



Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago

Ministry of Social Development and Family Services



MEDIA RELEASE

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Family Services encourages domestic violence victims to speak out

Wednesday November 25, 2020 --- Described by the United Nations as one of the most persistent and devastating human right violations in our world today, is violence against women and girls. Annually, November 25th is observed as International Day for the Elimination of Violence against women. To mark the day, The National Family Services Division (NFSD) of The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services (MSDFS) decided to highlight the situation from a local perspective, and provides some insights into how women facing these circumstances may benefit from the services they provide.

During a conversation with Edris Gabriel, Social Worker at NFSD the ills of the issue were spotlighted, as it relates to Trinidad and Tobago. Gabriel also sits on an Inter-Ministerial Committee spearheaded by the Office of the Prime Minister which was formed to coordinate strategies to reduce domestic violence. Domestic violence, according to Gabriel, seems to be plaguing our land as we continue to see incidents making headlines related to the abuse of, and in some unfortunate instances, murder of women. The Committee undertakes a number of projects designed to combat violence against women and comprises a number of stakeholders, including the Victim and Witness Support Unit of the TTPS, the Child Protection Unit, as well as various Non-Governmental and Civil Society Organizations etc. One of the most recent ventures of the Committee was the establishment of two shelters specifically for accommodating female victims of domestic violence and their children. These two shelters are able to house children up to the age of 18, who accompany the victim (in many cases, their parent).

One of the concerns Gabriel expressed is the misconception sometimes associated with domestic violence; in that, persons believe it is only physical. However, she stressed that domestic violence may also encompass abuse of a verbal, psychological, sexual and financial nature. Gabriel said it is also relevant to mention, that financial abuse must also be considered, as in these instances, the breadwinner may withhold household contributions in attempt to punish their spouses and/or children. Another misunderstanding Gabriel spoke about was that a lot of persons associate victims of domestic violence to be women who live in rural communities, refugee women, women with minimal education etc. However, she stated that according to the statistics, this is not the case as the situation affects women across all levels in society. The difference however, is in the number of cases being reported, as some women may refuse to report mistreatment due to the stigma attached, and the associated embarrassment which may accompany it.

With the onset of Covid-19, Gabriel explained that some of the associated stresses have contributed to what seems to be an increase in domestic violence cases recently. With the number of job losses due to the pandemic, families are spending a lot more time within the households e.g. where a woman may be a 'stay at home mom' and the father/breadwinner has now lost his job, there is no time apart, therefore with everyone being in each other's spaces, it has created a fragile situation creating conflict. Therefore,

cases of frustrated men abusing women seem to be rampant and some women are now forced to go out to earn money to help maintain households. In a lot of instances, these women may have basic levels of education and would have to secure jobs such as street vendors and some even resorted to prostitution.

Accordingly, domestic violence, coupled with Covid-19 has triggered associated mental illnesses in women such as anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts and tendencies etc. and often times these women do not possess the coping skills to deal with same. This is why the NFSD urges persons to contact them for the necessary advice and guidance. Whenever the NFSD intervenes, it is determined if certain homes are safe for women to return to, or if it is safer for them to be placed in a shelter. Some of these shelters are able to assist victims secure jobs in order for them to be able to provide for themselves and/or their child in an effort for them to rebuild and return to some sense of normalcy.

Once willing to be counselled, the NFSD also offers services to the perpetrators of the abuse, in an effort to help them change their habits. The NFSD realizes often times, these abusers are persons who would have either grown up in a dysfunctional home, or would have been abused themselves as children. On the flipside, the NFSD has also noted an increase in domestic violence against men. To this end, Gabriel explained that the Inter-Ministerial Committee is exploring introducing a men's hotline as well.

In terms of current affairs as it relates to Venezuelan women coming to our shores, Gabriel works closely with the Counter Trafficking Unit which is aware that a number of under-aged girls are being held against their will, having been forced by their abusers who have them employed as sex workers. On this International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the NFSD and by extension, the Ministry, is encouraging women to report their situations of abuse and seek help. It will be the first step in the right direction.

The NFSD plans to host sensitization workshops in the very near future to address issues such as domestic violence and continues to urge the Public - if you or anyone you know may be in need of their services to contact them at 623-2608; Ext. 6701 – 7.

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