



Statement by

Senator the Honourable Donna Cox

Minister of Social Development and Family Services

on

**Incidence of Violent Crimes Against Women
and Girls**

April 27, 2021

Madam President,

According to UN Women, globally, an estimated 736 million women—almost one in three—have been subjected to intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both, at least once in their lives. This is 30 per cent of women aged 15 and older. The World Health Organization has placed this figure even higher at 35%.

Madam President, the Commissioner of Police, during his media briefing on April 9, 2020 stated that the number of reported cases of assault by beating during January to March, 2020 doubled the number of cases reported in 2019.

In 2019, there were two hundred and thirty-two (232) cases of domestic violence reported but in 2020, there were five hundred and fifty-six (556) cases reported. Today Madam President, the statistics reveal that this number continues to increase to 826 for the comparative period January to March 2021.

A 2017 Trinidad and Tobago Women's Health Survey (WHS) commissioned by the Inter-American Development Bank revealed relatively high incidence of emotional, physical and sexual abuse against women, both within relationships and also from non-partners. The Report found that thirty (30) percent of partnered women experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime; and six (6) percent in the twelve (12) months prior to data collection.

Data from the Crime and Problem Analysis branch of the TTPS extracted from an August 2020 Report of the Trinidad and Tobago Central Registry on Domestic Violence cited 7,594 reports related to domestic violence between 2014 to 2019. Madam President more than 75% of these reports were from women. In 2019, 81% of the reports were women with 22.5% being between 18 to 29 years of age and 48.5% between the ages of 30 and 49.

Madam President, as I continue to make my presentation today, I want to categorically state that one case of violence against a woman is too many. We must never sit down and comfort ourselves with numbers. We must assert that violence against any woman is violence against all of society.

Until this is achieved, there is nothing heartening when the discussion on the pervasiveness of violence against women and girls in our country comes up from time to time, as it does.

The fact is, Madam President, Violence against women and girls in any form has serious consequences for all of us. For the primary and secondary victims of abuse, it can lead to negative health outcomes, behavioural health concerns such as depression, alcohol and substance abuse, and high-risk sexual behaviours, which are also linked to absenteeism and poor performance in the workplace. This may result in social isolation, housing and financial concerns for the victims and their families.

Abuse and violence against women and girls have a lasting impact on families and are sometimes passed on from generation to generation, becoming a vicious, continuous cycle when underlying issues are not adequately addressed.

Madam President, despite the many challenges confronting our nation and notwithstanding the reality that COVID 19 is undoubtedly shaping our socio economic landscape, the Government has and will continue to invest generously in time and resources to make Trinidad and Tobago a better place for women and girls, a safer society a society where women and girls will be able to achieve their heart-felt aspiration and reach their fullest potential.

The efforts of the Government span several Ministries, Government Agencies and Civil Society.

Madam President, permit me to provide some information, which is more pertinent to my portfolio as Minister of Social Development and Family Services and relevant to the subject of this Motion. The National Family Services Division has the primary mandate to promote healthy family functioning through the provision of preventive, developmental and remedial programs and services. The Division is the primary institution in Trinidad and Tobago, which provides a range of support services to strengthen families.

Over the years, the Division has done rigorous interventions in cases of abuse against women and girls referred from the Magistrates' Courts, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, as well as victims themselves.

We must understand that there are many causes/triggers of abuse which may include unmanaged anger, marital discord, relationship/trust issues, alcohol abuse, drug addiction, family conflict and poor/ineffective communication.

In identifying the aforementioned, and to ensure that women and children are not penalized for seeking support when experiencing violence, the social workers of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services have continued to provide counselling and psycho-social support over the years and moreso throughout the pandemic.

Our dedicated staff treated with matters that were brought to their attention as assessments were done and appropriate intervention strategies were developed to meet the needs of our clients. A holistic approach is taken as inclusion of both primary and secondary victims of abuse and the perpetrators are included in the intervention strategies, given that many times the perpetrators are left untreated.

Intervention strategies include, but are not limited to communication techniques, counselling, family group therapy, conflict management, anger management, mediation, problem solving, and in severe cases, placement at rehabilitation centres. In instances of perpetrators with substance use disorders, the Piparo Empowerment Centre provides the required support.

The primary victim, along with the children, are also catered for through placement at undisclosed shelters located throughout Trinidad and Tobago with the assistance of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, the Ministry of Gender and Child Affairs under the Office of the Prime Minister, as well as the Children's Authority.

For the year so far, the National Family Services Division has made interventions in twenty-three (23) cases; eighteen (18) female and five (5) male.

Over the years, the National Family Services Division has utilized various formal and informal networks which enable the staff to successfully undertake its critical role, in both preventing and treating with abuse. The Critical Incidence Protocol is a systematic approach to addressing critical incidents, including young women and children affected by domestic violence, after initial intervention by the police.

Let us now focus on the macro level as it is common understanding that violence occurs at a community level.

Partnering with Civil Society Organizations:

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services currently provides annual subventions to four (4) Non-Governmental Organisations that specifically address and respond to victims of abuse and gender based violence.

Partnering with other key Government and State Agencies/Bodies:

The Ministry has established and continues to maintain strategic partnerships with other key governmental agencies to combat violence and associated issues being faced by women and girls in Trinidad and Tobago.

Some of these partners include the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, the Judiciary of Trinidad and Tobago, the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago as well as Non-Governmental Organizations that focus on Gender Based Violence.

Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS):

Madam President, I turn to the efforts of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. The Gender- Based Violence Unit was launched by the Commissioner of Police in January, 2020. Officers of this Unit are based in the nine (9) Policing Divisions across the country. These officers are highly trained and continuous training is provided by internal and external agencies.

The training and capacity building agenda at the Unit includes sensitization about domestic violence amendment, Safe Communities Preventing Gender Based Violence through Perpetrator Focused Interventions, Dynamics of Domestic Violence and many more.

I checked on the training undergone by the officers of the Unit and some of the modules covered in 2020/2021 are as follows:

- Gender based violence and the law
- Mental Health Workshop
- Fighting family violence – emotional intelligence
- Dynamics of Domestic Violence
- Introduction to sex crimes against children
- Domestic violence amendment sensitization
- Exiting violent relationships

- Investigating domestic violence and sexual offences
- Cyber-crime awareness and training
- Economic consequences of break down in relationships
- Gender violence, human rights and children's rights.

A robust case management system was established by the Unit. From the time a report is received the process is explained to the survivor and the investigative process commences IMMEDIATELY. A zero tolerance approach is adopted with regard to reports made to this Unit. Matters are investigated thoroughly and arrests are being made. For the period January to March 2020, 62 persons were arrested and charged compared to 97 for the corresponding period January to March, 2021.

Madam President, there are strict and clearly documented procedures with regard to the protocol which should be adopted when reports are made to the gender based violence unit.

All Victims are referred to the Victim and Witness Support Unit for Psychosocial Support. Victims are assisted with applications for Protection Orders through the Judiciary Hotline. The investigators also maintain contact with victims and provide follow up, feedback and any support required throughout the process.

Welfare checks are conducted on both the survivor and perpetrator, so as to ensure that they are both keeping the peace and abiding by any orders issued by the court.

From the inception of the Unit to the present, many survivors have expressed their gratitude and satisfaction with the officers of Gender Based Violence Unit of the TTPS.

The Unit is also engaged in a large number of outreach and sensitisation Programs throughout Trinidad and Tobago. These sensitisation programs are ongoing in an effort to educate the Public about gender based violence and the function of the unit in order to bring about awareness and effect change in behaviour. When analysing the statistics presented earlier, one can see a 33% increase in the number of reports when compared to January to March 2020/ 2021.

This tells us that the Unit has generated enough public acceptance as more and more victims feel comfortable and more confident to come forward to report.

Madame President, I wish to publicly commend the TTPS for this initiative and urge them to continue working diligently in the interest of women and girls in our society.

I now turn to the efforts of the Ministry of Gender and Child affairs. The elimination of abuse and gender-based violence is addressed through a number of initiatives and the Ministry has commenced a programme to fast track these initiatives.

In the area of **Strengthening State Accountability and Community Action to end Gender-based violence and sexual violence**, the Ministry partnered with the United Nations to enhance activities focusing on developing and enhancing the existing state systems, while mobilising communities to a zero-tolerance level for such violence.

Improving the delivery of services to victims and providing rehabilitation for perpetrators; the government, through the Ministry of Gender and Child Affairs has already established two shelters for victims and a service delivery model, leading to the economic empowerment of victims.

The government continues to invest in, and plan for additional facilities and services to support women, men as well as potential victims and perpetrators through outreach services and psycho-social support. Two (2) Safe Homes are in operation, and the refurbishment of three (3) are underway.

These government-owned shelters will support service delivery for both female and male victims of domestic violence.

Expansion of the Legislative & Policy Framework:

Several important policy and legislative developments have occurred since 2015 that contributed to strengthening the national gender infrastructure.

The most important among these is the implementation of the National Policy on Gender and Development.

It provides the framework for a collaborative approach among state, civil society and private sector, to address cross-cutting issues of gender equity and equality.

Work has commenced among agencies and is well advanced at the Ministries of Trade and Industry and Social Development and Family Services. Notable changes in 2020 included the amendments to the Domestic Violence Act and the Sexual Offences legislation to bring further protection for women and girls impacted by domestic violence, along with the enactment of legislation to allow for electronic monitoring of perpetrators of such violence.

Amendments to legislation:

The Central Registry on Domestic Violence is a repository of data on domestic violence, enabling the Government to more reliably and comprehensively use data on domestic and gender-based violence to inform programmes and projects.

Efforts are currently underway to expand the data collection in the Registry from domestic violence to all forms of gender-based violence.

Programmes & Projects:

In addition to policy, legislation and infrastructure, efforts are being made to implement programmes and projects at the community level to ensure that gender awareness forms an integral part of the lives of citizens.

Community Outreaches

The Ministry of Gender and Child Affairs will continue to collaborate with its partners to conduct outreach activities in institutions, schools, and communities to build awareness.

Men-Centred Programmes:

Though men and women alike require training and empowerment on gender issues, the Ministry has targeted men in its programming to dismantle pervasive gender norms and practices that impede development.

Madam President, there have been considerable accomplishments in our breakthrough strategies, but the reality is that much more is required.

While the government continues to invest in strengthening the legislative and policy framework for the protection and overall well-being of all women and girls, these actions are, by nature, multi-sectoral and cross-jurisdictional, with engagement, advocacy and cooperation between Government agencies, Civil Society, and between individuals, volunteers and communities.

We recognise that there is a need to strengthen the collaboration, coordination and setting of an agenda of planned and deliberate actions, activities and a similar measure of advocacy in order to address this issue.

CONCLUSION

We can all agree that a supportive and appropriate framework will make all the difference in whether or not someone overcomes an abusive relationship and impacts the final outcome of the situation.

Madam President, we look forward to deepening the relationship with both our governmental and non-governmental partners to secure and protect the victims and their families, as this remains a core strategy to reduce the impact of violence against women and girls. This is not to minimize the seriousness or to send a signal that we are any less concerned about violence against men and boys.

This motion is a call to action, to effectively address the rising incidence of violence against women and girls. As a society we can always do more; we can always do better.

The call is often made for more legislation and policies but we too need to examine ourselves, what can we do to make the difference. How can we prevent some of this from occurring?

This motion calls on the government to assess the deficiencies in the system to deal with the violent crimes against women and girls. I agree the government has its part to play.

I have outlined some of what the Government, Agencies, NGOs, TTPS are doing to address this issue. But what about the man in the mirror? What are we as responsible individuals doing?

What about the parents who aid and abet their children in the abuse of others by hiding their faults? What about neighbours who look the other way when abuse is taking place in their backyard? Someone would just peep through the window!

What about the police officer who does not follow the protocols put in place by the TTPS? What about the role of the church?

This requires a collaborative, systematic approach. We must acknowledge that we all have a part to play in protecting our women and girls. It is time we band together and do just that.

I thank you.