

VERBATIM NOTES OF THE SEVENTEENTH MEETING OF THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY HELD IN THE HAMILTON MAURICE ROOM (MEZZANINE FLOOR) (IN PUBLIC), OFFICE OF THE PARLIAMENT, TOWER D, THE PORT OF SPAIN INTERNATIONAL WATERFRONT CENTRE, #1A WRIGHTSON ROAD, PORT OF SPAIN, ON FRIDAY, JANUARY 12, 2018 AT 10.40 A.M.

PRESENT

Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly	Chairman
Mr. Kazim Hosein	Member
Mr. Esmond Forde	Member
Miss Candice Skerrette	Secretary
Mrs. Angelique Massiah	Assistant Secretary
Miss Khisha Peterkin	Assistant Secretary

ABSENT

Mrs. Vidya Gayadeen-Gopeesingh	Member
Mrs. Glenda Jennings-Smith	Vice-Chairman
Mr. Dennis Moses	Member
Dr. Dhanayshar Mahabir	Member
Mr. Saddam Hosein	Member

OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER

GENDER AND CHILD AFFAIRS DIVISION

Mr. Ian Ramdahin	Permanent Secretary (Ag.)
Ms. Antoinette Jack-Martin	Director, Gender Affairs (Ag.)
Mr. Bertrand Moses	Child Development Coordinator
Ms. Gaietry Pargass	Senior Legal Advisor
Ms. Amanda Ackbarali-Ramdial	Child and Family Service Unit Manager

Ms. Safiya Noel Director, Children's Authority of
T&T

SINGLE FATHERS ASSOCIATION OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Mr. Rhondall Feeles President/Director
Mr. Wendell Grant Director
Mr. Errol Fabien Director

MINISTRY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY SERVICES

Mr. Asif Ali Permanent Secretary (Ag)
Ms. Vidya Pooransingh Director, National Family Services
Mr. Troy Pollonais Deputy Director (Ag), Social
Welfare Division

Ms. Angelique Taylor Director (Ag), Social Policy and
Research

Madam Chairman: Good morning, everyone. It is my pleasure this morning to reconvene this meeting. This is the 17th meeting of the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity, and this public hearing is being broadcast on Parliament Channel 11, Parliament Radio, 105.5 FM and the Parliament's YouTube Channel, *ParlView*. I would like to welcome the officials who are here with us from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services; the Office of the Prime Minister, Gender and Child Affairs; the Single Fathers Association of Trinidad and Tobago; and the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago.

My name is Nyan Gadsby-Dolly and I am the Chairman of this Committee. At this time we have two Committee members here with us and I would like them to introduce themselves.

[Introductions made]

At this time, I would like to ask the members of the delegations here to introduce themselves and we can go in the order: Ministry of Social Development and Family Services first, followed by the Office of the Prime Minister, Gender and Child Affairs and then the Single Fathers Association of Trinidad and Tobago and the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago.

[Introductions made]

Thank you so much everyone for being here with us this morning. In the UK in 2012, 13.5 per cent of all single-parent households were single-father homes. In the US in 2013, 8 per cent of all single-parent homes were single-father homes and that is up from 2 per cent in 2000. In 2011, a Social Norms and Values Report commissioned by the Ministry of Social Development stated that 25 per cent of single-parent homes in Trinidad and Tobago were single-father homes.

This issue, therefore, of whether being a single father is beset by more challenges than being a single mother in Trinidad and Tobago is a relevant and important one. Some view single fathers as not generally being afforded equal treatment, while others demand informed, empirical bases for such conclusions. It is in this context that the Committee set about to do the following, and I would read now what you would be familiar with, which would be the objectives of this enquiry:

1. to understand the unique challenges faced by male single parents in Trinidad and Tobago;
2. to examine the equality of policies that exist with respect to single fathers;
3. to determine whether the programmes and services offered to single parents adequately meet the needs of single fathers; and
4. to evaluate current legislation that may impact on the custodial rights

of single fathers in Trinidad and Tobago.

The Committee would have received 13 written submissions from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services; the Office of the Prime Minister, Gender and Child Affairs; Office of the Chief Personnel Officer, or the CPO; the Single Fathers Association of Trinidad and Tobago; the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago; the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development; the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service; the Family Development and Child Research Centre of the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus; the Judiciary; and through the public call for written submissions, three submissions were received. I want to thank all persons and institutions that would have submitted their written submissions for our perusal.

During this public hearing, viewers and listeners can send the Committee questions related to today's topic via email on parl101@tparliament.org and our Facebook page @tparliament and on twitter@tparliament. At this time I would like to invite brief opening remarks from the delegations that are here: Mr. Asif Ali, the Acting Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services; Mr. Ian Ramdahin, the Permanent Secretary, Acting, of the Office of the Prime Minister, Gender and Child Affairs; and Mr. Rhondall Feeles, President of the Single Fathers Association of Trinidad and Tobago. So Mr. Ali, Mr. Ramdahin and Mr. Feeles in that order. Thank you.

Mr. Ali: Thank you, Chair. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services is charged with the responsibility of coordinating and implementing the objectives of the Government for the social sector which are to protect and empower the elderly, persons with disabilities, the socially displaced, the poor and the family which we see as a cornerstone of the community and, by extension, society. As the lead social sector Ministry, we are pleased to contribute to today's

discussions.

Madam Chair, one of the main objectives of our Ministry is the fostering of strong functional families which we consider to be of critical importance, given some of the several challenges that we currently face. These would include: poor parenting skills; insufficient and ineffective communication within the family; poor methods of discipline; poor socialization skills; the influence of the media, both conventional and social; and changes in the community and the society at large.

Our Ministry, through its National Family Services Division, provides several programmes and services that treat with these issues confronting the family. These services include: general counselling services; co-parenting counselling services; advocacy services; advice; community parenting workshops; community parent support groups; a radio programme—"It's Family Time, Let's Talk"; and training for lay responders to domestic violence.

The Ministry remains committed to the provision of a relevant suite of social products and services to all families in Trinidad and Tobago. These include programmes which support and sustain families in meeting their basic needs for educational opportunities, food security, income support and other general assistance to improve their quality of life. The Ministry recognizes the need to improve its social service delivery processes as well as to improve our client service experience. In this regard, we have embarked on an integrated approach to addressing our programme efficiency and effectiveness as well as focusing on poverty prevention and early recovery.

This shift will promote not only independence, but rather as opposed to maintenance which offers no assistance in lifting persons out of poverty, a robust collaborative network with our social sector partner Ministries and other civil society groups is a key success factor to ensure that families receive the maximum

benefit from our programmes and the programmes of other divisions within the social sector. Thank you.

Madam Chairman: Thank you so much.

Mr. Ramdahin: Good morning. I would like to thank the Committee for giving the Gender and Child Affairs Division of the Office of the Prime Minister the opportunity to be here today. Just to look at the context in which our Ministry is basically approaching gender-related matters, we basically look at gender, both male and female. We basically focus on the policy and the programmes. Right? In looking at the context of how gender would have evolved over the years, in the 1980s it was just a desk. It became a Gender Affairs Division in early '90s and a Gender, Youth and Child Development Ministry in 2011, and right now we are at the Office of the Prime Minister in terms of recognizing the significant impact of gender on civil society. Right?

To date, our Ministry, in recognizing matters relating to the gender, the males, we basically have increased our institutional capacity, basically in terms of staffing. Right now, in terms of September 2011, we have a male coordinator who is assisted by an assistant. Two persons at that particular portfolio are managing male-related matters. We have set up a registry in April 2016 to deal with domestic violence. Being the Ministry responsible for policy, we basically recognize policy cannot be moved without data. In terms of ground treating, we find out what are the issues affecting the males in society and it is our intent to basically take this registry and expand it to cover all issues relating to male-related matters, as well as female. Okay?

So we have made progress to date in terms of, we have submitted a gender policy—it is before Cabinet—as well as the National Strategic Action Plan which is also before Cabinet, related to violence—gender-related violence. So our

Ministry has put specific focus on matters relating to the male gender and we hope to basically contribute towards resolving any issues related to the single father, as well as clarify any matters that you may have. Thank you.

Madam Chairman: Thank you. Mr. Feeles?

Mr. Feeles: Good morning, everyone. First of all, I must say a heartfelt thanks to the Joint Select Committee on behalf of the Single Fathers Association and, by extension, every father in Trinidad and Tobago. It has been a while we have been clamouring to meet with the parliamentarians. It has been a while. You would have seen us on a number of community projects. We would have had a lot of consultations with many of the organizations here, and many of them have partnered with us as well.

Our main intent is to provide the best type of parenting possible that we could provide for our children, to have more access to our children. And, actually, something I think people overlook, many of us fathers today were the sons of yesterday that did not have fathers. That is why we understand the importance and the relevance of being involved in our children's life. I mean, at times people—I think sometimes people misinterpret our altruist agenda and may think that we do not have the child's best interest at heart, but we do. We understand the importance of fathers and mothers working together, at times putting their intimate relationships apart, so that they can form the proper parental partnership so that we can parent our children properly.

This is exactly what our children demand for us. We see it in the field at Single Fathers Association outreach, where a number—we do not only assist single fathers; we reach out to grandparents, we reach out to—single mothers reach out to us as well. There is also the element of mothers that reach out to us to have fathers involved and encourage proactivity of fathers being involved in their lives as well,

taking a new approach, not the deadbeat dad approach, but the approach of showing good parenting, fathers enjoying parenting so that we will motivate those fathers who may not be interested to come and be interested in parenting, because it is a blessing to all of us.

So once again, I mean, we must thank everyone here for seeing that this is a very important issue to be discussed and as we highlight the issues here, we hope that we will have a very positive resolution at the end of everything. Thank you.

Madam Chairman: Thank you so much everyone. At this time we will begin the questioning phase of our public hearing and I would like to remind our Committee members, as well as members of the delegations, to direct any questions and concerns through the Chair and I would just like to start off the questioning, if I may. And this question is directed to each of the organizations here with us.

When looking at some of the information that is available online and so on, I realized at that time that there were a number of definitions of “single father”, and I would like to ask each of the institutions here, what is your definition of a “single father”? Anyone can start.

Ms. Pooransingh: Hi. Good morning again. A single father is a male who has the responsibility for taking care of a child or children. A single father could be a biological father or adopted father, or a foster, in terms of having an informal arrangement to take care of a child. So, basically, it is a male who has the parenting responsibility of a minor, in a general sense.

Madam Chairman: Anyone else?

Mr. Feeles: Just to add on a little bit. I mean, Ms. Pooransingh is totally accurate in that perspective. Also another perspective, many people believe that you cannot be a single father if you do not have custody of your child. That is something that we want to put out there, that you are a single father still. I mean, if you look at the

definition when you Google and different searches, you do not have to have custody of the child to be a single father. The relationship between the child and the father, once you take care of the child, once you have the responsibility of taking care of the child, or you are at least making an attempt to have that responsibility fulfilled, you are indeed a single parent, a single father.

Mr. Ramdahin: From the Gender and Child Affairs Division, we recognize the definition of single father is an issue, because if you do not define it correctly you may exclude someone in terms of the policy programme. So it is an area to be addressed in this deliberation.

Madam Chairman: And the reason why I ask this is because, traditionally, I think the first impression one would get is the definition given by the Ministry of Social Development where it is somebody with the custodial rights for the child. The Single Fathers Association, however, has widened it to any father who is not living with the child, regardless of if you have custodial rights for the child. And that dichotomy, is it addressed in the Gender Policy in any way that is before the Cabinet at this time?

Mr. Ramdahin: I would like Ms. Jack-Martin to assist with answering this question.

Ms. Jack-Martin: The term “single”—[*Coughs*—]—please excuse me. I have the cold badly, so my voice might be cracking a little bit. So please excuse that. The term “single father” is not addressed in the Gender Policy because the Gender Policy looks holistically at male, female, boys, girls, in a holistic manner. So the term “single father” was not highlighted in the policy.

Madam Chairman: Perchance in the Parenting Policy, is it mentioned?

Ms. Pooransingh: In the Parenting Policy it is addressed and there are measures in the policy to address the shortfalls that a single father would have, in terms of

having more access to relevant services. And in terms of health facilities, it is in the Policy too, that—well, not necessarily a single father, but young parents are given more information when they do become a parent in terms of information that is required in helping them in their new role as a parent. So it is not really very specific to being a single father, but being parents.

Madam Chairman: Recognizing that, as was mentioned by Mr. Ramdahin, that the difference in definition would lead to differences in the challenges that can be identified, is there any revision of the definitions that go forward in the Parenting Policy? Has the Single Fathers Association had any input in clarifying what this definition really is, and therefore what are the specific challenges that face single fathers?

Mr. Ali: Chair, the Parenting Policy that you referred to, it is a draft policy at this point. The Ministry is currently planning for a public consultation with a view to finalizing that policy, and definitely we would be seeking the input of all agencies and groups, including the Single Fathers Association, in refining that policy. So to answer the question, it is still a draft policy and we will take that under advisement.

Madam Chairman: Thanks so much. Mr. Forde?

Mr. Forde: Thank you, Madam Chair. All right. We hear the term “single fathers”, but I think we do not hear much of the term “single mothers”. All right? What is the difference? What are the disparities between a single father and a single mother? We hear the single fathers talking about not having equal responsibility, not having jurisdiction, restrictions, custody issues and things like that, but we hardly hear of single mothers talking about these concerns, talking about these issues. Why? What are the differences? Any one of the relevant divisions.

Mr. Fabien: I would like to respond or start off, Madam Chair. The difference is

that there is an unwritten rule in the Magistracy and the Judiciary, and in general in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, that a child's place is with his or her mother, and as a result, single fathers tend to be the people, or the parent, who is alienated from participating in parenting the child. He is the one who is found, or finds himself in front of the court with maintenance issues and different things like that, and accountability and so. You would seldom hear about single mothers ending up in that position because the general behaviour towards the situation is that the child's place is with the mother.

Mr. Forde: And according to the Single Fathers Association, you all are trying to change that? You all are trying to enhance the whole—get betterment?—for want of a better word. What is the whole purpose then?

Mr. Feeles: Well, firstly, I want to touch on something you spoke on before. I think people would agree with me when we say that that term “single mother” is something used a lot more than “single father”. We actually kind of spurred it off of the—if you are the single mother and I am doing—I have my parental rights and I am a good father; I am taking care of my child, then I have to be a single father as well. So, I mean, I think the single mother is something that is heard of a lot in many circles throughout the world, not only in Trinidad and Tobago.

And as I said, we mentioned before, it is about co-parenting. It is about us understanding the relevance and importance of fathers being involved in their children's lives. Many of us, as I said, were sons that did not have fathers, so we understood the things that we lacked by them not being there, and at the end of the day, sometimes it was a court order that stood in their way. And then we understand now that we are the generation that must not allow this to go on to the generation after us.

Many of us have sons as well. So at the end of the day, we understand and

we appreciate the mothers' input and we believe that the input from the father was primarily focusing on monetary contribution when we have a lot more than that to offer. We nurture our children. We take care of our children. We have fathers who have raised children by themselves and no notice or no kudos have been given to them for this. So it is one of our duties to highlight the capability of fathers being able to be good nurturers and good parents in our society of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Chairman: If I may, is there any evidence that has been collected by either the association or that is available in the public that suggests that the court is biased towards mothers? Has there been any collection of evidence at all that suggests that this is true? Because there is a counterview that the males do not put themselves forward for custody and that, again, is anecdotal at this point unless there is some data that suggests that one or the other is true. Has the Single Fathers Association or any of the other bodies been able to collect data that would suggest that the court has been granting the females custody in preference to the male?

Mr. Feeles: Yes, and I think we would have sent you all a copy of a study, a research that was done. It was actually sponsored—the project that was sponsored by the European Union in partnership with the Emancipation Support Committee, where we had Attorney Tiffany Hercules. She had done research on the family court system where she took cases and analyzed them. So you guys are supposed to have that. And the finding at the end was, when you are dealing with general orders, she made mention of selecting the cases where there was no sexual abuse or no violence—no form of abuse by either parent, both on equal footing, mother and father come into custody for the court. And the findings were, generally, 74 per cent custody was ordered to the mother, 21 per cent—and this is care and control we are talking about, right? Because you know there is a difference between

custody, and care and control. Right? So we are talking about—care and control is who would have the child live with them and take care of the child from day to day.

So 21 per cent of the time it was granted to fathers, 74 per cent it was granted to mothers, and 5 per cent there was shared care and control between both parties.

Madam Chairman: So I looked at the study and I was really trying to find out who would have commissioned—who did it. Because I saw it was an EU grant and the Emancipation Support Committee was involved. So 50 cases, over what time span were those cases—

Mr. Feeles: I think the span was from 1996. And if I am to identify another challenge that you have as well, I know there is a lot of pronouncement, but many of the judgments she identified were not written, so there were not many, I mean, to go with, because the judges did not write out the orders particularly, so she had to go based on what was made available, and also the ones that did not involve any form of abuse so that both parties could be on a level footing when they appeared to the court, so that statistic could give a good reflection of what happens in the case.

Madam Chairman: And the sample of 50, was there an indication that that was 50 out of what was the total amount of cases that could have been considered?

Mr. Feeles: Well, yes—

Madam Chairman: Would that have been considered a representative sample?

Mr. Feeles: Come again?

Madam Chairman: Would the 50 have been considered a representative sample?

Mr. Feeles: She would have selected as many—this is the information I think we would have gathered from her. She would have selected as many as she could that

were not compromised in any way toward any particular party. Whether it was abuse or some other thing that was in play, she would have selected those cases where both parties were on equal footing. As I said, it is not many. I am just saying off the top of my head, I think when we were looking at it before even the study, one of the issues they were having, I think from 1996 to date, I think it was just about 100 cases that were documented or so, not many; about 75 to 100. So that, itself, was a challenge as well.

Also, with the magisterial court, what we decided to do is have some forms and fill out the information because a lot of these orders are not written out there as well. So there is no database to get it from the magisterial court to have an idea, which, most of the cases, actually, are in that level as well. There is no way to really have a record of what has really been—there is no database really held for them to go, like how the Family Court has the library that the lawyer could have gone there. So those are things that I think would have been challenges as well.

Madam Chairman: So, do you believe—or is there any evidence, again, that would give you an idea of, in cases where the welfare of the children and the custody of the children to be considered, how many fathers would have applied for custody as opposed to mothers? Is there any evidence that—any data that can be gleaned to answer that type of question?

Mr. Feeles: It is in the same document, because these were fathers and mothers that applied for custody, care and control.

Madam Chairman: Right. But that would be of the written judgments she would have been able to find. So, basically, there have been a number of custody cases. Some of those were not documented. Most of them would not have been written judgments and so you could not use those. What I am trying to get a sense of is, in most cases, do the fathers actually apply for custody?

Mr. Feeles: In many cases fathers would apply for custody.

Madam Chairman: But is there any—do we have data? Do we collect data that would suggest how many? What is the ratio? Because, obviously, it would only be in the cases where fathers do apply that you can see whether or not there is a bias. But what I am asking is a broader question. What is the percentage of fathers that actually apply?

11.10 a.m.

Mr. Feeles: What I would like to touch on as well though, even if a father does not apply, the judge or the magistrate has the power to do what is in the best interest of the child. So even if the father is to apply for access and the mother is the one that applied for custody so to speak, but in the determination of the magistrate or the judge, the child's interest is best at heart or being best placed with the father. I mean, based on the assessment of the judge or magistrate of the evidence brought forward, the judge can also make a custodial ruling that the father has custody as well. So I do get your point and as I said, this is the information that we have from the information that was available.

Also at the ministerial court we have done some information, some research. That part is not completed as yet because we have to go person to person for them to fill out these forms—do you have custody, did you apply for access? So we are in the process of doing that part, and before the project ends in May 2018 we should have some information from the magisterial part of things as well because we understand many of the matters do not get to Family Court because some people just do not have the money to end up in Family Court.

Madam Chairman: So then maybe I would submit that there is room for a lot more data collection to take place to be able to prove positions, or at least to inform positions that we can say make certain generalizations, and that really has to do

with our data collection and how because we did ask for some of this type of data, but what we were told is that it is not collected in the way that we were asking. To be able to identify these issues: Are the fathers applying in many cases for custody and of those that apply for custody how many of them are granted and so on? For us to be able to really inform those discussions properly I think there is room for more data collection, and I know the association is doing their part to get some of this research and get some of this data in. I do not know if any of the other institutions can say if they are aware of any other bodies doing any data collection in this type of way to inform positions and to look at gaps and to look at patterns. Anybody else is aware of any data collection happening?

Mr. Ramdahin: Madam Chair that was one of the probing questions we also had when we started to analyse the data collection, because to formulate policy you have to start by ground truthing and collecting the data. The Ministry has already started with our national registry on the gender-based violence. We hope to expand this to capture data and all other aspects relating to gender related matters. When we looked at the file with the single fathers we would have basically contributed in terms of granting funding, but there is no information with issues. If we have an issue log of all issues affecting single fathers we could basically use that in our policy foundation and from the policy foundation we could also recommend law reform. So it is an area that we need to work on and I would like to recommend that.

Mr. Ali: Madam Chair, from our perspective, at the Ministry, our main division, Social Welfare Division that treats with the issue of grants to whether it will be single fathers or parents and the whole applicants, they are paper based. So it is very difficult for us to extract that data from our records. We are working on a management information system, an IT system, an IT platform, that would speak to

electronic case management. So once that is implemented it will be a lot easier for us to extract data of that type to inform those policy decisions.

Madam Chairman: Thank you. Minister Hosein?

Ms. Noel: Madam Chair, if I may?

Madam Chairman: I am sorry.

Ms. Noel: No problem. I just wanted to add that the Children's Authority also collects data, but the children that come to our attention are children that are at risk of being abused and neglected specifically, not necessary to do with custodial matters. We do not necessarily get involved unless the court ask us to get involved. We have information on whether a child may be removed from the mother and placed with father or vice versa, but we do not analyse the data by that particular category, but we do have information on our records. I just wanted to share that.

Madam Chairman: Thanks so much. Mr. Hosein.

Mr. Hosein: I would like to compliment the Single Fathers Association of Trinidad and Tobago because I see you all as role models. I have known Mr. Fabien for a long while and everybody knows him as Uncle Errol. He always has a lot of children around him. So I want to compliment you all for the role you are playing. I have one question and the question is: has the Single Fathers Association made any prior representation to have legislative amendments; and if so, to which state agency and what was the response?

Mr. Feeles: What I would say, we had conversation with the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services pertaining to public assistance, where we had single fathers who approached different welfare offices and were turned away. One case in point, we have Mr. Marlon Lewis, he was one of the single fathers. His wife had died leaving him with seven children and he was told that only a

single mother would be able to apply for public assistance.

We also have Jonathan Price, he approached the Barataria social welfare as well and was told something very similar. I approached Mr. Ganga Persad where he looked at the legislation—well we were looking at the legislation together more so to see what the issue was, if there was an issue. Our lawyers looked at it, did not see anywhere that said specifically that a single father, particularly children living with a single father should not be publically assisted, but I think it is possibly an interpretative problem, an interpretation problem or an issue, and I think the best people to clarify that would actually be the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

Madam Chairman: If we could segue now just to get some information on that? Is that a policy of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services?

Mr. Ali: Chair, I would like my Deputy Director of Social Welfare to maybe field that question. He is better able to answer that.

Mr. Pollonais: Good morning again, Madam Chair. As Mr. Feeles indicated, the persons he would have interacted with, Mr. Ganga Persad in particular, in accordance with the Act, the Act does not in fact speak to a gender bias in general. There is one minor section as it relates to the Public Assistance Act, but what I believe and this might very well be just by way of opinion, it relates to a statement that was made earlier, traditionally the male has always been deemed as the head of household. What I believe would have happened over the years, even though there was adjustment to the legislature there were no real changes in the practices and procedures that came with it. So in fact we have now embarked on a sensitization drive to look at the Act in accordance with the staffing of the Social Welfare Department to bring around a culture change.

I believe it is linked to more or less practice and while we have moved

forward and the Act would have been amended, the traditions that were involved in how public assistance was administered, remained by and large the same. What would have also probably added to the slow process of change—again the same culture change because what we have observed and again we do not have any data per se to back this at this point in time but it is really a minimum of males of themselves would have come seeking assistance. Most males just in themselves would have by way of tradition accept the position of being head, whether they were there to assist in the parenting of the child or not. So it probably would have been more of the exceptional case where a male would have come forward seeking public assistance and as such if such a person was told you do not qualify—because the male is deemed the head of household—I think in most instances most person walked away expecting that to be a fact. Thank you.

Mr. Forde: I heard your considerations. Only this morning we would have had a presentation from UNICEF and one of the key considerations that they have identified also is with regard to necessary grants in terms of allocation, in something that need to be looked forward with regards to the legislation. So to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services: the submission indicated that gender equality advocates will be included in the consultations on your National Draft Policy—the document that you all would have presented to us—what is the expected date of the consultations? Based on what the public servant now mentioned, are those considerations for legislative review being considered in the national draft presentation that you are having—points like those in terms of the inequality between single fathers and single mothers when they go to the social welfare office—and who are the gender equality advocates to be included, and have they been contacted in going forward for you all to have these consultants?

Mr. Ali: Thank you, Sir. Let me answer part of that question in terms of when

were consultations commenced. We hope to commence those consultations during the month of February.

Mr. Forde: 2018?

Mr. Ali: 2018, yes member. You spoke about the issue whether it will inform our legislative changes? Yes, to the extent that during the consultations if issues arise that require amendment to the legislation that will form part of our overall legislative review. So, yes, it would inform that. Your third question spoke to the issue of the gender affairs advocates, maybe I would let Ms. Pooransingh answer that part of it.

Ms. Pooransingh: A definite determination of the list of the NGOs have not been done as yet, but it will include not just Single Fathers Association, other similar groups. It also include women's groups and other NGOs that actually do work with children and parents. So you have Families in Action, you have the ParentingTT, you have the Rape Crisis, you have other groups that not just deal specifically with one gender, but deal with the families. So it would be broad. It would not be gender specific.

Mr. Forde: Okay. Now keeping in mind what your PS mentioned, Ms. Pooransingh, February 2018, today being the 12th, we are going into the Carnival season in terms of timeline, in terms of dates and so on, I hope that you all are keeping that into consideration to ensure that when you send out these invitations the responses will be positive in order to attend. Definitely I am sure the single fathers will attend, but in terms of getting the other NGOs and the other groupings involved.

From where I sit, you know, is one of the pre-requisites that we need to improve in our system of operation in terms of going forward, because the UNICEF group has identified some key considerations—it is probably a document

that the Parliament can pass on to you all—with regard to, like for example, expanding parental leave to include paternity leave—we know that has been an issue for many years. I was once employed at the National Insurance Board and I know that was an issue since in the 1980s—national parenting policies and programmes which address single fathers and mothers in particular; social protection policies and mechanisms; grants for single parent households—because again as an MP constituents come to the office, again male, single parents, and when you refer them to the Social Welfare Division they usually return negative response. When the mothers go positive response, and again as your public servant at the rear-view would have mentioned the legislation is there, the interpretation, and I think this is something that we definitely need to get on the front burner in order to get into the laws of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Chairman: I want to ask this question to the Single Fathers Association. It is about two or three questions, but I will ask them in sequence. Are the challenges that are faced by custodial single fathers—so those who have custody for their children—are those challenges different from the challenges that are faced by custodial single mothers?

Mr. Grant: Morning again. Madam Chair, to answer that question, the challenges faced by single fathers with custody care and control are similar in nature in some sense to those of single mothers. However, based on some of the prior discussions here, we have a unique set of challenges that single fathers face. I myself, as I said before, have been a single father for the past 21 years and a single father in the truest sense because I single-handedly without any assistance from any female or anyone else, department, organization, anyone else, took care of my three children. We face challenges in terms of having to be able to access care for our children. Whereas a single mother may readily get support from

family and friends and even members within the society who are sensitive to her being a single mother, single fathers are not looked upon like that. We face challenges with respect to that. One of the other challenges we face, again as discussed before, being able to access goods and services from Government institutions that are provided for single mother households, but we cannot access it as single fathers.

Madam Chairman: Now, we spoke about the social services grants and we spoke about it being a matter of interpretation not necessarily that matter of policy, are there any particular laws, or legislation, or policies that exist in Government agencies that discriminate between custodial single fathers and custodial single mothers? Because what I am trying to get at is this: Are the problems faced by single fathers—when we say single fathers—is it a problem of single fathers who are not custodial single fathers, and is that the real issue that those single fathers who do not have custody of their children face difficulties within the legislative system and the policies in dealing with their children who are living with their mothers? Or is it really a problem where custodial single fathers are discriminated against based on legislation and policy with respect to single custodial mothers?

Mr. Grant: What we have discovered by looking into the documents and the policies, and so forth, is that it is not so much the legislation or the policies, but it is more the application, the interpretation and the application, and what we have found is that the actual bias exists at the level of the individuals who are charged with the responsibility of administering these policies.

Madam Chairman: So is it more of a cultural issue?

Mr. Grant: I will ask Mr. Feeles to elaborate on that.

Mr. Feeles: Yes, I would say culture has played a massive part on it, but another challenge I would like to identify that custodial fathers face, definitely custodial

fathers face particularly when they are custodial parents of daughters, a number of false allegations normally levied against them of sexual assault which are many times proven after an investigation that it was fabricated. I mean the Children's Authority they would know of some of the cases that we brought to light as well. They worked in getting some of the children back to the fathers as well. That is a key issue because particularly we had a case with Mr. Andrew Gross where allegations were made against him and the children were taken away from him for an extensive amount of time because of him having custody of the child and the allegation being levied against him. Once obviously you know an allegation like that is made and there is a daughter involved, automatically the Children's Authority is called upon to act, the Child Protection Unit will act. That is their duty to do so, but the damage sometimes—and this is something that he has expressed.

Even though he has been given back custody, and other fathers who have gone through this, they never really repair that damage. Even though they have been proven innocent, the label that society has labelled them already as if they have molested someone they are supposed to protect, it stays forever. There is no redress, there is no punishment for this fabrication. This false allegations levied against them, it is something that really needs to be looked into because it is a pattern. I have seen it with at least three or four cases of fathers who have won custody of their children and then later on the mother reopens the case and an allegation is made against them.

Mr. Grant: Madam Chair, I would like to elaborate on that because I personally experienced that sort of bias within the system. Prior to the existence of the Children's Authority, or the Child Protection Unit, or any of these agencies, I am the father of two daughters who are now 25 and 26 years old, and when those

children were—I have been single parenting them when the eldest was actually six years old and about three years into being a single father, the police showed up at my door and grabbed these two girls with a false allegation like that labelled against me. Took them to a medical institution where a male doctor violated them by insertion of his finger in order to examine whether the allegations were true or not, and the individual in question—and this is not an isolated case.

Many single fathers today that we have come in contact with are facing these sorts of allegations. This is one of the challenges that single fathers face, domestic violence and sexual impropriety. As long as those two are labelled before single fathers at the court, custody of our children is immediately removed from the single father and given to the mother. It is one of the key weapons that women are using before the Judiciary today, and if you look at how the Domestic Violence Act is structured you will find that as long as such an application is made for a protection order, the protection order has to be given and it is given with the statement pending investigation. However, what we have experienced before the Judiciary is that the man then has to prove his innocence which is a very difficult thing because when we appear before the court the assumption is that we are guilty. So we are starting off at a disadvantage.

So in my case what happened is the police grabbed my children, took them to the medical centre, the doctor inserted his finger, and mind you he did that when the two girls and he also checked the boy's anus to see if the boy was being molested as well. That is three years after the mother left. What this woman had done was journey all the way from north Trinidad where she was living, to south Trinidad, Barrackpore to be exact, with a blanket soaked in blood and gave it to the police. The police acted on this allegation and did what they did, examined the children and so forth, found nothing wrong, returned the children to my care at the

time and sent the blanket for forensic analysis, only to discover that it was goat's blood in the blanket. Absolutely nothing was done by way of calling her to task for the false allegation. I just continued to parent my children, and I paid hundreds and thousands of dollars in a counselling cost to make sure that the damage was minimized. This is one of the biggest challenges that single fathers are facing today, allegations, false allegations.

Mr. Feeles: Madam Chair, if I may just shortly, I would like to call the Joint Select Committee and I mean the members here to really take that into serious consideration because this is something we have been seeing happening very often and the damage on the children. Some of these children, many girls, they are removed from the homes. Some of them were excelling in school—we have evidence. A particular case that is before the court, I would not mention it—they were removed for two and three years, put in homes, moved around the entire place, not allowed to do SEA. We are destroying our children if we are not really dealing with this issue. So that is just my personal piece on that, that we take a very firm approach on these things especially with the sensitivity that there are children that are really being abused. So we must not allow people who make false allegations to make it harder to find these people who are committing this abuse against children.

Mr. Forde: Again, I empathize with the concerns voiced by the single parents, Mr. Grant and Mr. Feeles. Ms. Noel with regard to the Children's Authority now, we received submissions from the Judiciary and they are not here. They apologized for them being unable to attend today. So I do not know if the Director from the Children's Authority might be able to assist along those lines. Added to what the single parents would have said, the Judiciary mentioned that the first and paramount consideration in custody cases and that it best promotes the welfare of

the child determines which parent is awarded custody or whether there should be an order for joint custody. Then they also mentioned again in their submission: the courts are guided by legislation and its interpretation and the legislation with regard to child custody and maintenance is gender neutral; it recognizes that both parents have the same right to custody and one parent does not enjoy a greater right than the other. And this is where the concern or the question arises, whether domestic violence can be traced to inequality and bias shown towards mothers, or where custody and access is denied to the father of the child?

Madam Chairman: Let us just say perceived inequality at this point since we have not—

Mr. Forde: Thanks for the correction, Madam Chairman. Perceived. So I do not know if Ms. Noel could shed any light on that in terms of the biasness as mentioned from the single fathers. Now, we do not have single mothers here in order to rebut what probably the single fathers are saying, and as the Director of the Children's Authority if you could shed any light along those lines in the absence of the Judiciary. I am not saying that you are answering for the Judiciary.

Ms. Noel: Yes and certainly I may come short because again the Children's Authority does not participate in the majority of the custody matters because they are private matters. Only when the judge or the magistrate believes that the child may be in need of care and protection, then they may ask the Children's Authority to participate. So we will not have a lot of that information, but what I can say is based on the cases that are reported to the Children's Authority for whatever reason, be it for child abuse specifically on a domestic violence matter, both parents are evaluated equally and they must because both are very important to the child's development. So if it is in our investigation we find that the mother may not be in the best interest of the child, we will place the child with are the father. If

it is the father is able and fit and willing to care for the child that is what we do. So there is no discrimination or disadvantage to fathers within the work of the Children's Authority. What happened in the Judiciary, I would not be able to speak to that at all.

Mr. Forde: Just a follow-up. So there is no bias as the case may be. So therefore the Judiciary makes a ruling, sends the information to the Children's Authority, you then in turn carry out what the court order entails; or is it that now you have to do a separate investigation, or you just proceed with what the court order says?

Ms. Noel: If it is the Judiciary brings the matter to the Children's Authority's attention, most time it is to ask our advice or recommendations. So any orders that may have been made might have been an interim order and they would want feedback from the Children's Authority before making a final order. But there are cases where the court may make an order for the child to be removed from the father or the mother and the Children's Authority would then have to carry out that act and then do its investigation, and based on its findings submit the report to the Judiciary. We have seen all sorts of things happen where a child may be wrongfully removed from a father based on an allegation and when we investigate the allegation was false the child was returned, and we may find sometimes the allegation is in fact true and then the child does not return to the father. So it really depends on the merits of each case, and when the Judiciary asks for the Children's Authority's input, it is to guide their decision making. It is really to give them information, recommendation and advice.

Mr. Forde: And subject to the approval of the Chairman, in terms of the present scenario that is in the public domain with regard to the present young man and that is with the Children's Authority, I know subject could any light be shed on that, Madam Chair, or is it sub judice?

Ms. Noel: I am not sure what you are referring to, sorry.

Mr. Forde: Okay. We will leave it at that.

Mr. Grant: If I may continue, Madam Chair, with regard to challenges? One of the other challenges that single fathers face as well, when we do not have custody, care, or control and we may have access, and we are have been given access even in cases where fathers have joint custody, when it comes to the education of the child even though the court makes a ruling that we are to be consulted with regard to matters regarding education, health care and removal from the jurisdiction, it is not happening.

Madam Chairman: So this is referring now to that issue where you may not have custody of the child but you are supposed to have an input—

Mr. Grant: Yes.

Madam Chairman:—into their care and control, and what you are saying is that sometimes the mothers default on this?

Mr. Grant: Yes. And we have no redress—

Madam Chairman: No recourse?

Mr. Grant: Yes, where that is concerned.

11.40 a.m.

I have cases that I have dealt with. We have members, one of them present in the public gallery this morning who has been battling for his child for the last 14 years and even though he was given joint custody—for example, he went to the school when the child was being registered and there sitting in a meeting like this, together with the mother, the principal and teachers and representatives of the school, was a Muslimeen thug that was brought there to intimidate him.

We have a situation where he went to the Ministry of Education to get information as to what school his child had passed for because the mother refused

to give him that information. And one of the challenges we face with the Ministry of Education is that—who registered the child is the question that was asked or that is being asked and if the mother registered the child, the father cannot get any information concerning the child even though he has joint custody of the child. All right?

Madam Chairman: Has the association made any formal complaints to the Judiciary and/or the Law Association with respect to some of these very serious concerns that are being raised with respect to the custodial single mothers not adhering to the court rulings?

Mr. Feeles: Madam Chair, it has been for the last five years, we have tried to reach out to the Judiciary in a number of ways: personally visiting, we have lobbied them, we have sent letters for meetings, a number of ways. We have held consultations. Every single representative here has participated in our yearly consultation, Fatherhood and Society Issues and Solutions— Children Authority, all the other stakeholders here. Every single year as today, the Judiciary has never been here. They are not even here today. So we have not been able to truly make proper representation to them because they have never made themselves available to us.

Madam Chairman: But you have communicated with them by way of letter specifically indicating issues or examples?

Mr. Feeles: By way of letter—exactly yes. And sometimes no response even. Sometimes a response to come in and meet with the Manager of the Family Court. We were supposed to structure a meeting, we were never recontacted again.

Mr. Grant: If I may continue? Relative to what Mr. Forde had said concerning the Judiciary, I always say it is all nice and lovely on that paper that you read from, Sir, where the laws are concerned and that fathers and mothers are on equal footing

before the court and nobody is more important than the other and everybody has equal rights and so forth—that is only on paper. The actual process, the actual practice of the court is not what we, the fathers, experience. I have reports from fathers who have said the magistrate said, “Sit down dey and hush yuh mouth, ah doh want to hear what you have to say”. Right?

We have reports from fathers who have said the magistrate, when they applied for custody, they having actual possession of the child, the magistrates turn to the mother and ask, “Ma’am, do you want your child” and the mother says yes, and the magistrates write an order for custody, care and control and take away the child from the father. This is the type of cases that we are being confronted with at the Single Fathers Association.

So when we hear about how equal single fathers and single mothers are, I mean, it is actually hilarious. I mean, if we could actually eat that paper that those things are written on, we might get more benefit from it than what we receive before the court.

Madam Chairman: Mr. Hosein.

Mr. Hosein: Thank you very much, Madam Chairman. Section 21 of the Births and Deaths Registration Act creates the opportunity for a father not to be included on the child’s birth certificate. Does this give the father a legal opportunity to challenge for parental rights?

Mr. Feeles: Well, the father would have to prove paternity of the child and as we are dealing with that, that is a very relevant topic as well because you would have heard us lobby also for paternity testing to be made mandatory before application for a maintenance order. Because one of the issues I think we have, one of the ways to presume fatherhood is by admission, something they deem admission. But how can I really admit to something that I am not truly aware of?

The only true way now, in a world where we are living with technology, is DNA testing will confirm that you are the father of a child. But admission as well as you being married as well is another presumption which poses another challenge in instances where—because we are looking at all sides here. Instances where possibly, we have had cases where the mother—there may be some infidelity and there was an extramarital relationship and that father is a father that wants to be involved in the child's life and the mother may have gotten pregnant but because she is married, the husband is presumed the father and the real father, he will have no claim, he would have no say or would be able to be father of the child because of that presumption based on marriage.

Mr. Fabien: And that is the law.

Madam Chairman: Let me clarify, that is the law. So if there is an extramarital relationship that results in a child, the father of that child is not recognized—the biological father is not recognized as the father of the child.

Mr. Feeles: Not until he proves paternity. If he is to prove paternity, then obviously he will be proven but out of the gates, it is presumed, presumption, that the husband automatically must be the father.

Madam Chairman: And let me tie this in because I saw it in your submission and I wondered and I wanted to clarify. Maintenance payments, are those in fact payable without proof of paternity?

Mr. Feeles: Yeah, of course. That is what they call admission. So a problem that we face or men face is that you are called before the magistrate and the first thing that they would ask you: Are you the father? And you would say yes because you know yourself to be the father of the child. But I can tell you today, I have represented many men that when we did the test, they were never the father. So this is why we are calling on some—warrants have been brought for their arrest,

we had to—Marlon Thompson’s case, we had to go to the High Court to get a warrant quashed or he would have faced imprisonment for a child that he paid maintenance for, for nearly eight years, that was proven not to be his child.

Madam Chairman: But then he would have admitted in court that the child was his?

Mr. Feeles: This is exactly why I made the first point. How can you admit to something that you do not know? I cannot say that I am the father for certain unless it is being tested.

Madam Chairman: Well then, why would the person have admitted?

Mr. Feeles: Because in the best thoughts in your heart, you believe you are the father. You may think you are the father but you believing you are the father—we as men, believing we are the father, does not guarantee that we are the father of our children, biologically. That is the truth.

Madam Chairman: Well, is that a legislative failing? Because it was noted as one of the things that should be amended in the Legislature. But is that a legislative failing or is it something that men need to be aware of, that if you are being called to provide maintenance, you should first prove not to put yourself for admissions?

Mr. Feeles: Now, the reason why we said it should be mandatory, you see, it has to deal with the same culture we are talking about as well. Many a time, a man will never say—and any father, as a good father, will not say that is not my child, if you ask him. He should not be put, I believe, in that position to say, Is that your child?—when he really does not know. So I believe the response you would get from any man in any room who has known his children is, “that is my children”.

Madam Chairman: And why would that change eight years down the road?

Mr. Feeles: No, it would not—well I mean if, at the end of the day, he decides—

not that it is changing but he decides to do a paternity test to verify at that point for whatever reason, if there is some disagreement or if he found out something later down the road that she may have been unfaithful and now he decides at that point in time to do a paternity test and it comes back valid that the child is not his, these are the ways that these things are happening. And then it may sound unimportant but now you are talking about a man has invested in the child, not even monetarily—one of the greatest problems is the child and the man developed such a close bond and many of the fathers continue to father the children as their own but they now know this at that point in time, at that stage, and it has wrecked their lives.

Mr. Grant: Madam Chair, I wish to simplify this a bit. According to the practice of the Judiciary, as long as a woman goes before the court and makes an application for maintenance and there is a hearing, she is not likely to leave that courtroom on that day of that first hearing without an interim order for maintenance. Whether it is proven that the child is the man's child or not, the man is made to pay maintenance forthwith via an interim order. The interim order facilitates the investigation of the court. Many times, the investigation does not require a paternity test but it is the presumption of the court in practice that because the woman has come before the court and identified John as the father of the child, John is made to pay maintenance.

Madam Chairman: So that I will ask the question again because it seems as though the answer would be different. Is it a practice of the court then in Trinidad and Tobago to require maintenance to be paid without paternity being established?

Mr. Grant: Yes.

Mr. Fabien: It is a practice of the court.

Mr. Grant: It is the practice of the court.

Madam Chairman: Without admission of the man?

Mr. Feeles: No, the man must admit. He must admit that he is father of the child. All right? So the thing is, there must be admission to have presumption of fatherhood or the other presumption of fatherhood is marriage as I stated before. But I am saying that now since we have advanced in technology over this amount of time and if paternity can be proven with certainty, it is a very unfair position, an inequitable position, to ask a man to admit that he is the biological father of the child when it can be proven if he is the biological father of the child.

The mother, off the bat we know because she bears the child. But the father, in light of recent developments, we are not an old society back in the 1950s, I mean we are in the 21st Century, we can prove paternity instead of admit to something that you are not totally aware of as well and that is it. It is the culture of the court as well and the fear of many men that if you say that child or question the paternity of that child and it comes back and it is your child, you will get dealt with. That is the fear. I am telling you just as it is colloquially.

Madam Chairman: Is that fear based on fact?

Mr. Feeles: Well, of course. I mean, sometimes it is just the mannerism. When we enter court—I will give you a short story that my mom told me when she went to court with my father. She came home the day and she said “yuh father this, yuh father—she said when he entered the court, his shirt was outta his pants and the magistrate say, put yuh shirt in the pants! Get out the court, put yuh shirt in the—if yuh see” and it was comical at that time, but I will tell you this. I remember that from a little boy to a big man, so one thing that was in my pants was my shirt when I had to go to court.

So it had created in me already, at childhood, a fear for that magistrate when I was about to face her and that is something that is perpetuated in the system, no

matter we may not speak about it. That is our culture that when you go to court, you will get dealt with if you are a male. So many men and many men in the gallery out there and even many men right on this table, if they decide to end up in court, may face the same thing.

Mr. Forde: Again, the Judiciary is not here in order to verify, confirm or rebut what is being said. Right? I think we need to make that clear. All right? And as Mr. Grant mentioned with regard to the document I am reading from in that, you know, it can be eaten you said?

Mr. Grant: If we eat it, we will benefit more. Have more rights.

Mr. Forde: Will benefit more. Anyhow, so coming back. But before I go to that, do single mothers pay maintenance?

Mr. Fabien: Yes, it is in a minority of the cases. You see, this whole issue of maintenance, Madam Chair, it is a very important issue for us to ventilate in this setting. The Judiciary, I do not know if they are very familiar or completely familiar with the law because when men are incarcerated for maintenance which is a very big travesty in my opinion, the maintenance continues to accrue and according to the law, it is not supposed to. So men are incarcerated, they are in jail so they cannot make the money. They come out and then they are placed back in jail and that is the cycle some men find themselves in.

And whereas some men may be “deadbeat dads”, if you want to use that term, it is not a term I like. There are many men who are being practically criminalized in the system because a lot of people in this country today are losing their jobs or are underemployed or just cannot make ends meet, it is a fact, and as a result of that, you are put in jail, and you are in a cell with bandits, murderers. You are in there with thieves, you are in there with drug dealers in the same cell and sometimes these men end up placed in a position now to go along with satisfying

requests from some of these guys when they go outside, and that is how some of them end up earning money to pay the court.

There are men who I have met through the Single Fathers Association, one man in particular, he was medically unfit to work. He brought all of these documents to the court and the court saw that he was medically unfit to work. The court, in its wisdom, asked social services to pay for that child's upkeep. The man was paying I think \$800 at the time and the court asked social services to pay \$1,200 towards the child and did not close or crush the order for the man. So he was arrested repeatedly for not paying the maintenance after the court saw that he was unable to and instructed social services who were paying at the time.

Another case in point is a man who has been paying for some 10 years to the mother of the child only to find out that the mother had given the child to another couple and the money he was giving to her was not going to the couple nor was the money she should have been paying going to the couple and that man was arrested time and time again, and these are not, in any way, Madam Chairman, isolated cases.

Mr. Forde: Madam Chair, again, we ask the question: What programmes and services are provided to single fathers by the Family Court and the new Family and Children Division?—include whether there are programmes and services to mediate conflict between parents. And the answer: Subject to the findings in each case, persons may be referred to the Family Court to:

Co-parenting workshops. Partnership for Peace programme comprising three elements in the holistic opportunities for people empowerment hope for men, for women or for children.

Counselling services, psychologist intervention, mediation services. Other specific services external to Judiciary, mediation services.

Are you all familiar with those services provided by the Family Court of the Judiciary system of Trinidad and Tobago?

Mr. Feeles: Yes, of course, totally familiar. And, I mean, I would have participated as well. I would have participated in the mediation service.

Mr. Forde: So the Judiciary gave us good information?

Mr. Feeles: But let me give you a little more information. I mean, my personal experience with the mediation, I am not saying that that is everyone's experience, but my personal experience is that if even though we were made—is because of the social perception sometimes, I believe, that a mother is entitled to her child that even with mediation, she does not truly mediate to the fullest because sometimes she believes that when she gets to court, she will get her will anyhow, and that was actually proven in my case.

We mediated, we were there and the mediator, even though I spoke to other mediators later on, professionals who said it should not have been a mediation process like that, he actually, like, if she said take eight days, he was saying, “Well this is a good deal, like take this”. And that is one thing that was identified to me. I mean, after I gained more experience after that, a mediation process should not take place in that manner. So at that time, particularly in my experience, it was not the proper protocol that was actually used for the mediation process.

I know the Judiciary is not here but I just wanted to, I mean, not a long list but just identify some sections. I do not know if it would be recorded and they may be able to look at it, where there is current legislation. I heard Mr. Fabien, he mentioned one, particularly, that is section 27(5) of the family law where he mentioned that no arrears should be allowed to accrue while a man is incarcerated from the family law, section 27(5). However, we have a lot of fathers, who while incarcerated for whatever reason, the money continues to run and when they get

out, there is a maintenance warrant waiting for them. All right?

Also, section 21(2) in another issue he coincidentally mentioned as well, when they spoke of giving the power to the magistrate to suspend maintenance, meaning no such suspension—and this is something that does not take place. We do not see suspension of orders taking place in circumstances where people have lost their job or sometimes when they become injured. I had a TSTT dad who fell off a ladder and broke his two hands and the maintenance continued to run and he was expected to pay it the other year after his therapy had completed. So there was no suspension, he was not granted that.

We have Darryl Phillip who was a police officer as well. He went before the magistrate. He had a serious heart condition. A lot of medical information from the police service to have suspension with maintenance until he was better and possibly put the child on social welfare because that is a suggestion we have made. If in instances of fathers becoming unemployed and having maintenance payments to be made, social welfare should be made or should be able to come in and assist for some interim for some time.

And also, what is very alarming too, section 27(2)(a), they speak about—you know normally when we hear maintenance, the first thing that happens—well first, if you are brought before the court and you do not pay, when you return and if you ask for time and now a committal warrant is out for you, they will imprison you. But I saw that the law, section 27(a) said that there are a number of ways that they could deal with it before imprisonment, when it comes to sale of goods and chattels that the defendant may have that they may be able to sell or they may be able to seize instead of having the person imprisoned. So this is legislation that is on the books already that you are not seeing utilized.

Also, another section, section 27(4) where the magistrate has the power to

determine before commitment to prison if a parent's non-payment was not due to his or her culpable neglect. In this case, a warrant of commitment to prison should not be issued. So if the magistrate could determine that it was not and the person neglecting to pay the maintenance, that the magistrate had the power not to commit them to prison. So these are some of the things that we are not seeing happening. So I cannot ask for it to be legislated if it is legislated already. I could ask for them to start to utilize other alternatives to imprisonment if we have some and I mean we have other suggestions as well.

Mr. Fabien: But on that, Madam Chair, I would like to add, forgive me. Recently I was at a world's family conference and the Acting Prime Minister for St. Lucia, Guy Joseph, made a bold statement there where he was taking to his Parliament an Act to stop the imprisonment of fathers for non-payment of maintenance and, in fact, to ask that different arms of the State prioritize these men for employment and the amount or the moneys due for the children be taken from their earnings, because it is in the interest of all that these men are not incarcerated. It costs the State more to keep that man imprisoned. The family and that man would be part of his current family. In many cases, he has a new wife and children and he is removed from that family also because of non-payment of maintenance for the child who is with another family.

So, nobody profits really from the incarceration of these men and if there is work within whatever programmes that the State may have in whichever Ministries, I think it is very good idea that we could take something from Mr. Joseph's recommendation that if people cannot find work to pay the maintenance, that they be prioritized for employment within these social programmes and their earnings be taken—the correct money taken for the child. We could garnish their earnings and pay the money to the court for the children.

Mr. Forde: Again, Ministry of Social Development, coming to you shortly, I just want to clear up something with the father there. No response anticipated. Okay? While incarcerated, the father is still the parent of the child. No need to answer. While on disability, incapacitated, the father is still the parent of the child. Fine. Social welfare should pay for the disability status of the child or while he is incapacitated for the thing. Point taken, no need to answer. Before I go to social welfare, why would some fathers defy their court order? As a result of being unable to pay—incapacitated. For the same reasons, right, basically?

Mr. Fabien: Some men do not want to take responsibility for their children also, right, and we are not negating that at all, but some men cannot find employment, some men are underemployed, some men have so much responsibility with their current family and other issues in their lives, sometimes they get behind with their payments. We do not condone non-payment of maintenance.

Mr. Forde: So therefore, an extension from here then is that we need to bring in family services in terms of family planning and things like that in order to get both male and female in order to subscribe to these facilities.

Mr. Fabien: And both families.

Mr. Forde: No, “I doh need no answers, yuh know”, I just wanted to throw these things out. Because I am bringing an important point to social development. Go ahead, go ahead.

Mr. Feeles: No, I just wanted to elaborate a little more. I mean, sometimes we say men can pay or they are not paying the maintenance, but there is no real transparency or checks that even the sums that they are being asked to pay, if they can afford to pay it. And I will use a short instance which is actually a bigger issue, where a father previously, Jason Sawh, was made to pay during the period of 2012 to 2013, an interim maintenance order of \$200 per week for one child and

when the final order came into fruition or was put in place January 2017, he was then ordered to pay \$550 a week for one child, so nearly triple the cost they decided to. And no he is not a big businessman; no, he is not anybody extraordinary. So I think sometimes that we really need—because sometimes people would ask if they could pay something and I must as well admit that sometimes men in ignorance and sometimes partial fear as well, they say “Yuh could pay 300, yuh could pay 400 a week” knowingly they may not be able to do so, sometimes say, “Yes ah could pay it” and it goes down like that as well. Right?

Mr. Forde: To the Ministry of Social Development, if a single father who genuinely wants to continue caring for his child or children becomes unemployed, does the welfare system have a category to approve continuing assistance to facilitate his continued parenting of his dependants to support him in continuing to meet his responsibility? All right? And as an offshoot of that, what are the social services for temporarily unemployed males? What can we do now in order now to assist, to lift some of the single fathers that find themselves in this scenario?

Mr. Ali: Thank you. Chair, let me answer the second part first and then I will pass it across to our Deputy Director of Social Welfare Division. With respect to unemployed males or anyone who is unemployed, who has been retrenched, there is a programme at the Ministry of Labour, it is the A2O programme.

Mr. Forde: The what?

Mr. Ali: A2O.

Mr. Forde: I am not hearing it clear.

Mr. Ali: A2O.

Mr. Forde: A2O.

Mr. Ali: Yeah, it is a programme at the Ministry of Labour where they seek to place retrenched workers to make them marketable. They assist them with job

placement, interviews, what have you, so that they can be reemployed. Our clients, when that happens, we refer them to the Ministry of Labour for that assistance in terms of their hopeful reemployment. With regard to your first part of the question, I would like to ask Mr. Pollonais to speak to that part of it, please.

Mr. Pollonais: Good afternoon. Just for clarification, the nature of the grants at the social welfare department, and we are speaking to public assistance, I want to just comment that would add to the discussion that went before and I know a lot of psychosocial issues were being raised so maybe it was not the appropriate time. But apart from the public assistance grants, we have a cadre of general assistance grants which does not, in no way, carry any apparent or evident bias and quite a number of males would have accessed this grant. And I know we are speaking of single fathers here but the nature of the grants are not so designed in any way to, let us say, specific to probably any type of male because there is one issue of gender, right, but then “single fathers” also takes into consideration a nature of that gender there—the actual being single. Right?

So public assistance, since its inception, has been a grant that catered to the unemployable in general and not the unemployed. Do you wish me to continue?

Madam Chairman: Go ahead, go ahead.

Mr. Pollonais: All right. So the grants that we would issue or the assistance that would be given would, in the normal sense, speak to where the head of the household is unable to provide, not simply because of not having a job, which, of course, we understand and we will agree is a need.

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But the nature of the grants was so designed, in the construction of the Act and in the minds of the persons that constructed such, that we will have this category of people who are unable to provide for themselves and their dependents.

So the general provision will allow for the person who has a medical condition and where you have dependents, if the person who is deemed the head of household may be, apart from that medical condition, imprisoned, right, of course deceased, the situations where you fail or are unwilling to maintain your children.

When the Act was amended, however, right, and I would probably say that my thinking is where you would probably be unemployed, the thinking would have been okay, public assistance would provide for the unemployable and probably where you are unemployed the other agencies, let us say the Ministry of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development, service commissions may be responsible for probably treating with the aspect of actually being employable and having the capacity to earn. Right?

But, notwithstanding that, we have, over the years, recognized that there are situations that will come before, in particular where they let us gain—not so much the capacity, but the availability of employment is limited. And as such, the Act allows for the payment of public assistance for a maximum of three months, where the specific criteria, as outlined in the Act in general, we can bypass that for the purpose of issuing that grant. So in a lot of instances, even said single males or even males in general, on their own behalf and on behalf of themselves or even dependents, would have had the opportunity to access that grant.

Madam Chairman: If I may, there are programmes that are offered by each of the Ministries, I would assume gender, as well as social development, that cater to single parents. That is a fact? Are there programmes that cater specifically to single parents in both of the ministries?

Mrs. Jack-Martin: In the Gender Affairs Division, not specifically to single parents, to parents on a whole, male, female, everybody.

Madam Chairman: What about social development, are there programmes that

specifically cater to single parents?

Ms. Pooransingh: The programmes cater to parents, whether you are a male or whether you are a female. It is not gender specific.

Madam Chairman: Do we admit as a country that we have—I do not have the figures before me right now, but we do have a large number of single-parent families. Is it the belief that single-parent families warrant different support and different capacity building than families where you have two parents present?

Mrs. Jack-Martin: Madam Chair, I just want to make some comments before I answer you. I listened to this discourse and a picture to me, and I am just expressing how I feel about the discourse so far; a picture is painted of discrimination against men, with respect to access to their children, with respect to custody matters, via maintenance, and it paints a picture of gender inequality and inequity, with respect to single fathers.

Coming from being a former welfare officer and also being a former National Family Services officer, the statistical data that exists have shown that the women are the ones that are at a disadvantage when it comes to inequity with respect to, especially maintenance, and I could vouch for that for a fact.

Many of the times the women came for public assistance because the fathers are not supporting the children. They would be asked to take court action. They will take the court action and they will bring the court paper to the welfare division, and in that way they would—. Many of the times they come also is because there are issues that pertain to the fact that the fathers are gainfully employed, some being police officers, some having a profession and refuse to maintain, and the State will support these children.

We would ask them to also take out a warrant to have these men and there are cases where they will come to us indicating that the warrant officer knows the

men and they will not give the warrant out to the men. There are many cases like that, and I am sitting here and I am hearing where fathers are feeling discriminated and unequal treatment.

Madam Chairman: If I may? The objective of this enquiry is to deal with single fathers who are willing to support their children and the challenges they face. The fact that we have 75 per cent of single parent homes being led by mothers, and only 25 per cent by fathers, indicates very clearly that what you are saying there is not untrue. But we are dealing with the subset here; that 25 per cent where, there are fathers who are single fathers willing to support their children and the challenges they face. So what you are saying is quite true but that really is what we are looking at. We are looking at where fathers want to, the challenges they face, and inequality. So in no way are we discounting the problems that are faced by women. We know that those are real.

And if we were to look and have an enquiry about single mothers; we are would hear that side of the story. Right? So, in no way are we trying to say that single mothers do not face pressing issues as well. But we are just saying that there are also single fathers who are doing their best and they are expressing that they have difficulty. Let me just clear that up one time because I understand your angst, because it may give that impression. But that is not what we are saying at all. We are just listening to this subset of people and how they feel about their efforts. Right?

So, what I was trying to get from you is: do we, as a society, consider that there are these group of people, single parents, who require specific support, in terms of capacity-building, coping mechanisms, and so on? Do we have that for single parents? And if we do not have it for single parents, do we need to have it? And if we have it for single parents, is it necessary to even have that broken down

to having something for single fathers in specific who want to support, who are facing the challenges that may be outlined, feelings of frustration, and so on.

I do not want to even raise it, but there is a case in front of the courts right now of a father who would have shot a child. And anytime these things happen—there was another very sad case of a woman I actually taught as a student in St. Francois, where she was killed late last year and the comments that came out is that it surrounded access to a child, and that this is a single father who was reacting quite badly to problems with accessing a child and that kind of thing.

So, what I am trying to get at is: Are we as a society reacting in the right way, in the correct way, to supporting the needs of single parents and single fathers specifically?

Ms. Pooransingh: At National Family Services, we encounter these types of matters from different sources. We get referrals from the court. We get referrals from other agencies. We get referrals from the Single Fathers Association also. No matter how they come to us, once they come to us, we assess the entire situation. We look at their needs. So it does not matter whether you are a single father or a single mother. And yes, a single parent would have a little bit more challenges than a two-parent household. We do not have data but anecdotal I can say that.

Also what we do is we try to—once we assess their needs, we try to address the needs. Even if it is not addressed within the division of the Ministry, we liaise or network with the agencies to fulfill the needs. And we do—in terms of, you were talking about support. It could be financial support, social support. Social support is a very big aspect. I heard the Single Fathers Association referring to child care. That has also an issue. Whether it is a single male or single female. That is always an issue getting available and affordable child care.

There are other issues that will come up when you are raising a child, in terms of the stages of child development and the different behavioural change that you will encounter as the child grows older. And those would be challenges, in terms of communication, in terms of discipline. So it is not different, in that respect, if you are a two-parent or one-parent, in that respect, in terms of the stages of child development, in terms of school challenges, in terms of social challenges. But obviously, if you are a single parent the challenges would be a little bit more, because then you have to attend to everything by yourself. So, in terms of our case management, we try very hard to address those issues.

Mr. Ali: Chair, if I may. That spoke to the issue of the counselling and those psychosocial services. With regard to the grants, I would like to ask my Deputy Director to maybe speak to that part of it, please.

Madam Chairman: Sure.

Mr. Pollonais: Madam Chair, as I made mention, I just touched on it. We have quite a few grants. I do not think, for the purpose of time, that I would probably run through them but we have a booklet here. We have listed about 11 grants that comes under "General Assistance Funding". I would just probably identify a few of the significant ones: household items. We have persons who would have experienced disasters, pharmaceuticals, education, dietary, clothing. These are just some of the grants that come primarily under the Ministry in general. But social welfare has the mandate to distribute most of these grants.

Madam Chairman: I do not want to cut you, but I know we are coming to the end. What I really was getting to, I know there are the grants and we have established that they are gender-neutral, even though sometimes the application, based on who you meet, might be a little bit. But what I was really getting at is that support, in terms of somebody to speak to, advice to be given to support, not

necessarily financially, but that social support for single parents.

Ms. Pooransingh would have addressed and said that: okay, there is support offered, not specifically catered necessarily to single fathers or mothers but whoever is referred. You make an attempt to deal with them, based on their needs. Right? So that is the kind of thing. Is there something from the OPM Gender Division that deals with that support?

Mrs. Jack-Martin: Yes, Madam Chair, we have one of our major programmes, the Defining Masculine Excellence Programme, that caters for the needs of men. In some of those modules we have things such as self-esteem; a man and his mother; anger management; conflict resolution; parenting sons and their developmental needs; parenting issues to address single parenting; estranged parents, and teenage parenting. We also have intimate relationship couples, emotion and sexuality in that module; in that defining male excellent module.

That programme came on stream in 2003 and have been running right up to 2017, where we have graduating from that programme 1,695 males so far, and that is a continuous programme.

Madam Chairman: All right. So, again there is a programme by OPM dealing with men, not necessarily single fathers, but it covers some of the issues that may arise for single fathers.

So let me ask specifically now, to the Single Fathers Association, because I saw as well that you offer services to single fathers. Did the necessity for you to offer single services arise from the fact that there are certain things that single fathers need to hear, need to be supported with that maybe were not present in some of the more generalized offerings by the different institutions?

Mr. Feeles: Yes, most definitely I would agree with that statement. Definitely advise them as into a lot of the legal, their rights per se; a lot of the things that they

may not—because we admit to that even in here that sometimes some of the challenges is because people are ignorant to some of the laws that are in existence; their rights. Even the lawyers, sometimes, I think are ignorant to some of the laws that are in here right now as well.

But our challenge, as I would say, the reason that a lot of single fathers will have to come to us is because of culture. I mean, sometimes culturally, even though it is a single parent programme or a single parent, we have seen that it is being heavily directed towards single mothers. Because single parent equaled single mother before we started Single Fathers Association and people start mentioning single fathers. And that is the reality of it.

I mean, even more so, we see it. No disrespect intend but even in just a second ago where, in other words, the mention of single motherhood always seem to drop at the level of appreciation for single fatherhood, and that is the challenge we face. We start highlighting issues that directly affect us and then we say: “doh study ‘bout dat because single mothers are X, Y, Z”. But we are affected and we have challenges as well and this is why we have to state our challenges, just as single mothers would state theirs as well. We must have that space. We must be able to do that. And some of these challenges are actually—some of us, we share challenges as well. The same challenge that Mrs. Jack-Martin referred to, there are fathers who have warrants out for mothers, for bench warrants to appear for custody. The police have not brought them. The police cannot find them. They have big maintenance.

Corey Francis has a massive—his child is autistic and he has a massive maintenance warrant. The mother has over \$80,000 and she has not been brought before the court.

Mr. Feeles: So, some of the things we face are very similar as well. So it is not

something that only single mothers face, but things that single fathers face. But exclusively as single mothers would have things that affect them that do not affect us, we have things as well and these are the things that we express to these fathers when they come to us. Teach them ways of getting around, teach them ways of, I mean being long-suffering, being patient, putting certain strategies in place. Sometimes they are going to all the wrong places to get help. But then there are other areas where they keep bouncing their head on the wall because they have gone to all the agencies and the agencies do not provide for them, particularly as we had highlighted before with the public assistance.

Imagine Mr. Marlon Lewis is there. You have seven children. Your wife now died, and then you go there. He exclaimed to me that he felt like—they told him if he was disabled then he would get assistance—cutting his hands off. And that is the reality of it. So, there are certain things exclusively to single fatherhood that we face challenges with.

Another challenge that we made mention of is maintenance. When it comes to accountability and transparency we are imprisoned if we cannot make our contribution to maintenance, because it is the belief that what we contribute, the mothers contribute a percentage monthly as well. We contribute a thousand, they contribute a thousand. Two thousand dollars is the welfare of the child for the month. But we are imprisoned for ours. We have no guarantee. There is no transparency to even know that the mother is making a contribution and she is not imprisoned for it. But for years it has been law if the father cannot pay his own, he alone must be imprisoned. His payment alone is identified as well.

Madam Chairman: Is the law “father” or the person who is to pay the maintenance?

Mr. Feeles: Well yes, noncustodial parents, right. But in the majority of cases—

look at the lines in maintenance and you would know who are the noncustodial parents, in most of the cases, particularly the magisterial courts. So we are noncustodial parents most of the time, and I mean men face challenges. For men and women we share the same challenge. So we represent men and women at times. When it comes to making the payment at the court and the mother receiving, lengthy lines. We have been calling on the courts. We have sent recommendations to the Judiciary to have electronic payments made available so that men do not have to go to the lines to pay, mothers do not have to go to the lines to collect.

So, whereas, we appreciate that there are similarities, there are differences that must be mentioned on both sides as well, from single fathers and single mothers, independently.

Madam Chairman: Thank you so much. We are drawing to the end of our time. I would ask Mr. Forde, do you have any other questions you would like to ask? A closing question?

Mr. Forde: This is for Mr. Ramdahin from the Office of the PM. In your submission you all mentioned that there was no gender impact assessment conducted on the Draft National Policy on Gender and Development. Right? So, as a follow-up to that, I presume you all plan to have one, consultation, and then what format will it take, in terms of the necessary NGOs that would be invited to this forum and when do you all plan to bring it on stream?

Mr. Ramdahin: Okay. Basically, I am holding on for PS Jacqueline Johnson who is on vacation right now. Right? So what I was told is that basically once the policy gets the green light to be implemented and you have a trial period of implementation, data would be collected, in terms of what are the issues. You would have teething problems, basically with implementation of the policies and

these issues would be captured for basically going forward and trying to address whatever issues and fix the problems.

I would like to also, before we close, I came from the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs, recognizing that a lot of the things we do in here is reactive. Right? If we have the parenting programmes implemented at the youth level, before the youths become parents, give them that educational background, a lot of the issues we are facing here could be eliminated. Everyone transitions from youth to adult, becomes a parent and they just do not have the skill sets to do the parenting properly. So this is just a recommendation.

The second recommendation I would like to put forward is that there is a social disconnect, coming from a technical background and looking at the logic. In terms of having an equity policy, right, there is nothing like that. I asked: Where is the equity policy? There is nothing like that existing. I asked whether Ministries are collaborating, in terms of those who provide social services, if we have overlap in programmes, if we have gaps in programmes. There is a Social Services Coordinating Committee that basically was active, but basically has dropped off in defunct. That committee should be focused, given priority, in terms of bringing all Ministries of social services together, so that we could network and integrate and identify the gaps and issues and align our programmes to address those gaps and issues. So those are the two comments I would like to make.

Mr. Forde: Okay, again. You are the acting PS in the Office of the Prime Minister. So all the overlaps, whether positive or negative, throughout the Ministries, I trust that again you would be utilizing your office, whether acting or not, when Ms. Jacqui Johnson returns again that information would be passed on.

Because yes, we need to ensure that the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs and all the other relevant Ministries, where we have human beings being

operational, that again we are able to think. The Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs, social development, Ministry of Health, where we can tie in with regard to this Draft National Policy on Gender. So that at the end of the day, when we make this Draft National Policy, it is comprehensive and it will entail whether fathers or mothers, youth or the elderly, are taken into consideration as we go forward.

So again, keep in mind that the PS, Mr. Ali from social development said they are looking at February. And I trust that, coming out of your office, being the Office of the Prime Minister, again some sort of headway will be taken in order to coincide, with February 2018 we do not do further down the ladder and the whole point and the whole purpose will just become null and void.

Madam Chairman: At this time, I would like to invite the delegations to make their closing submissions. And so we can invite Mr. Asif Ali of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services; Mr. Ian Ramdahin of the Office of the Prime Minister, Gender and Child Affairs Division, as well as Mr. Rhondall Feeles to make their closing submissions in that order.

Mr. Ali: Thank you, Madam Chair. We have taken note of the comments and the discussions today and we commit to give consideration to those. We look forward to receiving the UNICEF report as mentioned by member Forde. I think that would definitely inform some of our deliberations as we go forward as a Ministry.

I just want to reiterate the Ministry's commitment to adhere to the principles of social justice and equity, as it pertains to the protection of the family, which, as I said earlier, we see as the cornerstone of our society.

Mr. Ramdahin spoke about the need for the rationalization of the services across the social sector. Cabinet would have recently approved the social mitigation plan for the public sector that seeks to do exactly that, where we look at the different social sector agencies, address duplications and assure there is

alignment. So that there is a holistic approach, in terms of service delivery to our clients. So definitely that is something that is being done. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services is the lead Ministry for that social mitigation plan and it speaks to an oversight committee that would seek to do exactly what PS Ramdahin spoke to.

What I found from today's discussion is that there is a need for ongoing and some more public education, with regard to the services that are offered by our Ministry and the other social sector ministries, and also, Mr. Pollonais spoke to it, the issue of sensitization of our staff, to ensure that the legislation and the policies of the Ministry are applied equitably to all our clients.

I just want to close by identifying some of the initiatives that the Ministry would be pursuing towards that end. We are in the process of finalizing our standard operating procedures that would be used across all our divisions, so that there is a consistency of the experience for all our clients, in terms of how we apply our grants and the criteria for those. We are continuing discussions with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, with regard to the issue of social housing. We are transitioning, as I mentioned earlier, from our current paper-based system to our SSMIS, Social Sector Management Information System that seeks to address the issue of client case management. I think most importantly, we have on the agenda the issue of promoting positive values, attitudes and behaviours among our programme beneficiaries to ensure that they transition towards sustainable, self-sufficiency.

Again, we thank the committee for this opportunity. Thank you.

Madam Chairman: Thank you so much. Mr. Ramdahin.

Mr. Ramdahin: I would like to thank the committee for having this forum. Basically it was very informative and the information that we gathered here

basically would be utilized by the Office of the Prime Minister, Child and Gender Affairs in refining what we are doing, as well as addressing the needs.

I just want to highlight that you need to have issues; all issues to basically act on the issues. Being in child and gender affairs for a short stint, the first thing I asked was: Where is the issue log? We do not have an issue log, a national issue log, for all social issues, in terms of what are the issues affecting single fathers, single mothers, even parents. So we need to build that.

Basically, we started up already. The good thing that the OPM has done, we have already started our national registry capturing the gender-based violence, which we hope to expand the registry to capture all other gender-based issues. So by building that issue log we are using it to identify where the shortcomings are and where the corrective actions are required, as well as alignment and synchronization. Where are these things required and which programmes are working and not working and where we could adjust and make recommendations to fix? This is what the OPM is trying to achieve.

We have implemented institutional capacity to start capturing gender-based issues regarding males. I so happened that the public may not be aware of this. So whenever issues are being raised we would like the public to basically forward these issues or cc us on these issues so that we will capture these issues.

We have Ms. Martin here. She is the Director of the Gender Affairs Division and she would have basically a lot of the programmes that we would have being implemented pretty soon. We would like to advise the public to go on the website and check the programmes that are being implemented.

We hope to work closer with the single fathers to basically help resolve issues as well as network with the Judiciary and other Ministries in solving problems. Thank you.

Madam Chairman: Thank you so much. Mr. Feeles.

Mr. Feeles: Finally, we just, from the bottom of our hearts, as men, as fathers in Trinidad and Tobago, we would like to thank the Joint Select Committee and all stakeholders here for seeing that it is valuable and important to give us a fair hearing. We are parents. We love our children. We take care of our children to the best of our abilities. There are many fathers, a lot more fathers out there than we give credit to in Trinidad and Tobago society who love their children and want to be vested in their lives. It is not only the fathers' responsibility but it is the entitlement of a child to have his parents involved in his life in that capacity. And I must commend this Joint Select Committee for taking the initiative. I mean, people may say a lot of things about the organization. But we are purpose driven to truly be there to do all that we do to make sure that we preserve our parental space in society. Thank you for having us once again.

Madam Chairman: Thank you for being here. Allow me to just summarize some of the main things we would have spoken about and some of the recommendations that may have been made.

- The definition of “single father” seems to be unclear between the agencies who use it in their work agenda.
- Data collection is necessary to inform issues which affect single fathers and influence policy.
- As the major number of noncustodial parents are men, single fathers are faced with long lines and significant time challenges as they seek to pay their maintenance orders.
- Policies may not specifically deal with the issues of single fathers.

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- Social Services' policies may not be interpreted to allow for single fathers to benefit from some of the available grants.
- Unwritten rules that children belong with their mothers may exist.
- Single fathers are assumed guilty of sexual impropriety accusations by mothers and custody may be revoked without the opportunity to defend themselves.
- Consultations with and letters to the Judiciary and Law Association may not have resulted in satisfactory levels of response with regard to the issues where there are breaches of custodial and/or care and control orders by the courts.

Some of the recommendations:

- Consultations on draft gender policy should be engaged upon to clarify the term of "single father".
- Parenting support needs to be extended to single parents and single fathers, specifically, to deal with particular issues that may arise in those situations; issues such as their rights, legal options should be covered and explored fully.
- Electronic payments for maintenance would make the process much more efficient both for single fathers, as well as for the receiving mother.
- Single Fathers' Association should be part of all consultations on parenting policy as well as the gender policy.
- An equity policy needs to be considered so that gender issues are dealt with adequately across other specific policies and procedures.
- The social mitigation plans spearheaded by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services should include a robust communication

plan to make the public aware of the services that are available.

- Sensitization of the general public to the support needed by single fathers in our society may go a long way in changing the culture of our society as they look at single fathers.
- The Public Assistance Act needs to be fully reviewed and a culture change enacted within the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services so that awareness of the needs of single fathers and interpretation of the laws can be adequately addressed.
- Recommendations from the consultations must be taken into consideration when legislative changes are being considered.
- Spurious accusations by mothers should be punished and legislation should be enacted to ensure that this happens and redress when custodial single mothers do not adhere to the ruling of the courts should be sought.
- The Family Law Act needs to be reviewed so as to avoid single fathers who cannot afford to keep up their maintenance payments, for good reason, being incarcerated. In some cases, legislation is in place, but discussion with the Judiciary is necessary to have consideration given to single fathers who qualify for the exceptions already legislated for.
- Alternative measures for payments of maintenance should be explored other than incarceration.
- Maintenance payments should be matched to single father income and accountability measures for maintenance payments should be legislated.

So these are just some of the main points that would have come out in our discussions that we will want to note.

And at this point, I really want to thank the delegations that would have

made themselves present. I want to thank you for your frankness in sharing, I want to thank you for your willingness to consider the points of view that were raised, and we look forward to the report being sent to the various Ministries and so on. And we look forward to this issue being ventilated even more so that the various issues of persons in society can be taken into account and, of course, when we speak about parenting, we speak about fathers we really are speaking about our children and this generation of children that have to live in the world that we as the adults, as the legislators, create for them and so we look forward to these discussions having a ripple effect that redound to the benefit of the children who are involved in these situations and the future of our country.

Thank you again for being here with us. Thank you to our listening and viewing public and at this point I would like to declare this meeting now adjourned.

12.44 p.m.: *Meeting adjourned.*