

# COVID-19 LOCKDOWN AND MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST MINORS IN NIGERIA

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## **Abstract**

Sexual violation of minors has become a global endemic problem. Whether in the families, social centres, schools, market places, churches or mosques, sexual violence against minors continues unabated. Covid-19 pandemic and its accompanying lockdown seemed to have escalated the problem. The manner in which Nigerian media (especially the newspapers) reported sexual violence against minors during Covid-19 lockdown necessitated public outcry among well-meaning Nigerians. Using Social Responsibility Theory (SRT), this paper argues that media reportage of such crime is poor and was done merely to increase tension and suspicion in the society; for beyond this cosmetic approach to the issue, nothing has been heard afterwards. The paper relies on review of relevant literature, some captions on sexual exploitation of minors in selected Nigerian newspapers and internet sources. Quantitative research methodology and content analysis of three newspapers; *Punch*, *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* was adopted in the study. It concludes that the press has abandoned its social responsibility to the public by its inability to pursue such cases to a logical conclusion; a disservice to the nation and humanity at large.

**Keywords:** Media, Covid-19, Lockdown, Sexual violence, Minors, SRT.

## **Introduction**

The year 2020 was remarkable in the world history for three obvious reasons. First, it was a year that recorded rapid spread of a pandemic. Second, it was a year that recorded the highest number of simultaneous deaths by a pandemic all over the globe and third, a year that witnessed the greatest fear, uncertainty and despair among the inhabitants of the earth. Beginning from December, 2019 when Covid-19 was first traced to Wuhan City, Hubei Province in China, both mass media and social media were awash with the news of the new pandemic. Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) as it was called (before the nomenclature, changed to Covid-19), spread like a wildfire all over the globe and killed millions of people regardless of race or creed within a few months (Omoera and Ogoke 149-150). In the absence of vaccine and any known medication, coupled with increasing death toll nations began to impose lockdowns as a primary measure to checkmate the spread. Consequently, fear of sudden death gripped humanity. Covid-19 spread rapidly within the first

two months of its discovery. With increasing number of infections, Nigeria also joined the rest of the world in lockdowns in March, 2020. This first phase of lockdown affected residents in Nigerian mega cities like Federal Capital territory, Lagos and Port Harcourt. This was between March and April. Other states in Nigeria later announced lockdowns that restricted movements all over the country. The restriction imposed by lockdown increased both domestic and gender-based violence. Some states like Edo, Benue, Ogun, Oyo, Kaduna, Taraba, Niger, were worse hit with gender based violence. Social media spread such news fast. There has never been a time in the world history that impact of social networks like face book, twitter, become more effective in dissemination of information like in 2020. As lockdowns became the norms all over the globe, so also did rise in crime; as well as insecurity of life and property.

The most worrisome form of insecurity during Covid-19 lockdowns in 2020 in Nigerian was the spike of violence against children. Though violence against minors in the contemporary period manifests itself in form of physical abuse such as pouring hot water or piercing a child with sharp objects, the most common features; sexual violation of minors, is on the on the increase. According to UNICEF report, “every year, millions of girls and boys around the world face sexual exploitation. Another report further states that “some 15 million girls aged 15-19 have experienced forced sex in their life time” (“Violence against Children” unicef.org). Covid-19 lockdowns increase the spike of sexual violation of minors because ‘the perpetrators’ live with ‘the victims.’ The United Nations’ report on gender-based violence (GBV) in Nigeria claims that in March 2020, a total of 346 GBV incidents were reported in 24 states while in the first part of April, the number increased to 796, showing an increase of 56 percent in just two weeks. Lagos recorded the highest number among the states reported during that period. UNICEF Global Annual Results Report 2020 also states that “around 17.8 million women, girls and boys were provided with GBV interventions across 84 countries. That is five times the number reached in 2019. Covid-19 has accelerated the scale-up of protection from sexual exploitation and abuse...” (10). Tade Oludayo’s article, “A Routine Activity: Analysis of Select Rape Cases during Covid-19 Lockdown in Nigeria”, also gives us an insight into cases of sexual violence in Nigeria at that period. He claims that “between January and May 2020, Nigeria’s Inspector-General of Police stated that the force arrested 77 suspects associated with 717 rape cases. Out of this figure, six hundred and thirty-one have been charged to court while 55 were still being investigated” (1).

Awosola and Omoera contend that child sexual abuse “is largely underreported and usually goes unpunished in our society (125). One of the reasons for this, according to Oseni, Lawani and Oyedeji is the fear of

stigmatisation (2). In fact, violation of minors seems to have become a norm in the contemporary period. It is worrisome to note that despite the existence of many laws meant to protect children such as “The Child Act 2003”, “The Violence against Persons Prohibition Act (VAPP)”, and “Criminal Code and the Penal Code”, more children are being defiled on daily basis in Nigeria. In 2018, there was a case of serial rape of a 13-year old girl, Elizabeth Ochanya, by two members of her extended family that eventually led to her death. Though this case was reported and one of the rapists apprehended, the second culprit is still at large. Recently, a 14-year-old Keren Happuch lost her life as a result of rape at Premiere Academy Lugbe, Abuja. Though the school authority is denying the fact, a medical examination report conducted by her family before her death, indicates that condom was found inside her vagina. This has led to a strident outcry for justice especially from non-governmental organisations (NGOs). One of such organisations is “Men against Rape Foundation, Abuja”. The Executive Director of the NGO, Lemmy Ughegbe, has called on the government and other stakeholders to do the needful in order to see that the pedophiles molesting children were brought to book. Regrettably, only mention of the case in the Federal House of the Assembly was achieved.

Though many reasons have been adduced for the increase in rape and sexual exploitation of minors, little is done to checkmate this ugly trend. More worrisome is the fact that such act constitutes a heavy burden on children in Nigeria and has many health implications. The reasons why some minors died after sexual abuse is because “the victims also do not present (sic) to the health facility for medical evaluation unless there is an obvious health challenge; they, therefore, do not get medical help to overcome the trauma associated with the crime” (Oseni, Lawani, and Oyediji 2). It is in this context that this article explores newspaper reportage of violation of minors during Covid-19 lockdown with a view to exposing the nonchalant attitude of the Nigerian press towards checkmating such social malaise. In doing this, we shall adopt the United Nations Convention definition of a minor/ a child as “every human being below the age of eighteen years” (2016 Report to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child). In this connection, some of the gender-based violence or sexual violence incidents reported during Covid-19 pandemic are closely looked out.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This discourse is anchored in the Social Responsibility Theory (SRT) of the media as propounded by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm in 1956. The theory was an outcome of Robert Hutchins Commission Report of 1947. SRT can be said to be an intellectual effort aimed at establishing press freedom that opened a window for one to express one’s opinion irrespective of one’s status

in the society. The theory was borne out of the necessity to correct the anomalies of the past when the press engaged “in sensationalism, invasion of privacy, defamation of character and other negative activities” (Baran, and Davis 114). Consequently, emphasis is laid on “the need for an independent press that scrutinises other social institutions and provides objective, accurate news reports. The theory calls on the media to be responsible for fostering productive, and creative “great communities”. Accordingly, “the social responsibility theory, rests on the notion of free press” (Asemah, Nwammuo, and Nwam-Uwaoma 49). Some of the basic principles of the theory as enumerated by McQuail include; the media should accept and fulfill certain obligation to the society; the obligations are mainly to be met by setting high professional standards of informativeness, truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance; and in accepting and applying these obligations, media should be self-regulating with the framework of law and established institutions (73).

### **Literature Review**

A rich body of literature exists on gender-based violence and sexual exploitation and its causes. This includes Tade and Udechukwu (5); Ekweonu, (10); Utoh- Ezeajugh and Anijah (2); Oseni, Lawani and Oyedeji (3); Adebayo and Kolawole (3); Mulroney and Chan (25); and Berns (2). Tade and Udechukwu’s shows that the age range of victims from 1-10 represent 33 percent, of the entire victims of sexual abuse under study (5). This simply means the case of pedophilia is high. Though both male and female are victims, female gender is more vulnerable. The common factor among the victims of such violence is either physical burden such as injury in the private part or other parts of the body or psychological burden, such as emotional trauma. In the opinion of Oseni, Lawani and Oyedeji, “victims of sexual abuse often sustain genital and bodily injuries and can suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. These health challenges often are not referred to health experts thereby causing death of the victims” (3). The sad story is that victims of sexual abuse are dependents who often are not even aware of the health implication of their condition. Adults, who often are the perpetrators of this act pay little or no attention to traumatic experiences of these minors. This why the press is very important and can act as a watchdog of the society. The press can achieve this by taken up its social responsibility.

Social Responsibility Theory of the press is a clamour for press freedom. This press freedom in Nigeria is lopsided in the sense that the freedom as it is practised, is a prerogative of certain categories of people such as the elite, political office holders and the media owners. Though the press ought to be the watchdog of the society, the capitalist nature of the media seems to have deprived the masses of this privilege. Ejiga and Omirigwe allude to this point

when they observe that the “media enterprise make huge profits by filling their time and space with commercial contents, while less attention is given to people-centred content including content of specialized audience” (137). Media commercialisation is tied to profitmaking. Till date, it remains the heart and soul of its operation. By generating huge revenues through this means, private owners of the media pay little attention to its social responsibility. To say the least, some media ethics have been thrown to the wind, and the public is worse off. With commercialization of the media, what is considered as ‘news’ represents the opinions of the ‘highest bidder’ who could be a politician, a captain of an industry, or government that paid for the news. Ironically, filling air time and space with commercials, implies that other news items have lost ‘news values.’ Ejiga and Omirigwe articulate this fear thus, “the emergence of commercialisation altered the effectiveness of the media to serve public interest” (140). Regrettably, what is circulated on the pages of Nigerian newspapers in some cases are ‘fabricated lies’ meant to serve as propaganda. “Rather than working for the interest of the public for the development of the masses, they represent the ruling class, thereby making the voices of the poor unheard” (Ekharefor and Akintaro 208). Here lies the problem this paper seeks to address. ‘Irresponsibility of the press’ has caused more harm to the society at large prompting concerned citizens to ask; ‘is Nigerian press really free? Is violence against minors under reported? And when reported, does the press follow up such report to logical conclusion? Sexual abuse is an offence under sections 216 and 218 of Chapter 21 of the Nigerian Criminal Law. The law stipulates that the age of sexual consent is 18 for both sexes and offender is sentenced to a minimum of 12 years. Meanwhile Section 358 of the Criminal Code Act applicable in Southern Nigeria states that the punishment for rape is imprisonment for life. Despite the penalties attached to rape, enforcement of this law receives little or no attention and the Nigerian press remain passive in most cases.

The masses are faced with dire consequences as a result of this failure of the press to fulfill its social obligations. A seemingly dysfunctional society such as Nigeria, no doubt, will experience high crime rate. The media, especially the press can help to reduce crime if the interest of the masses is made a priority. A state of anomie, can only guarantee total break-down of law and order. In the contemporary Nigerian reality, crime wave is alarming. Sola attributes this to government failure to provide good leadership to the people such as basic education, social security for the aged among others. For him, “Nigerian media’s romance with foreign films-laced with violence and sex” is to be blamed” (131). While apportioning blame to the media, (especially the digital media) lack of proper parental guidance still bears the greater blame. Parenting in Nigeria has suffered a terrible setback as a result of multiple

challenges. When a child is raised by irresponsible parents, nobody should expect miracle from such a child. The level of crime differs from one society to another and there is hardly a crime free society. However, it is the responsibility of the government and other state actors, such as the security operatives, to tame down the wave of crime. It has often been argued that “crime, violence, make news reports juicy---”because they “sell newspapers and programmes” (Soola 132). Economic condition is not static, as such, with changing economic and social conditions, newspaper editors are gradually dropping crime news in favour of more profitable political oriented news as such news do not adequately reward reporters, or media owners. Unfortunately, in the contemporary period, fewer people patronise the press and this affect the quality of the news.

### **Methodology**

The study adopted both qualitative and quantitative methods in collection of data. Direct observation and content analysis were used to examine newspapers’ portrayal of sexual violence and exploitation of minors in Nigeria. Most of the reports examined, covered early lockdown (from March to May 2020) and other months of the year. The study population was restricted to three dailies, *Punch*, *Vanguard* and *ThisDay*. The newspapers were selected through online sampling based on their wide readership and the fact that they usually publish news on gender-based violence. A total of 32 cases involving children were examined out of 85 cases reported.

### **Newspapers Reportage of Violence and Rape**

The year, 2020, will ever go down in history of mankind as a year of great misgiving, terror and shock, precipitated by Covid-19 pandemic that ravaged the world. The wave of devastation, orchestrated by the pandemic, had different implications for people of different races, gender, and professions. Restriction of movement opened a floodgate for crime, especially sexual abuse and exploitation. Nigerian newspapers such as *Punch*, *Vanguard* and *ThisDay*, were filled with such reports. A few examples will suffice. According to *Punch* report, the police was frustrating the case of an 18-year-old who was raped on April, 27, 2020, at Narayi Kaduna in Kaduna State by a gang of five friends. Report by Bala Yahaya in *Punch* of June 2, 2020, indicated that Justice Adedayo Akintoye of Lagos High Court sitting at Igbosere, sentenced an ex-Exxon Mobile engineer, James Onuoha to 15 years’ imprisonment on June 1. 2020, for raping his tenant’s 14-year-old niece. Still in Lagos, Tobi Ijalana, a reporter with *Punch* on June 6, 2020 captured the ordeal of one Blessing, a 12-year-old girl, who was defiled while playing alone in their compound. Four masked men gang jumped into the compound and raped her,

repeatedly, leaving her with multiple injuries. A story from the *Vanguard* of May 31 2020, also indicated that 11 men were arrested for raping a 12-year-old girl in Dutse Local Government Area of Jigawa State. On June 5 2020, Esther Onyegbula reported that Adeyeye Oluwatosi, a Botany student of Lagos State University, was arrested for molesting a minor, his 3-year-old step-sister.

A frightening report appeared on *ThisDay* June 30, 2020 entitled, "The Rape Scourge in Nigeria". According to the report, on 26 June, the Katsina Police Command reported the arrest of 40 suspected rapists between April and June, 2020. More frightening was a report from *ThisDay* of Thursday November 22, 2020 with the caption, "78 Arrested for Rape of Minors in Jigawa State". Another report on *ThisDay* had it that Ibrahim Haruna, 25-year-old shopkeeper was arrested for allegedly raping a 6-year old girl in Hadejia Local Government Area of Jigawa State. Despite the staggering number, the residents of the area in Jigawa State claimed that the incidents of sexual molestation of minors were under reported. On the other hand, Commissioner of Police, Imohimi Edgal at Police Headquarters Ikot-Akpan-Abia, Uyo Akwa-Ibom, in a press briefing, informed the public about the arrest of a pastor and eleven others for rape and defilement of minors, aged between 13 and 16. Report by Chioma Onuegbu of *Vanguard* of June 25, 2022 alleged that the pastor, Inimfon Inyang, who runs a 'Deliverance Ministry' has been having canal knowledge of the girls, aged 15 years. There were countless reports on gender-violence and sexual exploitation. What appeared to be a common factor in all the cases is that the victims of rape were often silent about their condition. Oludayo states that "rapists were mainly people that the victims knew, such as father, neighbours, clergymen and relatives, very few were strangers."

Official reports from Amnesty International, United Nations (UN), and American Department of State on Sexual and Gender Violence during Covid-19 lockdown were terrifying. According to Amnesty International, "over 3,600 cases of rapes were recorded during the lockdown. UN report also claimed that gender-based violence (GBV), have significantly increased since the lockdown. Three most affected areas were Lagos State, Federal Capital territory (FCT), and Ogun State. It further states that "preliminary information from 24 states shows that in March, alone, the total number of gender-based violence (GBV) incidents reported were 346. There is no gainsaying that violation of minors places psychological and physical burden on our children. Apart from premarital pregnancy and spread of venereal diseases, there are also chances of causing other damages to the child such as vesico vaginal fistula (VVF) and recto vaginal fistula (RVF).

Press freedom requires that the press should be the mouth-piece of the downtrodden. Until that is done, many of our children will continue to be

victims of this dastardly act. Sadly, despite the gravity of the crime, some newspaper organizations tried to cover up news on victims of sexual violence during the Covid-19 pandemic. Abandonment of such reports immediately after pandemic did not put Nigerian press in a good light. It is not only mockery of journalism and the nation, it is also a disservice to humanity.

**A Table 1. Illustrating Frequency of News Reports on Gender-Based Violence (GBV) during Covid-19 Lockdown from March - May 2020**

S/N	Newspaper	Frequency	Percentage
1	<i>Punch</i>	35	41.2
2	<i>Vanguard</i>	30	35.3
3	<i>ThisDay</i>	20	23.5
	Total	85	100

**Table 2. A Table Illustrating Frequency of News Reports on Violation of Minors during Covid-19 Lockdown from March - May 2020**

S/N	Newspaper	Frequency	Percentage
1	<i>Punch</i>	14	43.7
2	<i>Vanguard</i>	10	31.3
3	<i>ThisDay</i>	8	25
	Total	32	100

## Results

Table I shows that a total of 85 cases of GBV were reported. The *Punch* has the highest number of reports (35), representing 41.2 %; followed by *Vanguard* (30), representing 35.3 %; while the least was *ThisDay* (20), representing 23.5 % of the population. Table 2, which shows the frequency reports on the violation of minors, indicates that *Punch* has (14), representing 43.7%; *Vanguard* has (10), representing 31.3 %; while *ThisDay* has (8), representing 25% of the total victims. This result suggests that the frequency of reports on violation of children (minors) is low. The reasons for this maybe a lack of interest in the subject matter, owing largely because the victims



suffered psychological trauma and the perpetrators of the immoral acts are sometimes close relatives of the victims.

This major concern of this study is not only poor reportage of the issue but also absolute neglect of the cases of sexual violence against minors. Sexual violence of minor is a socio-cultural issue that can lead to traumatic stress disorder but can be reduced to a barest minimum if only the media can take up its social responsibility. During the lockdowns there were cases of defilement of children reported to the police and even the media that were ignored. There are Laws meant to protect children from violence/abuse such as Criminal Code, The Penal Code, The Violence against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act, and The Child Rights Act 2003. Nigeria is also a signatory to the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the child. What stops the press from at least sensitising the public on the legal implications? Who will enforce these laws without the press playing an important role? The position of this article is that if the Nigerian press continues to play to the gallery, the nation will be sorrier for it. Irresponsibility on the part of Nigerian media can only spell doom for the country. With this kind of attitude, the perpetrators of the noxious crimes may go scot-free. Though the law criminalizes incest and provides up 12 years for the culprit, enforcement has not been taken seriously, and so, the crime continues unabated.

### **Conclusion**

There is a gross negligence of this upsurge in the country, either because it affects mainly the girl-child or because the perpetrators are family members and friends. This researcher notes with utmost concern that, while the press looks the other way despite public outcry on the matter, some non-governmental organisations (NGOs), are pushing for justice for children who were sexually molested. It is concluded, therefore, that the print media (newspapers) live up to their social responsibility by framing the spike of sexual violation of minors in Nigerian society. Since framing draws the audience attention to a particular topic, the only way to get justice and curtail the spike in sexual abuse of minors, is for the press synergise with relevant NGOs to blow it up. There is no gainsaying that healthy children will make a healthy nation and a progressive one. Until there is prompt intervention, investigation and prosecution of rape, sexual violation cases, Nigerian children are not safe.

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