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Trivializing sexual abuse is not entertainment

Media should champion an end to widespread violence against women

By Agnes Odhiambo

Human Rights Watch (22.11.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2fog8Y0> - "You are so beautiful; everybody wants to rape Pasis.""

Those words, directed by a man at his female political rival on a popular, national TV show, have deeply shocked Kenyans and renewed the debate here about the treatment of women in the country.

The comments – made by Miguna Miguna, a former aide to opposition leader Raila Odinga who plans to run for governor of Nairobi next year – were directed at a fellow guest Esther Pasis, who is also eyeing the same seat.

Miguna also made disparaging comments about Pasis's looks, and openly mocked her. "A woman who has absolutely no integrity. A socialite bimbo whose only claim to fame is because she is looking for billionaire sponsors [sugar daddies]."

Jeff Koinange, a former CNN correspondent, hosts the show, which has been criticized by Kenyans for tolerating misogynist and hateful talk.

The heated exchanges between Miguna and Pasis may have deeper roots. Miguna has come out to say Pasis had earlier on called him a rapist during a commercial break, according to media reports. But for Kenyans who watched and listened to his remarks, the background narratives are not important. They find his remarks deeply offensive. Many took to social media to express their anger and repulsion.

Women in Kenya face widespread violence. According to the 2014 Kenya Demographic and Health Survey, 45 percent of women ages 15 to 49 have experienced physical violence, and 14 percent have experienced sexual violence. The same survey shows high rates of acceptance of wife beating in Kenya among both men and women.

The media has a role to play in combatting gender stereotypes that discriminate against women and promote respect for women.

It is outrageous that Miguna, who aspires to be a political leader who will bear responsibility for addressing violence against women, would publicly joke about the rape of the woman running against him. It is also outrageous that he was able to do so on air without being challenged by the show's host. His comments reinforce a culture of misogyny and abuse often directed toward female candidates.

Kenya is set to hold general elections next August. The government should take all necessary measures to ensure that women can participate freely as voters and aspirants,

free from violence and intimidation. Miguna owes Kenyans an apology. A stronger response from the government condemning intimidation of women political aspirants is needed.