

We Demand Public Apology From Navy

— Effah-Chukwuma

Mrs. Josephine Effah-Chukwuma is the executive director of Project Alert, a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), reputed for championing violence against women campaign. She told Emeka Umejei, in this interview that the recent brutalisation of Uzoma Okere has exposed the daily harassments road users are subjected to by certain categories of people in Nigeria. Excerpts:



• Effah-Chukwuma

What really constitutes violence against women?

The name speaks for itself. Violence against women is violence women experience by the very fact that we are women. In fact, simply put, they constitute physical, psychological and sexual abuse of women, more so because of our sex.

How often do you get to handle cases of violence against women?

It is every day. Our vision is a society whereby there is zero tolerance to all forms of violence against women and young girls. Zero tolerance means for no reason; be it cultural, tradition or whatever should there be violence against

women. Our mission is to provide information on various forms of violence against women and render support services to women and young girls who have been violated. What do I mean by support services? Counseling, legal aid and the shelter we run. So, in answering your question, everyday since we opened the office in January 1999, we get cases of women being abused, be it at home, public, schools or workplaces.

Let me take you to a more recent issue. On November 3, Uzoma Okere became the latest victim of violence against women. What is your opinion on this?

I would like to start by saying that the case of Uzoma Okere is a specific form of violence against women but

I would like to say that in the context of that form of abuse, which is as a result of abuse of power, position and ranking, specifically on the issue of abusive use of siren on the road affects Nigerians generally. In the sense that the average Nigerian on the street of Lagos is on a daily basis hounded, harassed by siren-blasting government officials; be them police officials, political officials, army or naval officials. So, it's a problem faced by everyone. This is not the first time that it's happening to a woman. Early this year it happened to yet another woman. Then it was the convoy of the Imo State Governor, Ikedi Ohakim, somewhere in Ikoyi. She was slapped in front of her two little kids, beaten and her car was

damaged before they drove off. We completely condemn such action by people who actually swore to serve Nigerians. People who are supposed to protect lives and property in Nigeria; they are the ones turning around to abuse Nigerians. They actually swore to protect lives and property. And what further makes it the gender offensive was the way Uzoma was stripped naked in public. It is a show of shame in a country where we are talking democracy. Project Alert with other women rights organisation demand a public apology from the Rear Admiral, particularly to Uzoma and her family and also to Nigerian women for such public disgrace.

Uzoma has gone to court to seek redress. Do you support that line of action?

I do. I think it is high time Nigerians stand up for their right. It is all these lack of patience. If you go to court you are going to spend more years. And the people would be saying they don't want any problem with the military, which is what allows the monster to keep growing, until it assumes a life of its own. So, if all Nigerians could fight for their right the way Uzoma is trying to fight for her right by going to court, filing a case against them, I think is a right thing. I support her in that regard.

Does the military brutality portend any dangers for our democracy?

Huge dangers if you ask me, in the sense that it is projecting a bad image of the country in the eyes of the international community. This particular case of Uzoma has been on the Internet, CNN and iReport. Can you imagine people seeing a military personnel pulling off the

shirt of a citizen, when is not a war situation? It is a bad thing that needs to be nipped in the bud. This case of Uzoma is bringing to the fore the daily harassments road users are subjected to by certain categories of people.

Recently, Amnesty International released its report, which indicted Nigeria's criminal justice system as one of the worst in the world. What is your comment on this?

The point is if the criminal justice system, starting from the police, to the court and the prisons could for sure say that a criminal indicted and put on the death row really committed that offence, possibly we would be talking about the death penalty still staying on. But you and I know that most of the people indicted for criminal offences are people who cannot pay and get out of the hands of these various tiers of the justice system. We have heard several cases of raids being carried out on the road or bus stop and innocent people are picked up but those whose parents or guardians are financially capable get out of it, and the poor ones remain behind bars. So, the question is: Which is better, either to save one innocent soul from dying than having more people dying because we say our criminal justice system could not investigate? I think there are a lot of issues with our criminal justice system and it needs to be addressed. Personally, I agree with the Amnesty Report that there is a problem and we need to put on hold this death sentence until such a time when Nigerians are confident that anybody that is shown on TV as a criminal, is really a criminal, and not an innocent person who got roped in.