

Analysis of the Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Gender Based Violence: Case Study of Rape Victims in Nigeria

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Abstract

The first confirmed case of Covid-19 “Corona virus” in Nigeria was announced in February 2020, when an Italian citizen tested positive for the virus in Lagos State. In order to curtail further spread of the virus, a moment of total and partial lockdown in affected States, was declared, thus affecting the economic, religious and socio-cultural setup. A careful study of the unfolding lockdown has sparked a surge in human insecurity, crime-related offences of human against fellow beings. One of such crimes is rape, men having carnal knowledge of females without their consent. In some instances, the victims were either brutalised, tortured, defiled, murdered or commit suicide. A compiled report from National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NATIP) and the Nigerian Police had documented over 717 cases of rape and about 799 suspects arrested from March to July 2020 (Premium Times, July 14, 2020). This has been the highest reported incidences of rape within the shorter time frame. The worst fear of the reported incidence involved minors and underage age girls. This has created state of worries in the mind of many and could not be dismissed with just wave of hand. The study examines prevalence of rape and the victims in Nigeria and profound recommendations that seek to address the plaque. The study is a content review analysis of selected national dailies, thus qualitative method has been adopted in substantially rendering facts. As widely pronounced in the country, rape is a pandemic of monumental consequences and must be addressed the way Covid-19 is treated though the problem had been with us long before the global pandemic.

Introduction

The total and partial lockdown due to Covid-19 virus across Nigeria has been filled with sad reckon of minors and underage girls being molested inside their abode, worship centres or inconspicuous places. The situation in Nigeria reflects the global trend of increased Gender Based Violence (GBV) during the global pandemic. The link to Covid-19 is clearer than in others, which raises issues about what available data tell us about prevalence of rape during pandemics. An April 2020 report on pathways to violence during pandemics by the Centre for Global Development adduces several reasons that appear to resonate regardless of context. Such instances are more attributable to underlying lax legal system, cultural norms and social inequities that normalize rape violence in conservative society like Nigeria.

While at the launching Sex Offenders Register in December 2019, Mrs Pauline Tallen Nigeria Minister of Women Affairs and Social Development claimed that about 2 million Nigerians mainly women and girls are raped every year (ibid). Be that as it may, the increase in recent reportage of rape cases could be attributed to the minister's initiative and increased sensitization of the populace by state and non-state actors across the country of the rights for fair hearing of rape victims thereby succeeding in breaking the culture of silence or stereotype.

The word Rape is derives from the Latin word "rapere" which means to seize, snatch, grab, carry off or take by force. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines rape as a form of sexual assault. While Centre for Diseases Control and Prevention (CDC) explained rape as a form of sexual violence. Rape is defined as any form of sexual intercourse without free mutual consent between those involved (Marry O. Esero et.,al 2009). The act is motivated by desire for ken strength and control over the victim rather than by desire for sexual fruition. The penetration could be through the vagina, anus, and mouth or with any part of the body using object or any part of the body or sex organ of the predator without the consent of the prey or under duress.

In a conversation with a victim of rape whose identity is withheld, who faulted most of definitions of rape as "sexual intercourse". Intercourse referred to something of mutual ties of two or more people attracted to each other. Sexual intercourse requires intimacy and the vagina lubricated for light penetration and sensation. In case of rape, the muscles or tissues at the entrance of the vagina are not relaxed and lubricated. The rapists forced his penis into the victim vagina, causing bleeding and rend tissues.

According to the victim, rape is forceful penetration of the vagina by the rapist resulting to tear and rend of the vagina. She added, rape is the most traumatic, painful physical ordeal that victim undergo during the process. The act is carried out by coercion, abuse of rights against a person incapacitated to defend his or her self or of giving valid acquiesce such as one below the legal age of consent.

Over time, rape cases reported involved adults in whom the victims (females) most often dressed indecent hawking in unsafe zones perceived as prey and so seductive to the predator. But what happened during the lockdown is totally

uncalled for and tends not justifying the heinous act on indecent dressing anymore. The victims are mostly toddlers, minors and underage girl-child without any pubescent signs neither revealing curves nor cleavages for attractions. Some were raped inside their abode; some were dragged into uncompleted/dilapidated edifice or religious centres (Church or Mosque). During the lockdown, the country witnessed a moment of population boom and all relaxation centres, schools, markets, places of productions, offices, worship centres were shut down. This has been the first time the country witnessed shut down of such places where its citizenry derived income, worship, fun and pleasure. A single or married man with an excessive sexual desire or uncontrolled of himself remain confided to their homes with his female relatives or neighbours who now his prey.

The rape case involved Madam Ige Samuela 96 year old grandmother by Mr Lanre Aremu a 30 year old in Kogi State (Vanguard 5 November, 2011) is one of the many reported cases that has left many asking what could have informed the dimension of this heinous anomaly during the lockdown. Or what do we say of the reported rape case of Malam Haruna Lawal 60 year old, who lured 8 year old girl to an uncompleted building to rape her there? (Vanguard 14 July, 2020).

The study argues that rape is a phenomenon against the minor or underage girl-child and the consequences they go through after this devastated and heinous incident such as “lacerations” which put their lives at risk and other complicated psychological and health complications. The study found that, most of the victims of rape during the lockdown are from the lower social economic class of the society and committed by the child’s parent, close relation or people of non-patrimonial. Therefore, any form of sexual intercourse with toddler, minor or underage regardless of the girl-child consent is rape against her and is liable for conviction.

Causes of Rape in Nigeria

Sexual Starvation

Sexual starvation is one of the major reasons men patronize commercial sex workers, especially when they have been starved of sex for a long time. Unlike women, the average man cannot go without sex for a very long time and when such happens, the tendency is for them to go to these ‘Ashewos’ to quench their sexual thirsts. Social isolation owing to the absence of regular social outlets, and exposure to exploitative relationships during lockdown, the victims and perpetrators found themselves confined under one abode or residential area for longer periods idle. Some of these perpetrators are labourers used to work and spend on commercial sex workers. Since these are not functioning, and because resources have been diverted to resolving the covid-19 pandemic or because of restricted movement they descend on the minors for free. During a period like this, the lives of the most vulnerable should be safeguarded.

Alcohol and Illicit Drugs

Most cases of rape in Nigeria are possible due to influence of alcohol or intoxication of drugs. At the peak of the Covid-19 lockdown, there was a footage that surfaced on the social media of an adult man laid under a tree on a brood day massaging himself to masturbate. Under intoxication anyone could behave in such manner and could not resist descending on a female minor or adult to satisfy his sexual desire. In most of the reported cases of rape reviewed in this study involved unemployed youth trying to find succour in alcohol and drugs due to depression and loneliness. This situation leads to the increase of violence of any kind among youths.

Insatiable sex drive

Some men do have an excessive sex drive or urge and no matter how hard the wife or girlfriend tries to satisfy him, he still seeks that extra pleasure elsewhere. And where is he likely to have it? With a prostitute for gratification or minor whose consent is not required. The lockdown was in place to ensure social distance is observed in the country. A single or married man with an excessive sexual appetite during the lockdown is confided with his female relatives or neighbours who now his prey. For instance, there was a case of Mr Bassey Archibong 64 year old in Lagos who slept with his four daughters (Vanguard 10 October, 2019), likewise, Mr Onouah 42 year old, who raped a daughter of his tenants' 14 year old girl also in Lagos State (Vanguard 1 June, 2020). Therefore, instead of pestering the wife, only to be met with rejection or complaints, they prefer to go for a minor or girl-child who cannot defend herself.

Laxity of laws

The laxity of laws against rapist can be a real problem for the safety of girl-child. The laws or Acts are only available on the paper. At the same time, there is always a problem with social inequality within the country. On the paper, the citizens of Nigeria are equal with each other. Nevertheless, people may come from different social backgrounds and if a rapist has money and influence, justice will not be served. An incidence of rape case involved a 13 year old who was sexually assaulted by Malam Babayo a tailor in Misua LGA of Bauchi state. Babayo was quoted to have said "you're too poor and couldn't do anything" (Vanguard 26 July, 2020). Babayo said this when he was confronted with the allegation levelled against him. The case of the victim was reported in 2020 when the girl had delivered. Rapists are confident that rape victims would not report the case because of the stigma or delays in the justice system. Therefore, as long as justice will not be provided for everyone, there is no stop factor for rapists. It's necessary to resolve the problem with law implementation in Nigeria because a rapist can easily escape as the Laws are porous. When people know that there will be justice for their actions, the level of crimes will decline drastically.

Culture of silence and stereotype

Silence is one of the worst causes of rape in Nigeria. Some of the victims of rape remain silent and decline to file a police report to avoid being named and shamed in the conservative society. A conversation with an NGO staff of Rahama Women Development Center, Bauchi said, it's true that a lot of families in Nigeria would prefer to cover the crime, even against the will of the victim as they are afraid that the victim will not get married because of that. Any rape can be considered as bringing dishonour to the woman in Nigeria. Moreover, it might be considered that this dishonour was brought on by themselves. Taking advantage of the stereotyping, the perpetrators descend on the victims and go unpunished or noticed. Therefore, victims of rape in Nigeria prefer to hide, rather than get justice. More so, some parents of the victims ended up in withdrawing cases or getting paid by perpetrators to keep mute. Mrs Ifeyinwa Ezukamma was chased out of her matrimonial home by her husband for insisting on justice for her eight year old daughter who was raped by a 57 year old man in March 2020. (Guardian 8 September 2020). The father of the victim was said to have collected huge sum of money from the rapist to keep mute over the case.

Virgin cleansing myth

According to some shocking myths, HIV infected men may believe that intimate intercourse with a virgin minor or underage girl may lead to the cure from HIV. The organism is considered to be the ultimate curing force and vital tool in manifesting desires. This myth has been for centuries but gained prominence in recent times and been identified as a motivational role in sexual violence.

Reported Rape Cases in Nigeria During The Lockdown

Since March to September 2020, there is hardly any day, week or month lately without reported rape cases of minors and underage girls on a keen keel making the headlines in Nigeria. If nobody is alarmed at the frequency of these occurrences, we are. They seem to have grown in frequency as a result of idleness due to the initial lockdown and the legal system not doing well in addressing these crimes.

Figure: 1 Compiled selected reported cases of rape from March to September 2020 in Nigeria

S/n	Victims	Ages	States	Dates	Culprits and Nature of Cases	Sources	Remark
1	Name withheld	2	Ogun	22-Mar	Mr Adekunle Olalere (35 year old) neighbour of the victim	Vanguard 22 July	Sentences to life imprisonment
2	Name withheld	Underage	Lagos	31-Mar	Mr Adetayo Razag (28yeal old) father of two raped minor in March but arrested on 9 th April. lure her with biscuits and took her into his room where he rape her	Vanguard 12 April	Remanded in Correctional Center
3	Name withheld	16	Ondo	15-Apr	Pastor Peter Alatake of Holy Ghost Mission Chruch Ehinogbe Owo raped the victim suffering from epilepsy during a deliverance session in his church	Vanguard 23 April	Granted bill in the sum of 500,000 and sureties in like sum
4	Name withheld	13	Oyo	16-Apr	Mr Timothy Abijo (29 year old) lured the victim with 500 into his host room of thesame compound with the victim and raped her	Vanguard 17 April	Under investigation
5	Name withheld (known as the Agodi girl)	3 months old	Nasara wa	27 th May	Unknown. The victim was stolen from her mother at night while asleep. The culprit took the minor to a nearby building, defiled her in a cold blood.	Daily Trust 15 June	The rapist was arrested in August 2020
6	Name withheld	12	Jigawa	30-May	Gang-raped by 11 men including (57 year old)	Vanguard 31 May	Under investigation

14	Name withheld	11	Delta	20-Aug	Mr Jomaph (30 year old) caught in a CCTV camera footage when sneaked into the toilet where the victim was using	Vanguard August	Charged to court
15	Name withheld	12	Lagos	August	Mr James Olajoyetan (67 year old) rape her several times in her grandfather house	Vanguard 7 September	Remanded in Correctional Center
16	Name withheld	8	Delta	24-Aug	(46 year old) man tickle the hands of the victim in an uncompleted building and raped her	Vanguard 25 August	
17	Etim Effiong	15	Akwa Ibom	Mar-20	Mr Udo Ekong Ezau (55 year old) raped the victim and got pregnant	Vanguard 10 June	Arrested
18	Barakat Bello	18	Oyo	1-Jun	Gang-raped to death by unknown assailants in her residence	Vanguard 3 June	No arrest was made
19	Name withheld	10	Kaduna	July 20 th	Gang-raped by five men including the victim's aunt's husband	Daily Trust 21 July	Under police investigation
20	Name withheld	7	Ogun	22 Sept.	Mr Ishola Claturji (72 year old)	Daily Trust 26 September	Arrested and under investigation

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The reports analysed shows that, the victims were particularly minors, teens and young adults aged between 3 months to 19 years old. This report implies that one in every ten girls would have experienced at least one form of sexual abuse by the time they reach 20 years. With current prevalence of underage girl-child molestation in the country, the state needs to rise to the occasion and deal with it like done to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The introduction of Sex Offenders Registers in 2019 by the Minister of Women Affairs and Social Development Mrs Tallen Paul is relatively commendable fighting the menace in the country. However, the register would have been an excellent campaign if the national database containing information of every citizen and a national criminal record system is available.

Implication of Rape on the Victims and the Society

Amidst Covid-19 lockdown, Nigeria sees increased of rape, sexual and gender base violence cases which increased severe implications on the victims and the society at large. According to Dr Abiola Akiode-Afolabi, founding Director of Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre (WARDC), “The Covid-19 lockdown itself has become the trigger” for gender base violence. She further lamented that, from what we have been seeing in terms of statistics of the Covid-19 spread across the world, the lockdown has become a major challenge in the sense that underage and women are now being locked down with an abuser they’ve been living with (wardcnigeria.org, July, 2020).

Analysing the impact of covid-19 pandemic on rape and gender based violence, multiple implications has been examined such as: Pregnancy, Sexual Transmitted Diseases STD, Psychological disorder; Traumatic and Physical injuries from beating, swelling and bruising around the vagina are painful ordeal.

Well before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, already in 2017, according to a study jointly commissioned by the Women’s Affairs Ministry and the United Nations Population Fund (UNPFA), 28% of all the women between the ages of 25 and 29 in Nigeria had faced some form of physical abuse since they had turned 15. The study also found that “44% of divorced, separated or widowed women reported experiencing violence since age 15, while 25% of married women or those living with their spouses have experienced violence.” The imposition of the lockdown has only worsened this already existing crisis.

Role of State and non-state Actors on Combating Rape in the Society

Several groups and organizations have carried out significant roles to contend rape and gender base violence in the society. Hence, two actors include the state and non-state actors.

State Actors

President Muhammadu Buhari reiterated his government’s commitment to fighting gender-based violence and assured citizens that the police were working to ensure justice in recent cases. Amnesty’s Osai Ojigho told CNN that authorities need a zero-tolerance approach to end the violence targeted at women, “Violence against women is a national crisis in Nigeria. There are cases from homes, schools, places of worship, police cells, and displacement camps. Nowhere is safe or immune to this violent crime against women,” Ojigho added that authorities need to strengthen law enforcement agencies to investigate and prosecute cases. Nigeria’s Inspector General of Police Mohammadu Adamu held meetings with heads of the country’s Human Rights Commission and anti-trafficking agency to map out a

“common front” against rape, human trafficking, and sexual violence, he said. According to him, rape as a menace and the force was examining its gender response unit to speed up investigations into those cases, including deploying more detectives to its gender desk.

Nigerian Governors Forum (NGF) declared state of emergency on gender based and sexual form of violence. For instance; Kaduna and Kano state Houses of Assembly unanimously adopted surgical castration as punishment for raping children under the age of 14. This is a welcome development for all and will serve a deterrent. Surgical castration is rarely practiced in the world but has been proven to reduce the sex drives of many, such as paedophiles. This can help keep some sex offenders from reoffending.

Non State Actors

The Vice President of Nigeria Professor Yemi Osinbanjo and National President of the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) in Nigeria Mrs Inime Aguma lamented different laws for sexual assault offenders. The Kaduna State Christian and Muslim religious leaders have united against rape. They both made the call for stiffer actions and punishment against rapists. Rapists are terrorists and should be given the most stringent of punishment. They are strategising structures at the grassroots and communities which will help to tackle the upsurge of rape and other gender based violence.

Mrs Oluwaseun Adodeji CEO of Stand to End Rape (STER) highlighted that, religious undertones as well as the blame-shift attitudes marginalise the victim and make it harder to come forward and report the abuse. Adodeji advocates government and society to approach rape cases as murder case with zero tolerance for perpetrators. Domestic Sexual and Violence Response Team DSVRT also advocated for forensic evidence in rape crime investigation. Mrs Titilayo Vivour Adeniyi the CEO maintained that, whenever rape is committed, the victim should avoid taking a bath before approaching hospital or forensic laboratory. This will guarantee accurate result.

Another group known as Women’s Rights Activists Organizations demonstrated against gender violence in Lagos Police headquarters. The protest led to the Nigeria’s 36 states resolving at the Nigerian Governor’s Forum (NGF) to declare a state of emergency on rape following a spate of sexual violence against women. The Forum is called on all states to set up a sex offender’s register and to sign on to two federal laws which punish rape and violence against women and children. The Forum has also invited the country’s police heads to brief the governors on efforts they were making to tackle sexual and gender-based violence in Nigeria, issued in a statement by the forum’s chair Kayode Fayemi- the Ekiti State governor.

The announcement came amid outrage from women groups calling for justice, following the brutal rape of two female students amid a string of violent incidents against several women in the country in recent weeks. University student Miss Uwaila Vera Omozuwa died a few days after she was attacked in a Church in Benin City on May 27.

The United Nations Human Right President, Mrs Elisabeth Tichy-Fisslberger stated that, for her next and final report to the Human Rights Council, in 2021, “I will address States’ responsibility to criminalize and prosecute rape as a grave and systematic human rights violation, crime and a manifestation of gender-based violence against women, in line with international human rights standards. I also intend to elaborate a Model law on rape to guide the harmonization of national criminal and other laws with international standards. She further invited all Member States and relevant stakeholders to submit their contributions to this report in line with the questionnaire issued. Elisabeth also encouraged States and other stakeholders to support the initiative financially in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

Our findings indicated most of the causes of rape as recorded occurred owing to the devastating consequences of Covid-19 lockdown. The country witnessed a moment of population boom and all relaxation centres, schools, markets, places of productions, offices, worship centres were shut down. This has been the first time the country witnessed shut down of such places where its citizenry derived income, worship, fun and pleasure.

A compiled review of Daily Trust and Vanguard newspapers revealed that, 20 reported cases of rape between March and September 2020 were analysed. 9 of the cases involved minors between 3 months and 10 years, 13 are between 11 and 19 years. About 99% of the cases are still on trial or investigation. Concerning the class of the victims, the study found that the victims are mostly from the lower social economic class of the society. The victims were left at home alone while the parents tidily seeking for daily up keep of the family when most of the incidences occurred.

Recommendations

Unification of the flexible legal codes operating in the regional divisions: The legal interpretation of the separate legal codes against rape and other inhuman assaults is a gross deficiency to our legal system for the prosecution of rape perpetrators. The perpetrators of the crimes are rarely punished due to weak laws and complicated procedures for prosecution. There are at least five different forms of legal provisions which provide access to justice for rape victims across the states in Nigeria. More specifically, the Panel Code domesticated in the north doesn’t recognise men or boys as victims of rape. Section 282 (2) of the said act explicitly recognised rape can only be committed by person of the male gender. This code counters the Child Rights Act 2003, a Federal Law which was enacted to protect the rights of children and has been domesticated in most of the Southern States in Nigeria with exception of Northern states. Failure to domesticate the Child Rights Act among others may be the reasons for high prevalence of child-rape or homosexual/bisexual cases in the north. Therefore, the legal codes must prescribe the same befitting punishment for rapist and explain when rape is said to occur across the country, irrespective of divisions.

Stiffer penalty: Cross sections of Nigerians proffer their support for public execution as the right punishment for rape. Some suggested 20 to 30 years imprisonment for rapist. The Minister of State in the Federal Capital Territory Dr Ramatu Tijjani Aliyu has also opposed the option of a death penalty, but advocate for castration as punishment for rapist (Vanguard June 7, 2020). World Population Review Statistics by country 2020 indicated South Africa, Botswana, etc in top ten countries with highest prevalence of rape cases (documentarytube.com/articles/top7cruellestrapepunishment, 2020). These countries have high prevalence of rape in the world as a result of soft and truncated legal actions against rape, just like Nigeria. A stiffer penalty is required for perpetrators of rape and as deterrents. China topping the list of countries with cruellest rape punishment of death sentence enjoyed relative minimal reported cases of rape in recent times. Saudi Arabian Islamic country acts accordingly to the Islamic jurisprudence also enjoyed relatively mild reported cases of rape. Punishment by death is cruel any way, but castration is highly recommendable in this study.

Subjecting rapist to a time frame in the Correctional Centres has not been yielding positive results. From a reliable source, inmates rape their colleagues and assault female officers. In September 2020, a serial rapist Mallam Yusuf Bako (50 year old) was arrested for defiling a girl of 4 years inside a mosque in Bauchi State. The rapist was in 2001 and 2015 respectively imprisoned for the same separate cases of rape. Yusuf was among the fortunate inmates pardoned by the State at the eve of Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020. Within a shorter time frame of his release from prison, he passionately committed the same crime. Be that at it may, the State governor Senator Bala Muahammed was reported to have regretted granting pardon to the serial rapist (Punch 10 September, 2020) Therefore, sentencing him to the prison for another shorter time frame is not the best solution stopping him from committing such a crime when he is released again but castration (removal of testicles). Castration as punishment for rape has been practiced in other parts of the world, such as Alabama, Texas in the United States.

The Kaduna and Kano State Houses of Assembly unanimously adopted surgical castration as punishment for raping children under the age of 14 (Premium Times July 15, 2020, Vanguard September, 11, 2020). This is a welcome development for all and will serve a deterrent to others. Surgical castration has been proven to reduce the sex drives of man or animals with sexual organs. This can help keep rapists from reoffending. Passage of bills or law is not enough, however, implementation and uphold of constitutional responsibilities is eminent.

Some activists, Federal and States Legislators have rejected an amendment seeking for castration of rapists in Nigeria. A prayer sponsored by Rep. James Faleke during a plenary noted that castration was not an ideal penalty for rape (Vanguard June 4, 2020). One of the reasons cited for their position is that, perpetrators could be left with no option but to kill their victims after the act to avoid revealing the culprits. It should be noted homicide has been the rapists' modus operandi during the lockdown. So, even at such without the castration bill, victims were killed in cold blood. Women and other Human Right activists used different means to communicate their support for stiffer punishment for rapist. One

of the protesters that got our attention displayed a placard conveying a message “control that erectile or get castrated and jailed”. Therefore, castration will serve a better punishment for rapists.

Adequate policing: There is absolute lack of specialised and well-trained personnel in handling rape cases or providing psychological and security support for the victims. The paucity of well-equipped forensic laboratory to effectively carrying out biological evidence, such as blood samples, semen, vagina epithelial cells render most of the investigations unfruitful. Only when security institutions are adequately trained and well-equipped with machinery for carrying out investigations of cases of rape most of the reported cases of rape will be elongated and fade away without probing or having justice for the victim. One of such instances was a case charged against three rapists, Hussan Suleman, Ibrahim Usman and Adamu Audu at a Sharia Court sitting at Tudun Wada Zaria Kaduna State for raping two girls aged 9 and 10 while on their way to school on March 23, 2015 (Daily Trust April, 27, 2019). It took five years for investigation before the accused are charged to court, sentenced to one year imprisonment with an option of 7000 fine with 20 strokes of the cane. The judgement however generated controversy within Zaria and other Human Rights activist. This demonstrated how weak and flexible the country’s legal sanctions and enforcement operate. The length of trial of rape cases should be abridged so that victims will still be able to recount the heinous experience within shorter time frame. This and other cases will have been probed within shorter time, if the personnel are well-equipped for adequate policing. If rapists are caught, tried and jailed in time, it can serve as a form of deterrence to future offenders.

Community sensitisation on preventing gender based violence and sexual exploitation: While the lockdown measure put in place to contain the spread of the virus the community should also be educated how to caution the effects of the lockdown. Since the risk of gender based violence can be attributed to the social and economic hardship exacerbated by the lockdown, the government should initiate programmes targeting both the most vulnerable and perpetrators on gender based violence response mechanism.

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