

Sexual Assault Referral Centre data tells a worrying story

Introduction

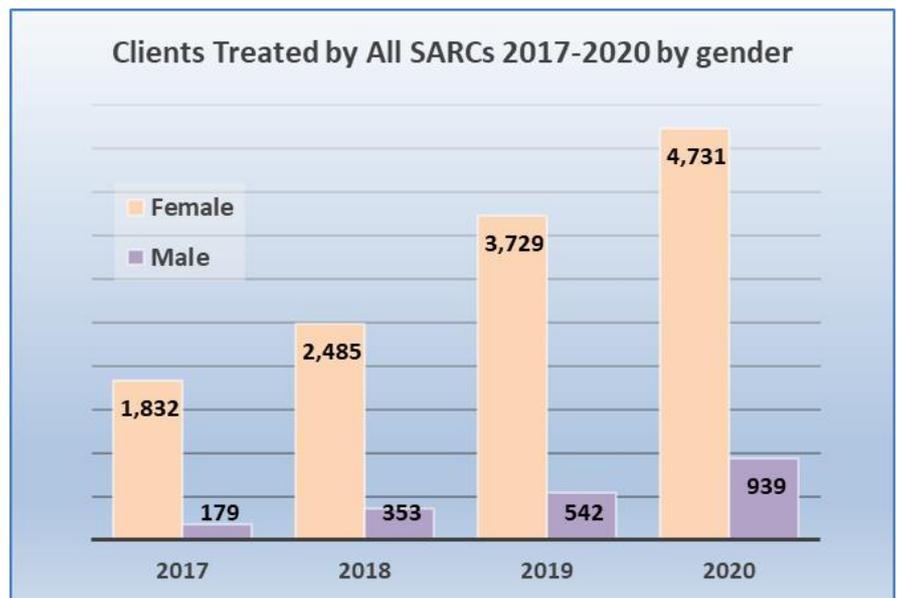
The first Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) opened in 2013 in Lagos State. By the end of 2020 there were twenty-nine SARCs operating across Nigeria. Data from 26 of these SARCs from 2017-2020 has been analysed and shows some worrying trends.

Over the four years, a total of 14,790 survivors of sexual assault have sought assistance from a SARC. The two Lagos SARCs dominate the numbers, helping nearly 5,000 survivors in the period. Kano SARC was the next busiest with over 2,500 cases. That the overall numbers have increased year on year is not a surprise as there has been an increase in the number of active SARCs from nine at the end of 2017 to 29 at the end of 2020.

More women than men

The chart below shows the breakdown by sex of SARC clients. The number of females reporting to SARCs has increased by over 150% to nearly 5,000 in total in 2020. This may be a reflection of the patriarchal society and how women are at far greater risk of sexual violence than men. British Council research in 2012 found that one in three Nigerian women and girls had been the victim of violence before they were 25 years old.

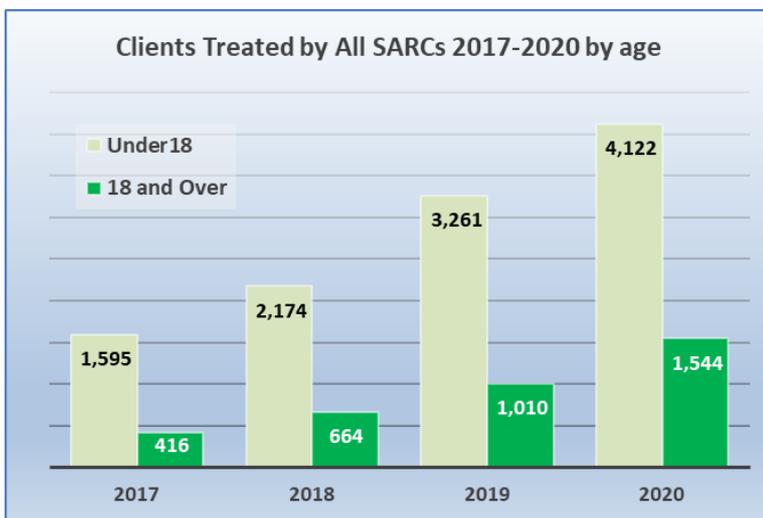
Whilst the majority of SARC clients are female it is notable that the number and proportion of male victims



Source: MCN SARC Client data

attending a SARC has increased by over 400% in the period under review. 17% of the clients in 2020 were male. This may be a reflection of an increasing acknowledgment that sexual assault against males is a significant problem in Nigerian society. Kaduna (Zaria) has the highest proportion of reported male victims at 49% of the total clients followed by Sokoto (33%).

Young people still most likely victims



Source: MCN SARC Client data

Whilst overall numbers are increasing, there has been a gradual decrease in the proportion of victims that are under 18 years of age from 79% in 2017 to 73% in 2020. The change is not significant enough to suggest that the assaults against young people are less likely; rather it may be due to the gradual erosion of the stigma attached to sexual assault meaning that more older victims are prepared to come forward.

SARCs providing essential services

SARCs are providing an essential service to victims of sexual abuse in Nigeria. Around 90% of clients receive (free) medical treatment and just as importantly counselling support when they attend a SARC. The perceived value of counselling may be a reflection of the changing attitudes towards the importance of mental health and the recognition that sexual assault can have a major impact on the minds of the victims as well as their bodies.

Demand for Forensic Medical Reports (i.e., with a view to prosecuting offenders) has remained static at around 65% of cases across the four years, and whilst it is disappointing that more victims do not seek redress through the justice system, this may be due to the poor conviction rates for sexual offences prosecuted in Nigeria.

Epidemic of sexual violence

The volume of cases and the continuing upward spiral of numbers vividly demonstrates that sexual violence is at epidemic levels, especially as it is widely believed that less than 10% of cases are reported. The increasing number of victims coming forward may be a reflection of the reducing stigma around victimisation or simply a result of there now being somewhere survivors can go to get help. SARCs have become an established part of the health, justice and social support landscape and must continue to be supported, if society is to look after the most vulnerable.