



**MINISTRY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY
SERVICES**

ADDRESS BY

SENATOR THE HONOURABLE DONNA COX
**MINISTER OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY
SERVICES**

for

**FAMILY PLANNING ASSOCIATION OF TRINIDAD
AND TOBAGO
REPORT TO THE NATION**

WEDNESDAY 6th APRIL, 2022

5 p.m.

SALUTATIONS

- Assemblyman Dr. Faith B. Yisrael Secretary for Health, Wellness and Social Protection, Tobago House of Assembly;
- Permanent Secretaries at the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services Ms Jacqueline Johnson and Ms Sheila Seecharan;
- Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Gender and Child Affairs, Office of the Prime Minister, Mrs Jacinta Bailey Sobers;
- Professor Rose-Marie Belle Antoine, President of the Family Planning Association of Trinidad and Tobago;
- Board Members of the Family Planning Association of Trinidad and Tobago;
- Ms Ava Rampersad, Executive Director of the Family Planning Association of Trinidad and Tobago;
- Dr. Tracie Rogers, Lecturer - UWI, Mona;
- Mr. Amiclar Sanatan, Project Coordinator-Socio Economic Projects, East POS Development Company Limited;
- Mr. Chinua Alleyne, Chairman-POS North/St Ann's West Constituency;
- Other representatives of the FPATT and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services;
- Members of the media;
- Distinguished ladies and gentlemen

I feel both honoured and privileged to be present with you this evening for the launch of the Family Planning Association of Trinidad and Tobago's '**Report to the Nation**'. Any report that provides the opportunity for us, as a nation, to evaluate our performance against specific metrics, and to determine the next steps to close any identified gaps, is worthy of noting.

The Family Planning Association of Trinidad and Tobago is recognized nationally as a pioneer in the delivery of services to the national community. I am happy to know that, for more than 65 years since your incorporation, you have consistently maintained your ethos of dedicated and committed service towards the preservation of the social fabric of our nation.

The theme of this year's meeting is "***Gender Based Violence in the time of COVID***". I must commend the Association for recognising the need for such a critical discourse because of what is taking place within numerous family units, and society as a whole. So critical is this issue, ladies and gentlemen, that it is now becoming increasingly known as "The Shadow Pandemic."

It is a well-documented fact that during times of crisis, more women and girls face an increased risk of exposure to gender-based violence (GBV), when compared to men and boys. Although GBV is known to be pervasive in all settings, emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, disrupt existing protective structures and create multiple circumstances that can lead to various forms of violence, abuse, and exploitation.

Despite the increased global awareness of the need to address Gender-Based Violence, its prevalence is difficult to often determine, especially in light of the large number of cases that go unreported. Another challenge is the limited resources in place for gathering this type of evidence in emergency contexts. Experiencing gender-based violence has been associated with a host of negative health, psychosocial, and developmental outcomes in the lives of survivors – both in the short-term as well as the long-term.

Gender Based Violence increases the risk of unintended or unwanted pregnancies, as well as unsafe abortions. It causes other severe maternal health complications, including the increased likelihood of miscarriages, stillbirths, and pre-mature labor. The view is also shared that unintended pregnancies can also lead to a generational cycle of lower education, lack of employment potential and poverty for both mothers and their children.

In light of these issues, gender-based violence prevention, response, and risk mitigation, represents essential and life-saving components of proposed interventions.

Trinidad and Tobago has not escaped the world-wide effects of COVID-19. The restrictive measures, and socio-economic effects associated with the pandemic unfortunately have resulted in an increase in the incidents of domestic violence. Data from the National Domestic Violence Registry show that assault by beating, verbal abuse, malicious damage and breach of protection orders are by far the most

common offences associated with domestic violence. These have increased by over 30 percent in some cases.

For example, assault by beating doubled in 2021; from 450 reported cases in 2019 to 865 in 2020 and was already close to 865 in March 2021. Sadly, it must be noted that these are ONLY reported cases.

This is the Shadow Pandemic growing amidst the COVID-19 crisis and there is certainly the need for a global collective effort to bring it to an end. As COVID-19 cases continue to strain health services, other services, such as domestic violence shelters and helplines, have reached capacity. We at the Ministry continue to give priority to establishing and strengthening programmes and services to address family conflicts that at times manifest in violence against women and even children. I can tell you that in the not too distant future, the Ministry will be launching its own suicide prevention and crisis hotline, to be manned by fully trained personnel. The plan to launch this hotline was conceived with the clear understanding that the hopelessness often felt by those affected by gender-based violence, can result in suicide.

The truth, ladies and gentlemen, is that all sectors of society have a role to play in bringing this Shadow Pandemic under control. I want to thank the Family Planning Association for staying true to its mandate. By keeping focused on the family, you have continued to render yeoman service to the wider national community, particularly at a time when the family structure continues to be under serious threat.

Former, Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan is quoted as saying,

“The happiness of any society begins with the happiness and the well-being of the families that live in it.”

We at the Ministry are firm in our belief that, as the cornerstone of our society, the family must, at all times, be provided with the support that is necessary to achieve its true potential. This is even more critical at this time, when we continue to grapple with these unprecedented challenges to our socioeconomic and human capital.

Engendering and supporting healthy functional families is among the core areas of priority at the Ministry. As a result, National Family Services Division, outreach services are provided to families to assist individuals, groups, single parents and couples through counselling, advice, advocacy and referrals. During the period January 2020 to December 2021, they counselled 234 persons who experienced domestic conflict. In addition, the Ministry's Parenting and Co-parenting programmes and more recently Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Programme have provided guidance and support to many families.

Hence, the Ministry continues to prioritize interventions that defuse conflict in families, support victims and offenders alike, and save lives. The Ministry's National Family Services Division is always readily available to assist those in need of support because building strong and resilient families is always at the heart of what we do.

Furthermore, the Ministry's NGO Unit is capably resourced and open to

collaborations that would provide support to NGOs, FBOs and CSOs, to ensure they effectively and efficiently deliver services to their target population.

The Unit provides subventions, one-off grant funding, capacity building, and also facilitates the exchange of information on how organizations such as yours may become more responsive to those most in need.

Last month, the NGO Unit and Family Planning Association of Trinidad and Tobago collaborated for a successful two-part knowledge initiative on “*NGO Resilience and Coping as Support Agencies in the Face of the COVID-19 Pandemic*”. This was a much needed dialogue on NGO burn-out, stress, mental and emotional health management, given the increasing demands on social sector NGOs.

The Unit is also bridging dialogue and cooperation in the area of sexual health interventions in at-risk communities. This is done through identified NGOs that work in their communities. This initiative also provides opportunities for these NGOs to receive support from the FPATT. I hope to see more of these kinds of collaborative initiatives led by sector stalwarts such as the FPATT, with the NGO Unit as a key partner.

For many years, the Government, through the Ministry of Social Development – in its various configurations, has supported and partnered with the FPATT. Our collaborative efforts have spanned from the annual subventions we provide, to developmental projects and programmes undertaken with the National Family

Services Division as well as the HIV Coordinating Unit of the Ministry and more recently, the NGO Unit of the Ministry.

In this regard, we view the FPATT as a critical partner and important institution in helping to create the change in the values, behaviours and attitudes needed throughout our society today. We recognize the need to strengthen our partnership with the FPATT, as this will allow us to take a more proactive approach to addressing the root factors that negatively impact our clients, especially women, who are, in many cases, disproportionately affected.

In closing, I once again applaud the FPATT for its work in creating positive change in our society for over six (6) decades. Please be assured that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services remains committed to developing and cementing partnerships like this, in an effort to ensure that the most vulnerable are supported in their most critical time of need.

I Thank You. May God Bless You.