who have been sexually assaulted often have bouts of anger. They are usually short tempered, and they tend to react aggressively when they feel threatened or betrayed. Another effect is difficulties with sexual capacity such as low sex drive or erectile problems, which not only goes to affect their self-esteem and sense of manhood but also interferes with intimate relationships. Some have also been known to feel unable to give or feel love or happiness, effects that reverberate into every aspect of their life. Men who have been abused tend to suffer bouts of shame which means they have the tendency to keep the abuse to themselves and never open up about it. This has the effect of making them question their sexual orientation or getting addicted to pornography because it is the one outlet they can be themselves without question.

5. WHAT ARE WE DOING WRONG IN THE WAYS THAT WE TEACH BOYS ABOUT SEXUAL ABUSE? HOW CAN WE DO BETTER?

Yinka Ogunnubi: It is less about what we are doing wrong in how/what we teach boys about sexual abuse, it has more to do with how we raise boys generally. There are stereotypes that we apply to boys that prevent them from speaking up when abused. Boys and men are socialized to see themselves as strong, tough, and self-sufficient. Acknowledging feelings and disclosing vulnerabilities are in some ways antithetical to traditional masculine roles. A boy from a very young age is told, "Boys do not cry," "Boys do not talk." He is always challenged to "Be a Man;" so, he grows up attaching very wrong stereotypes to being a man. We need to change these things. It is okay for boys to cry, it is okay for a boy to be expressive because in doing so, he learns not to internalize things but rather speak up about what is eating him up inside. It is important to stress that what makes a man relevant today is not the size of his biceps but the quality of his thoughts and the solutions he can bring to problems facing society. The playing field had change and shifted.

6. WHY DO YOU THINK EMOTIONS ARE OFTEN ASSOCIATED WITH WEAKNESS BY A LOT OF MEN?

Yinka Ogunnubi: It is an identity issue. One that is linked to our evolution as men. In the olden times, when the main economy was agrarian, men were required to be physically strong. Strength guaranteed income, it guaranteed safety. A strong man would marry many wives because they will bear him many children who will work in the farm to guarantee the family wealth. The bigger you are, the larger your "herd" and the more likely you are to protect your family. Those traditional concepts of marriage did not allow for the expression of emotions by males. A man given to emotions was considered weak. A man who talked a lot would be accused of "talking like a woman." As we evolved into a more inclusive and egalitarian society where work was not dependent on physical strength or the ability to provide income solely dependent on the male, these masculine norms stayed with us. It did not just disappear. The truth is this: men and women are the same. The only difference between them is their physical and physiological make up. We are all emotional beings. We all have hormones that trigger emotional reactions. We all have aspirations in life. While the degree of our physiological make up differs, it is not a sign of weakness in any form. It is only a sign of our humanity. I said earlier that it is an identity issue, and this is what I mean. The real man, the one that is created in God's image, is a body and a soul, a physical and an emotional being. He is strong but vulnerable. He is determined but not afraid to express his fears. He laughs but is not ashamed to cry. If the real man were to live his true identity, there would have been no need for the feminist movement today. In other words, feminists are merely just fighting the fake man and not the real one.

7. IN WHAT WAYS CAN WE PREVENT MALE SEXUAL ABUSE FROM HAPPENING?

Yinka Ogunnubi: We can do it through a couple of ways:

- *By educating boys.* I tell young men, the girls you will marry in the future would not look like or behave like your mother. They are alpha women who know their rights not as women but as human beings.
- *By helping men build capacity.* By the time, a girl is 18, she has learnt how to cook, how to do domestic work, how to take care of her younger ones all while masking pain because she also had to deal with her monthly menstrual flow and hormonal changes. She has learnt from an early age how to multi-task. When she is overwhelmed, she knows how to offload by talking about it or crying to relieve stress. All these have built her capacity to handle crisis. The boy on the other hand has been shielded from all these. He has been told, boys do not cry, they do not talk, they do not belong in the kitchen, they must be strong and never show weakness. These boys with low capacity will later marry girls with higher capacity and you wonder why marriages are failing? The solution is to help the boy build capacity from a very young age.
- *By fighting stigma.* We do this by encouraging men to speak, and once they do, we rally round them and call them survivors. Because, indeed, they are survivors too. An equitable society is one that recognizes the rights of all and not just the right of one. While men do not need another #MeToo movement to focus on male concerns, we can rally round each other to provide support. There are a lot of groups and networks in Nigeria focused on boys and men as well as male mentors like Deji Irawo (@DejiIrawo on Twitter). Look for them.

8. WHAT ARE YOUR FINAL WORDS FOR THE MEN HERE AS INDIVIDUALS, BROTHERS, FRIENDS, AND FATHERS?

Yinka Ogunnubi: I will admonish men not to feel defensive about the subject of sexual abuse but to confront the facts. As it is, overwhelming data shows that men are mostly the abusers and the predators in terms of sexual violence. It is not to deny that fact, but rather to interrogate the reasons why men feel entitled to sexual favours. When we do, we will find out that many of it is linked to the way boys are brought up and the examples of masculinity they saw from home. We must start from home by teaching our young boys the values of basic human decency. We must teach them what consent means and disabuse some of the notions of masculinity that they see and hear. Every man has a mother or sister. We all think our mothers and sisters are the best women on earth and not deserving of being maltreated or sexually assaulted. So, start seeing every woman out there as your mother or your sister because they are definitely somebody's mother or sister who thinks they are the best just as you think yours are the best.

That said, if you are a man out there and you have been the victim of sexual abuse, SPEAK UP! I will tell you why it is important to speak up. When you speak up, you do not just help yourself, you are potentially helping other men. Speaking up helps us to capture relevant data. These data help us to attract the right kind of funding to provide help for men who are abused. To other men who are not survivors, STOP THE STIGMA! Do not mock men who speak out about their abuse or trauma. You are the reason why many men die in silence and why few with pent up anger explode into violence. In the same way we empathize with women who are abused, let us empathize with men as well.

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