

# Perception of Rape Amongst Secondary School Students In Port Harcourt

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Rape in children is a significant public health problem and represents the least reported but most devastating major form of child abuse all over the world. It occurs when one person does not fully and freely consent to sexual intercourse. This study seeks to evaluate the perception of rape among secondary school students in Port Harcourt.

**Methods:** This study was conducted among secondary school students during a series of debates organised by the Medical Women Association of Nigeria in Port Harcourt. Using a structured, anonymous and self-administered questionnaire, data collected included bio data, awareness information, response and practices.

**Results:** One thousand and fifty students, 486 (46.3 %) males and 564 (53.7 %) females participated in the study. Their ages varied between 10 and 20 years with a median age of 15. 872 (83%) knew the general definition of rape but only 4% knew that intercourse between an adult and a minor is also rape. 412 (39.3%) believed that only persons between 16 and 19 years could be raped. 442 (42.1%) believed that anyone, both relatives and strangers could be the perpetrator. Only 138 (13.2%) knew that rape should be reported to the police. 48(4.6%) of them had been raped, of which 62.5% were by close acquaintances.

**Conclusion:** The study shows that respondents had a fair general knowledge about rape but the perception of age at risk and actions to take in case of rape is poor. There is therefore need for awareness/enlightenment campaigns about rape targeted at secondary school students.

**Key words:** rape, secondary schools, students

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## INTRODUCTION

Rape, a form of sexual abuse, is generally defined as a forced or non-consensual sexual act, regardless of the offender or the victim's gender, gender identity or sexual orientation<sup>1</sup>. Like all other illicit sexual acts, it is usually done in secrecy so much so that in some places it is referred to as the most unreported of all crimes<sup>2,3</sup>.

Rape has a worldwide prevalence affecting mainly teenagers of all tribes and nations<sup>2,3</sup>. Research in several countries has shown that high percentage of young girls

were coerced or forced during their first sexual contact<sup>3,4,5</sup>.

Accurately estimating the prevalence of rape in sub-Saharan Africa is difficult due to the limited amount of research done on the subject.

In Nigeria, the few available reports call for serious concern<sup>4,6,7</sup>. Omorodion and Olusanya<sup>6</sup> found that 83% of 396 rape victims reporting at the police clinics in Benin City were girls between 13 and 19 years; while in his study on adolescents and young adults attending public schools in the Oworonshoki region of Lagos, Shittu<sup>4</sup> reported that 1 out of every 5 sexually active teenagers has experienced forced sex and majority of them were younger than 18 years of age. Also, the focus group discussions with young people in Nigeria, carried out by the Federal Ministry of Health and Social Services<sup>7</sup> have shown that high percentage of young people do not support premarital sex. However, 24 to 40% of them were found to be sexually active and 22% had their first sexual experience through rape or coerced sex. These reports are very disturbing, considering the health hazards adolescents are exposed to, especially sexually transmitted infections (STI), including AIDS and unwanted pregnancy with all its consequences

The present study was undertaken to assess the perception of rape among secondary school students.

## METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted amongst a convenient sample of secondary school students attending a series of School debates organized by the Medical Women's Association of Nigeria, in Port Harcourt. Four sessions were organized from 9<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> June 2009. A total of six secondary schools participated in the programme. Of these, three were missionary schools (one all boys and two all girls), two were government owned (both co-educational) and one private school also co-educational. One thousand and fifty students were in attendance and participated in the study. Consent was obtained from the Schools' authorities and the students. Data collected included biodata, awareness information and practice.

Data were collected using a structured, anonymous and self-administered questionnaire. Respondents were allowed to tick more than one option per question where appropriate. Data were entered into a Microsoft Excel Spread sheet and analysed using descriptive statistics. Results are presented in tabular forms.

## RESULTS

A total of 1050 students participated in the study, 486 (46.3%) males and 564 (53.7%) female with a M:F = 1:1.2

(Table I). Their ages varied from 10 to 20 years with a median age of 15 years. Sixty-six percent of them were senior secondary school students and majority of the respondents (66.1%) lived with both parents.

Table II summarizes the perception of the respondents about rape. Although the majority of them, 872 (83%), had a good general perception of what rape is, only 40 students (4%) knew that intercourse between a male or female adult and a male or female below 16 years of age, as well as intercourse under coercion (5.4%) are also considered rape. The age most frequently mentioned by respondents (39.3%) as being at risk of rape was 16-19 years bracket. Four hundred and forty-two (42.1%) students believed that any male can rape a child. However, 286 respondents (27.3%) believed that the offender is usually a stranger while the neighbour (16.8%) topped the list of close acquaintances who could rape a child. Majority of the students (58.9%) knew that rape can take place anywhere.

In case of rape, 512 students (48.9%) would report the crime to their parents, 466 (44.4%) would seek medical care while only 138 (13.2%) would report to the police.

Forty-eight respondents (4.6%), admitted to have been raped. Eighteen of them (37.5%) were raped by unknown persons while another 18 (37.5%) and 6 (12.5%) were abused by their

Table 1. Characteristics of respondents

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Age (years)</b>		
10	6	0.6
11	12	1.1
12	46	4.4
13	98	9.3
14	246	25.9
16	72	16.4
17	74	7.0
18	20	1.9
19	6	0.6
20	12	1.1
Noreponse	86	8.2
TOTAL	1050	100
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	486	46.3
Female	564	53.7
TOTAL	1050	100
<b>Class</b>		
JSS1*	46	4.4
JSS2	60	5.7
JSS3	206	19.6
SSS1**	338	32.2
SSS2	354	33.7
SSS3	4	0.4
No response	42	4.0
TOTAL	1050	100
<b>Live with</b>		
Both parents	694	66.1
Mother	120	11.4
Father	48	4.6
Relative	114	10.9
Others	34	3.2
No response	40	3.8
TOTAL	1050	100

\*JSS: Junior Secondary School

\*\*SSS: Senior Secondary School

Table 2: Perception of respondents about rape

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
<b>What is rape?</b>		
-Forceful intercourse without consent of one partner	872	83
-Intercourse between an adult male and a female < 16 years	28	2.7
-Intercourse between an adult female and a male < 16 years	14	1.3
-Intercourse under coercion	56	5.4
-All of the above	92	8.8
<b>At what age can a child be raped</b>		
0-5 years	170	16.2
6-10 years	270	25.7
11-15 years	226	21.5
16-19 years	412	39.3
Dont know	160	15.3
<b>Who can rape a child?</b>		
Father	38	3.6
Uncle	34	3.3
Neighbour	176	16.8
Teacher	32	3.1
House boy/girl	28	2.7
Brother	16	1.6
Stranger	286	27.3
All of the above	442	42.1
Dont know	110	10.5
<b>Where does rape take place?</b>		
Home	82	7.8
School	56	5.3
Neighbours house	116	11.1
Relatives house	14	1.4
Friend s house	122	11.6
Anywhere	618	58.9
Dont know	121	11.6
<b>What action should be taken in case of rape?</b>		
Hide it for fear or shame	26	2.5
Hide it because you will be blamed	4	0.4
Seek medical care	466	44.4
Report to the police	138	13.2
Report to the teacher	24	2.3
Report to your parents	512	48.9
Dont know	86	8.3

Table 3: Incidence of rape in study population

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Have you ever been raped?</b>		
Yes	48	4.8
No	930	88.6
No response	72	6.9
<b>If yes, who raped you?</b>		
Unknown person	18	37.5
Father	6	12.5
Friend	18	37.5
Uncle	4	8.3
Others (teacher, pastor)	2	4.1

friends and fathers respectively (Table III).

**DISCUSSION**

Rape amongst secondary school students is a worldwide issue with devastating consequences<sup>2,7</sup>. Therefore, children and adolescents who are particularly at risk must have adequate knowledge on the age and place where rape could occur, who a potential offender can be and what action to take if rape occurs. In this study, 872 students (83%) could broadly define rape. This is probably because it seems to be more common in our environment than actually reported<sup>1-6</sup>. However, their awareness of certain aspects of rape, such as intercourse between an adult and a male or female less than

16 years of age<sup>7</sup>, is very poor (4%).

Comparing their knowledge with that of mothers, as found in a previous study by the author and colleagues<sup>8</sup>, 4.4% of mothers believed that children 16-19 years of age can be sexually abused while 39.2% of adolescents believed this age group is most at risk of being raped. The difference is statistically significant ( $p=0.0000$ ). This is probably because adolescents are more aware of what is happening to them either from interactions with their peers or from their own experiences, while mothers perceived otherwise. This may also be a reflection of a communication gap between mothers and their adolescents.

Several reports<sup>2,9,10</sup> have documented that in 60 to 96% of cases the perpetrator of child sexual abuse was identified as someone the child knows and usually trusts. In this study, less than half of the respondents (42.1%) knew that anyone can be an offender. More worrisome is that up to 15% of respondents were unaware of the age at which a child could be raped and up to 10% of them are ignorant of the fact that they can be raped by anybody, including close acquaintances, and therefore, are unlikely to guard against it. This lack of knowledge among adolescents is of great concern, particularly with respect to the aspect of prevention. It is however encouraging to note that majority of respondents (58.9%) knew that rape can take place anywhere, especially in friends and neighbours' houses.

Rape is a criminal offence that should be reported to the police for prosecution of the offender<sup>11</sup>. In case it occurs, it is recommended that medical attention be sought urgently, without a bath or brushing teeth, even when there are no physical injuries<sup>1</sup>. This is necessary for forensic studies and determination of the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, HIV and pregnancy. In this study, about half (48.9%) of respondents would report the incident to their parents while 44% would seek medical attention. In their study on mother's perception of child sexual abuse, Eke *et al* found that 75% of mothers would seek medical care in case of rape<sup>8</sup>. This implies that the majority of respondents would have medical evaluation and care. However, only 13% of adolescents would report the crime to the police. This may be because of fear of stigmatisation and lack of confidentiality at the police station or just because these young ones are not aware that rape is a criminal offence.

In this study, 4.8% of respondents assented to have been raped. This figure is similar to 5.1% found among secondary school students in three states in North Eastern Nigeria,<sup>12</sup> 4% among female apprentice tailors<sup>13</sup> and 6% in young hawkers in three cities in South Western Nigeria<sup>14</sup>. However, the figure in this study is lower than that reported by Shittu *et al*<sup>4</sup> who found that 1 in every 5 sexually active teenagers had experience forced sex among secondary school students in Oworonshoki, Lagos. Although the incidence of rape is low in this study, the data must be interpreted with caution since the actual incidence of rape is assumed to be much higher than the reported figures as the crime most of the time go unreported<sup>2,4,15</sup>. It is also possible that some who have been raped may not divulge the information for fear of stigmatisation. Another possible reason for the low incidence of rape in this study is that since respondents did not know

that an adult having sexual intercourse with a male or female below 16 years of age is rape, some may have been victims without realizing they were raped. In this study, close acquaintances accounted for 62.5% of perpetrators while 37.5% of victims were raped by unknown persons. This finding is generally consistent with results of several other studies<sup>2,9,10</sup>. The details of their experiences were however not explored.

## CONCLUSION

This study shows that adolescents are aware that rape occurs in our environment and some have fallen victims. However, their knowledge of basic facts about the issue, such as who can be an offender, age at risk, what to do when rape occurs and action for redress, is very inadequate.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

There is need for awareness/enlightenment campaigns about rape with emphasis on prevention targeted at children, especially peer educators as they can reach their colleagues anywhere and whenever the topic arises; parents and teachers. The introduction of sexuality education in the school curriculum and establishment of school health programmes are also of paramount importance.

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