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Is Nigeria having a drowning epidemic?

By Rakiya A. Muhammad, Sokoto | Published Date Sep 30, 2019 5:48 AM



Joseph Blankson, 36, drowned after saving 13 people in a boat accident in Rivers State in 2018

In the rainy season, cases of flood become rampant, but not much attention is paid to cases of drowning that also rise in this period. Our correspondent in Sokoto reports on the drowning epidemic across Nigeria.

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Fifty-one-year-old Amina sigh over news of yet another drowning, which brought back sad memories for her. It was the third drowning incident after the shocking one that claimed her three children some six months back.

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Amina could barely handle the quiver in her voice as she struggled to bare her mind on the menace.

“Failure to put in place appropriate measures against drowning has continued to lead to deaths. If relevant authorities had tackled the major risk factors, my children could have been alive today. The silence on the need to address drowning as a burning issue is deadly,” she said.

Consultant, Public Health Physician, Usmanu Danfodiyo University and Teaching Hospital, Sokoto, Nigeria, Dr Mansur Raji said drowning is a significant public health problem worldwide and laments the absence of data for drowning in Nigeria.

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The World Health Organisation, WHO, statistics indicate drowning as the 3rd leading cause of unintentional injury deaths worldwide. Drowning, it adds, accounts for an estimated 360,000 deaths annually, with Africa having the highest drowning rate (13.1 per 100,000 population).

In Nigeria, though it has been responsible for several cases of mortality across the nation, it appears overlooked as a critical public health concern demanding requisite attention.

Many states in Nigeria are replete with reported cases of drowning.

In the first week of September 2019, a teenager Shahid Lawal drowned while bathing in a pond at Bacharawa Ram in Kasa, Fagge Local Government Area of Kano State.

Last month, August this year, six children aged between 8-12, drowned in the process of crossing a river in Danko/Wasagu Local Government area of Kebbi State.

In July, two children aged eight and 10 drowned in a stream in Benue State while in search of used water bottles.

Also, in July a 23-year old man Aminu Abdullahi drowned while bathing in a pond at Hotoro Quarters in the Nassarawa Local Government area of Kano State.

In June, a Nollywood screenwriter, Actor, and Director Kagho Akpor reportedly drowned in a swimming pool at a popular hotel in Asaba, Delta State.

May 2019 recorded three drowning incidents in different parts of Nigeria. In Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory, a 17-year-old undergraduate, drowned in a pool. A 100-level student of the University of Uyo drowned at a pool party in Akwa Ibom. Also, a 200 –level student of the Cross River State University of Technology sank in a swimming pool in Calabar, Cross River State.

Between last year and mid-this year, ten persons reportedly drowned in the famous Ibeno beach, in Akwa Ibom South-South Nigeria.

Sokoto State, Northwest Nigeria, recorded 42 deaths in four drowning incidents in January, March, June, and August last year. Most of the victims were children. Some of the incidents occurred when the children went swimming while others were as a result of canoes capsizing.

In June 2018, a one-year-old son of Nigerian Music star D'Banj drowned in a pool at his house in Lagos, South-West Nigeria

Taraba, nine National Youth Corps (NYSC) members drowned during a riverside picnic in August 2018.

In Kwara, 19 children drowned in a boat mishap in December 2018.

This list is not exhaustive but only some of the reported incidents.

However, it goes a long way to show the weight of the drowning peril.

In sum, the cited drowning incidents showed 95 deaths in 20 months.

"This killer has hardly drawn requisite attention needed to curb the prevailing situation," Ahmadu Sani, a public affairs commentator, said.

"The issue of drowning remains a disregarded area. It seems, in the preoccupation with other pressing issues, many have neglected that of drowning."

He stressed that the fact that preventive measures are not in place and enforced shows a disregard of the threats. "Authorities have simply overlooked the menace."

Some inhabitants of villages where several drowning incidents occur in Sokoto State expressed concerns over the issue.

Village Head of Dantassako in Goronyo Alhaji Bello Aliyu lamented the number of lives lost to canoe mishaps leading to drowning.

“Since the creation of the dam, many people in the villages surrounding it have suffered casualties from the annual drowning of people, especially women and children who cannot swim.”

He adds that the use of old rickety boats and underage boatmen who ^{close}swiftly lose control, ^{close}worsen the situation.

A resident of Shagari, Alhaji Shagari, identified the reason for the annual drowning of people at Lambara, Kambama and Dorowa villages in Shagari Local Government Area.

“It is due to the overflow of the earth dam constructed at Dandin Mahe and Gamgam villages,” he said.

“The water usually spills over, flood farmlands and the routes leading to many villages making the residents resort to using the canoe as the only alternative means of transportation. In the process of crossing, some lose their lives in mishaps.”

To save lives, he suggested that motorised canoes should be made available at all waterside stations in the villages where they are needed.

“The regular use of manual and old rickety canoes makes the boatmen lose control when the tide is high. Also, something should be done on the earth dam to put the water to meaningful use such as irrigation,” he said.

He identified the need for operators to undergo training in water transport incidents.

Bashiru Kambama, former councilor, Shagari Local Government, called for regular desilting of the earth dam. He believes that it will stop the water from spilling into farmlands and blocking motorways, which force people to resort to travelling on water.

“The present legislators should borrow a leaf from a former House of Representatives member, Aminu Shehu Shagari,” Bashiru said.

He recalled that Aminu Shagari donated some motorised boats, which were distributed to some villages. He also recommended that the government should construct bridges.

In a global report dedicated exclusively to drowning, the WHO recommended specific actions to curb drowning.

They include installing barriers, community-based, supervised childcare for pre-school children, teaching school-age children basic swimming, water safety, and safe rescue skills, setting and enforcing safe boating, shipping, and ferry regulations.

Also, building resilience to flooding and managing flood risks through better disaster preparedness planning, land use planning, and early warning systems to prevent drowning during flood disasters, among others could help.

It highlighted the development of a national water safety strategy to raise awareness of safety around water, build consensus around solutions, provide strategic direction and a framework to guide multi-sectoral action and allow for monitoring and evaluation of efforts.

Sani called for the prioritisation of drowning prevention and implementation of measures towards curbing deaths and injuries.

"The situation is too alarming to remain ignored. We cannot continue to turn a blind eye to it."

Pundits are positive that application of anti-drowning measures will rescue many from a watery grave.

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