



5th Report

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON

SOCIAL SERVICES AND

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

An Inquiry into the State's Capacity to provide support for victims of Domestic Violence and Family Conflicts (with specific focus on the availability of support mechanisms during the COVID-19 pandemic.)

THIRD SESSION (2022/2023) 12TH PARLIAMENT
OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

5th REPORT

OF THE

**JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL SERVICES AND
PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

ON

**AN INQUIRY INTO THE STATE'S CAPACITY TO PROVIDE SUPPORT FOR
VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND FAMILY CONFLICTS (WITH
SPECIFIC FOCUS ON THE AVAILABILITY OF SUPPORT MECHANISMS
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

Date Laid in the HoR: 24/03/2023

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The Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration

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THE COMMITTEE



Mr. Paul Richards
CHAIRMAN



Mr. Esmond Forde, MP
VICE-CHAIRMAN



Ms. Penelope Beckles, MP
MEMBER



Ms. Vandana Mohit, MP
MEMBER



Mr. Rohan Sinanan
MEMBER



Mr. Roger Munroe, MP
MEMBER



Mr. Avinash Singh
MEMBER



Mr. David Nakhid
MEMBER

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Committee Mandate and Establishment

- 1.1.1. Section 66 of the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago declares that not later than three months after the first meeting of the House of Representatives, the Parliament shall appoint Joint Select Committees to inquire into and report to both Houses in respect of Government Ministries, Municipal Corporations, Statutory Authorities, State Enterprises and Service Commissions, in relation to their administration, the manner of exercise of their powers, their methods of functioning and any criteria adopted by them in the exercise of their powers and functions.
- 1.1.2. Motions related to this purpose were passed in the House of Representatives and Senate on November 13 and 17, 2015, respectively and thereby established, *inter alia*, the ***Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration***.
- 1.1.3. Standing Order 91 of the Senate and 101 of the House of Representatives outline the general functions of a Committee of this nature. They are as follows:
 - a) “To examine Bills and review all legislation relating to the relevant Ministries, departments or bodies or as may be referred to it by the House;
 - b) To investigate, inquire into, and report on all matters relating to the mandate, management, activities, administration and operations of the assigned Ministries, departments or bodies;
 - c) To study the programme and policy objectives of Ministries, departments or bodies and the effectiveness of the implementation of such programmes and policy objectives;
 - d) To assess and monitor the performance of Ministries, Departments and bodies and the manner of the exercise of their powers;
 - e) To investigate and inquire into all matters relating to the assigned Ministries, Departments and bodies as they may deem necessary, or as may be referred to them by the House or a Minister; and
 - f) To make reports and recommendations to the House as often as possible, including recommendations for proposed legislation.”

Powers of the Joint Select Committee

1.1.4. Standing Orders 101 of the Senate and 111 of the House of Representatives outline the core powers of the Committee which include *inter alia*:

- to send for persons, papers and records;
- to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the Senate;
- to adjourn from place to place;
- to report from time to time;
- to appoint specialist advisers either to supply information which is not otherwise readily available or to elucidate matters of complexity within the Committee's or Sub-Committee's order of reference;
- to communicate with any Committee of Parliament on matters of common interest; and
- to meet concurrently with any other Committee for the purpose of deliberating, taking evidence or considering draft reports.

Membership

1.1.5. The Committee comprises the following members:

1. Mr. Paul Richards	Chairman
2. Mr. Roger Monroe, MP	Vice-Chairman
3. Mr. Esmond Forde, MP	Member
4. Ms. Vandana Mohit, MP	Member
5. Mr. Rohan Sinanan	Member
6. Ms. Penelope Beckles, MP	Member
7. Mr. David Nakhid	Member
8. Mr. Avinash Singh	Member

Change in Membership

1.1.6. The following changes were made to the Committee:

- (i) Mr. Avinash Singh was appointed a Member of the Committee in lieu of Ms. Allyson West with effect from January 12th, 2022.

- (ii) Ms. Vandana Mohit, MP was appointed a Member of the Committee in lieu of Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh, MP with effect from November 12th, 2021.

Secretariat Support

1.1.7. The following officers were assigned to assist the Committee:

- | | | |
|--------------------------|---|---------------------|
| 1. Mr. Julien Ogilvie | - | Secretary |
| 2. Mr. Brian Lucio | - | Assistant Secretary |
| 3. Ms. Nicole Brown | - | Researcher |
| 4. Ms. Rochelle Stafford | - | Researcher |

ABBREVIATIONS

ASA	Alliance for the State Action to end Gender Based Violence
CATT	Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago
DV	Domestic Violence
GBV	Gender Based Violence
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex
MSDFS	Ministry of Social Development and Family Services
NFSD	National Family Services Division
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OPM-GCA	Office of the Prime Minister – Gender and Child Affairs
TSBWC	Trinidad Shelter for Battered Women and Children (TSBWC)
TTPS	Trinidad and Tobago Police Service

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2.1.1. At its 12th meeting held on May 05th 2022, the Committee resolved to inquire into the State's capacity to provide support for victims of domestic violence and family conflicts with specific focus on the availability of support mechanisms during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Committee agreed on the following inquiry objectives:

1. **To examine trends in Domestic Violence in Trinidad and Tobago for the period March 2020 – March 2022 compared with previous periods;**
2. **To examine the State's policies, projects and initiatives aimed at providing support for Domestic Violence victims during the period March 2020 – March 2022;**
3. **To examine the capacity of State-funded organisations and institutions to provide adequate support to victims of Domestic Violence for the period March 2020 – March 2022**
4. **To evaluate the effectiveness of support provided to Domestic Violence victims by the State for the period March 2020 – March 2022.**

2.1.2. The Committee acquired both oral and written evidence based on the objectives listed above. Oral evidence was received during two (2) public hearings held with various stakeholders on May 05, 2022 and June 22, 2022 (*See Appendix I and Appendix II*).

2.1.3. Some of the significant findings and issues highlighted during the inquiry were:

- i. The overall impact of COVID-19 regulations on victims, survivors and the support systems and services they need to access and rely on;
- ii. The increased demand of support services required which in many cases extended beyond the normal support required pre-pandemic;
- iii. The transition of certain services from in-person to virtual, while presenting some benefits for some, presented challenges for many persons who were unable to gain access to devices or have a safe space to use their devices;

- iv. There was an observed increase in reports made¹ during the period March 2020 – March 2022;
 - v. Despite increased provisions for reporting, there is still a high prevalence of underreporting of Domestic Violence, especially among male victims. Underreporting during this period may also be attributed to victims' inability to make contact for assistance due to being in the same home with the abuser; or social stereotypes related to males reporting instances of domestic violence.
 - vi. There is a lack of consolidated data relating to Domestic Violence. Different organizations may capture different aspects of DV and this data may not be shared between organizations. The accurate levels of incidence of Domestic Violence in Trinidad and Tobago may not be accurately known;
 - vii. Based on the data provided, most offenders were predominantly male and fell within the 30-59 age group. The highest recorded type of offence for the period investigated was *assault by beating*;
 - viii. The lack of adequate funding and capacity of NGOs who provide support and care for Domestic Violence victims and survivors continues to be a major issue;
 - ix. There appears to be misinformation or misdirection of persons in need of support/DV survivors to State agencies, as persons have indicated they were unable to access the support they needed or were redirected to other agencies;
 - x. There is an overall emergency placement shortage for victims of Domestic Violence. Specific mention was made of the lack of shelters in Tobago, shelters for abused boys and men and abuse victims of the LGBTQI+ community;
 - xi. The need for more education and public awareness drives and a revision of present Health and Family Life Education Programme as a prevention plan against Domestic Violence and Gender-Based Violence;
- 2.1.4. The Committee looks forward to reviewing the Minister's response to this Report, which becomes due, sixty (60) days after it is presented to the Houses of Parliament.

¹ An increase in Domestic Violence reports were recorded based on submissions provided by the TTPS,

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

OBJECTIVE 1 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

- A. The Committee notes a general recommendation made by several stakeholders for a standardized procedure for proper intake, monitoring, evaluating, discharge and follow-up data for offenders and survivors as this will play a major role in improving the quality of DV statistics available.

- B. By the next fiscal year (2023/2024) a Gender Based Violence Consolidated Database should be established by the Central Statistical Office (CSO). This should be a public database (functional and easy to navigate) that is standardized and receives all data from various agencies. While there may still be an issue of underreporting DV – a standardized National Database can provide reliable data that will have the potential for researchers, policy makers and related agencies in creating more attuned prevention and intervention strategies.

- C. Stronger relationships to be established between local police agencies and the communities they serve. Strengthening of community bonds is important with law enforcement to encourage reporting especially for the benefit of those who may have some scepticism concerning the effectiveness of police. Nurturing of community relationships with Police agencies can be considered a short term activity (done quarterly) that can contribute to long term impacts. These relationships can be fostered through the establishment of mentorship programmes and community awareness drives.

- D. Additionally, increased human resource capacity needed especially for first responders. Re-training and empowering first responders to appropriately receive and respond to DV can further encourage victims and survivors to be more open about their abuse, thus helping provide more reliable and accurate data through reporting. Retraining and empowerment can be facilitated in-house at respective agencies and done at most on a quarterly basis.

E. The Committee acknowledges and endorses the plan of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to establish a Vulnerability Registry, which aims to identify the vulnerability status of all households in Trinidad and Tobago. The Registry will be based on reports provided by the TTPS, the OPM, the MOE, state agencies and other NGOs. Through this registry, early intervention strategies could be implemented for families in need. It is expected that this registry can be developed one year after the presentation of this report.

OBJECTIVE 2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

- A. The OPM-GCA in collaboration with the MSDFS should resume work on the Strategic Action Plan to End Gender Based Violence and Sexual Violence. The revival of this Action Plan can update data and address holistic and inclusive prevention and intervention strategies as well as the inclusion of effective responses to DV. The report should be revised to reflect such and resubmitted to Cabinet within six months of the presentation of this report.
- B. The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with NGOs and private agencies should develop a comprehensive and inclusive Health and Family Life Education programme for schools. The revision and strengthening of existing programmes do not require a vast increase in funding allocation and can be as effective in addressing DV and GBV. This is a medium term strategy and initial iterations of the programme can be based off existing toolkits from UNESCO and facilitated in-house by teachers or through education drives hosted by the NGOs and private agencies.
- C. The Committee acknowledges the recommendation made by the Alliance for State Action to end Gender based Violence for consideration to be given to revising the Domestic Violence Act to include people of the same sex who are cohabiting or in visiting relationships, in addition to revision to reflect specific cultural nuances such as households including family of friends or friends of friends – all of whom are presently excluded from the protection of the Domestic Violence Act. Revision of the act can work toward providing all-inclusive protection.

- D. Provision of a safety plans – All reports of DV (whether a protection order was granted or not) should be accompanied by a safety plan. This can offer some support and relief to persons who are afraid of reporting their abuse.**
- E. Nationwide updated Communication Strategy on DV. The communication strategy should be engaging enough to capture the attention of various age groups, be gender sensitive and take into consideration different socio-economic and cultural nuances found within Trinidad and Tobago. This is seen as an on-going endeavour and should be spear-headed by the OPM-GCA in collaboration with MSDFS.**
- F. Improvement of the overall access to support – while there are programmes available, there needs to be improved timely access to social support services that address the consequences of abuse to help survivors stabilise and rebuild their lives. This includes shelter and medical, psychological, legal, and economic and other counselling and support services. Access to support can be initiated by explicit steps outlined on social media platforms and across traditional media by each providing agency.**
- G. Within the next six months, there should be an increase of prevention and Intervention strategies (through training programmes, psycho-social support, education and empowerment) targeted specifically for men. Additionally, the development of more widespread mentorship programmes for boys and men is important. These programmes can be developed and facilitated by both Public and Private Sector agencies.**
- H. Improved monitoring and evaluation of existing programmes and intervention policies. This will greatly assist with the further improvement and development of strategies for targeted groups. This can be done in-house by each Ministry/Agency that administers intervention in any capacity, however, any data collected should be shared and should feed into the Gender-Based Violence Consolidated Database every quarter.**
- F. Regular, mandatory follow up and contact with persons affected by protection orders (victims and perpetrators) by social workers and the TTPS to monitor compliance and for assessing the need for further support and intervention.**

G. Increased electronic monitoring for repeat offenders of domestic violence is needed.

This electronic monitoring system can be expected by the end of the next fiscal year (2023-2024) and should be a collaborative effort among the Judiciary, Ministry of National Security and the TTPS.

OBJECTIVE 3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

A. Overall increase of safe housing/shelters needed in Trinidad and Tobago. There is need for an increase of shelters specifically for abused men and boys. The state should also support the establishment of shelters that serve the LGBTQI+ community. Furthermore, in light of the growing migrant population, there should also be safe housing/shelters available. This recommendation can be pursued through a multi-ministerial approach, in collaboration with private sector stakeholders and NGOs. This should be spearheaded by the OPM-GCA in collaboration with the MSDFS.

B. Transitional housing or Transitional housing programmes to assist survivors in the path to safety and stability is needed. Transitional housing can support economic empowerment and survivor autonomy by not only providing safe housing (a basic primary need) but by providing the tools and a foundation to establish economic self-sufficiency through ameliorative and transformative goals for their futures. The establishment of transitional homes can be initiated by the next fiscal year (2023-2024) and should also take a multi-ministerial approach with the MSDFS, OPM-GCA, MHUD as well as collaboration among private sector stakeholders and NGOs.

C. Filling of vacancies will assist with critical staffing shortages and boost agencies' services. The filling of these vacancies should also assist with improving the administrative processes, to manage reports and responses in a timely manner. Vacant positions mentioned in written submissions to the Committee from the MSDFD should be filled as soon as is practicable taking into account budgetary releases. Additionally, human resource capacity should be increased at the Children's Authority, considering the high caseloads mentioned in their submission. The Committee anticipates that efforts to create additional positions to increase staff capacity would commence within fiscal 2022-2023.

D. Expansion of hotline services – establishment of dedicated hotline services for persons with protection orders to report breaches or threats of breaches for immediate police response. The establishment of this hotline service can be spearheaded by the MSDFS in collaboration with the TTPS and should be officially launched six months after the presentation of this report.

OBJECTIVE 4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

- A. As proposed by the Alliance for State Action to end Gender-Based Violence, there needs to be a system of accountability to monitor compliance with police obligations e.g. issuance of a receipt of the report and investigative follow up.**
- B. Additionally, MSDFS and OPM-GCA should initiate the development of Standard Operating Procedures that are grounded in interagency coordination and incorporate clear referral pathways and timelines where necessary to improve responsiveness of service. The development of these SOPs can also be presented within 6 months of this report.**
- C. Overall improvement in the Monitoring and Evaluation of intervention strategies is needed. There is also need for greater transparency from the state regarding allocation of resources and tracking the impact of those allocations. This tracking should include basic demographic and gendered data.**

INTRODUCTION

The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Domestic Violence

- 3.1.1. The Global response to COVID-19 has contributed to many stay-at-home measures of varying degrees. While these measures assisted with the reduction of the spread of the virus, it also led to many challenges without the possibility for much reprieve for many persons. One major challenge observed during this period was an increase in Domestic Violence. It was reported that during the period of the pandemic, there was a drastic increase in Domestic Violence observed around the world²³. One article assumed a “20% increase in violence during an average three-month lockdown in all 193 UN member states. The figures take into account the anticipated high levels of under-reported cases.”⁴²
- 3.1.2. According to a UN Women Report “Measuring the shadow pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19 (2021)”⁵², survey data from thirteen countries across various regions confirms the severity of Domestic Violence (DV). Key findings noted the impact COVID-19 has on feelings of safety and the increase in women’s experience of violence during this period. The pandemic and its subsequent ‘lockdown’ measures have heightened worldwide concern regarding the imminent increase of DV cases.
- 3.1.3. “Home confinement and limited spaces in some habitats, led to constant contact between offenders and victims resulting in increased violence and decreased reports⁶.”
- 3.1.4. It was reported that “two in three women report that they or a woman they know has experienced violence at some part of their lifetime (UN Women 2021). Furthermore, approximately one in two women report direct or indirect experiences of violence since the start of the pandemic⁷.”

² [The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19 | UN Women – Headquarters](#)

³ [Coronavirus: Domestic violence 'increases globally during lockdown' - BBC News](#)

⁴ ['Calamitous': domestic violence set to soar by 20% during global lockdown | Reproductive rights | The Guardian](#)

⁵ [Measuring the shadow pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19 | UN Women Data Hub](#)

⁶ [Domestic Violence During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Systematic Review - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#)

⁷ [COVID-19 and violence against women: What the data tells us | UN Women – Headquarters](#)

- 3.1.5. Increases in verbal, sexual, physical abuse, denial of basic needs and denial of means of communication⁸ were noted in this report. It is believed that COVID-19 made these instances worse.
- 3.1.6. Socio-economic factors were also highlighted as major contributors to the increase of DV experienced during this time. Among women whose partner had no earnings, 4 in 5 reported that they or a woman they knew had experienced at least one form of violence⁹.
- 3.1.7. Despite having different modes of reporting, there is still a general fear and reluctance to do so, thus contributing to the **'dark figure' in DV**. The UN Women's report highlights the preference of respondents to seek help from family¹⁰ versus authority figures and support centres – thereby making the impact of COVID-19 even more severe for persons without or with limited social support.
- 3.1.8. Similarly to these reports, Trinidad and Tobago reported similar increases in DV for the period March 2020 – March 2022. Reports that assaults by beating, verbal abuse and breach of protection orders have increased by over 30% in some cases¹¹.
- 3.1.9. The combination of stressors related to reduced family income, children being home from school, remote learning protocols and families being confined to their homes for extended periods of time exacerbated the already tenuous scourge of domestic violence across the globe. **This Inquiry seeks to ascertain the degree to which the Covid-19 pandemic affected domestic violence reports in Trinidad and Tobago and to determine the effectiveness of the support provided by the State.**

⁸ ibid

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ [Cox: domestic beatings doubled in 2021 | Local News | trinidadexpress.com](https://www.trinidadexpress.com/news/2021/03/15/cox-domestic-beatings-doubled-in-2021-local-news-trinidadexpress.com)

Conduct of the Inquiry

3.1.10. Prior to the commencement of the public hearings, the Committee issued invitations to specific stakeholders and requested written submissions based on the following objectives:

1. **To examine trends in Domestic Violence in Trinidad and Tobago for the period March 2020 – March 2022 compared with previous periods;**
2. **To examine the state’s policies, projects and initiatives aimed at providing support for Domestic Violence victims;**
3. **To examine the capacity of state-funded organisations and institutions to provide adequate support to victims of Domestic Violence; and**
4. **To evaluate the effectiveness of support provided to Domestic Violence Victims by the State for the period March 2020 to present.**

3.1.11. Evidence gathering for this inquiry included **two (2) public hearings** held with the stakeholders listed below on **May 25, 2022 and June 22, 2022**

May 25, 2022

- Office of the Prime Minister – Gender and Child Affairs Division
- Ministry of Social Development and Family Services
- Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago
- Trinidad and Tobago Police Service

June 22, 2022

- Alliance for State Action to End Gender-Based Violence (ASA)
- Center for Nonviolence, Research and Development
- Trinidad Shelter for Battered Women and Children (TSBWC)

- 3.1.12. Subsequent to these public hearings, additional information was requested from specific stakeholders and was submitted accordingly.
- 3.1.13. Oral and written submissions received from the entities appearing before the Committee provided a frame of reference for the Committee's deliberations on the subject inquiry.
- 3.1.14. The **Minutes of the Meetings** during which the public hearings were held are attached as **Appendix II and III** and the **Verbatim Notes** as **Appendix IV and V**.

KEY ISSUES, FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

OBJECTIVE 1: To examine trends in Domestic Violence in Trinidad and Tobago for the period March 2020 – March 2022 compared with previous periods.

General Trends in Domestic Violence Identified in Trinidad and Tobago for the period March 2020-March 2022.

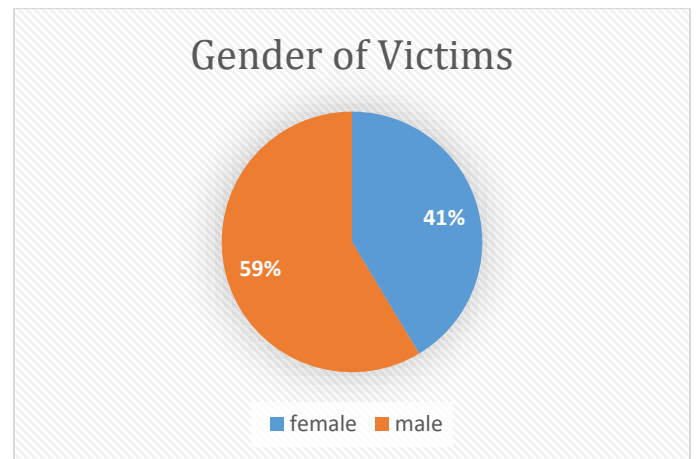
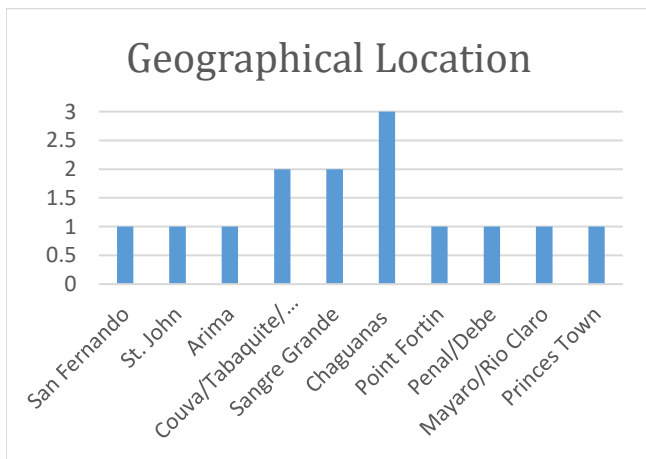
- 4.1.1. According to a written submission from the Office of the Commissioner of Police, for the period **March 2020 – March 2022, there were four thousand, eight hundred and fifty seven (4857) reports of domestic violence.** Comparatively, to previous periods (**March 2018-March 2020) there were two thousand, seven hundred and ten (2710) reports of domestic violence.** This represents an approximate 28% percent increase in reports of Domestic Violence when compared to previous years from this submission alone.
- 4.1.2. Referencing the written response from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, there was an apparent decline of reports on Domestic Violence. For the period March 2020 to March 2022, the Ministry indicated that they received **one hundred and eleven (111)** reported cases compared to one hundred and fifty four (154) for the period March 2018 to March 2020.
- 4.1.3. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services submission further states that despite declining trends, it can be noted that due to lockdown measures implemented during the pandemic there may have been an instance of underreporting as the lockdown would have impacted a person's ability to find safe and private locations to call and make a report.
- 4.1.4. Specifically referencing the written report from the Children's Authority, for the period October 14th 2021 to March 31st 2022, **fourteen (14) reports of domestic were received.** The Authority notes that its current client management does not have the provision for capturing Domestic Violence as a specific protection concern. They note however, instances where there are reports of intimate partner violence as a risk to children within a home, the Authority has taken steps to ensure that Domestic Violence be recorded specifically as a protection concern within the new client management database being developed and soon implemented.

4.1.5. It was also stated that awareness drives that were held during the pandemic contributed to the increase of reporting as persons became more aware of how to do so, whether it be through the TTPS app, online reporting or traditional modes of reporting.

4.1.6. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services noted that while there appears to be a decline in cases from 154 to 111 for the years March 2018-March 2018 and March 2020-2022, this does not mean that there were fewer cases of Domestic Violence occurring. In their submission, the Ministry stated that lockdown measures implemented during the pandemic stay-at-home orders may have impacted a person's ability to find safe and private locations to report abuse.

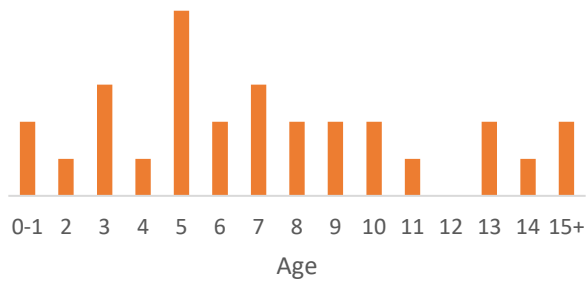
Demographic Trends in Domestic Violence Identified in Trinidad and Tobago for the period March 2020-March 2022.

4.1.7. The graphs below summarize trends documented by the **Children's Authority** for the period **October 14th 2021 – March 31st 2022**¹²

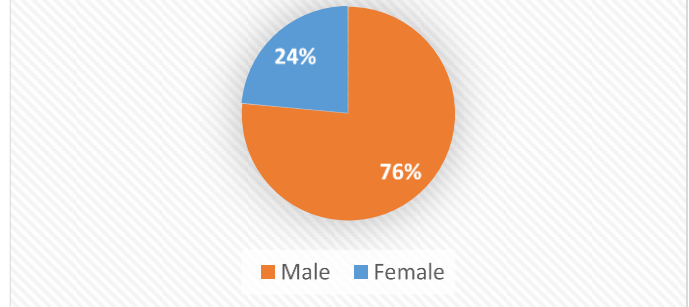


¹² The highest number of reports came from Chaguana for the period October 14th 2021 – March 31st 2022. For the aforementioned period males represented the highest number of victims and there were also more male offenders than female. Additionally, it was recorded that most male offenders were the fathers of the victims. Finally, while there was a broad age cross-section of victims, for this specific time period, most victims were age 5.

Age of Victims

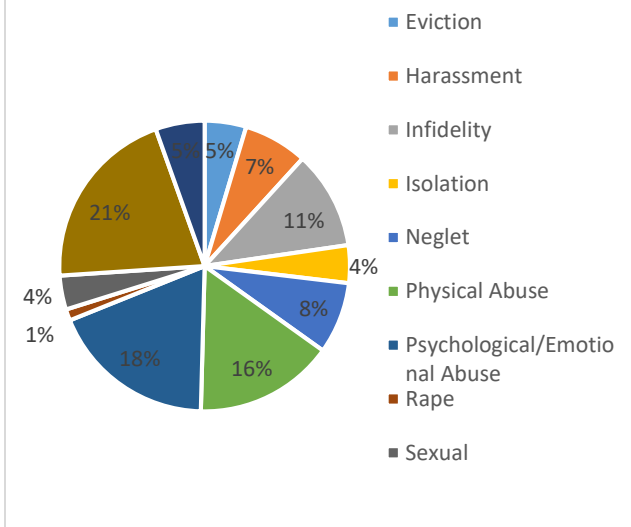


Gender of Offender

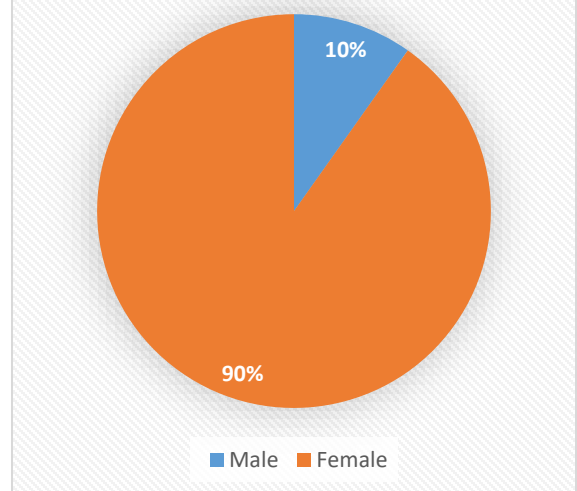


4.1.8. The graphs below summarize trends documented by the **Ministry of Social Development and Family Services' Response**¹³

Type of Offence

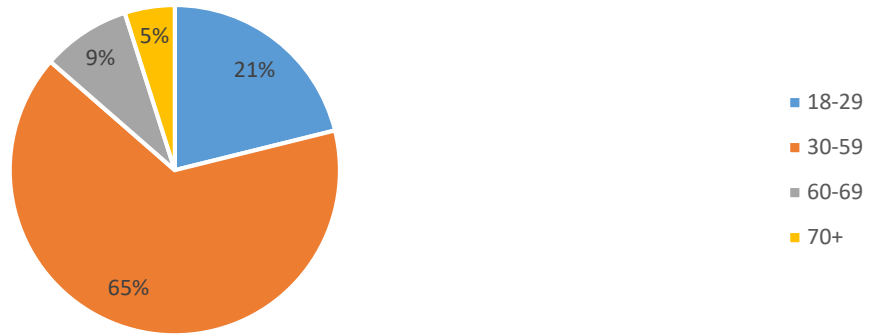


Gender of Victim



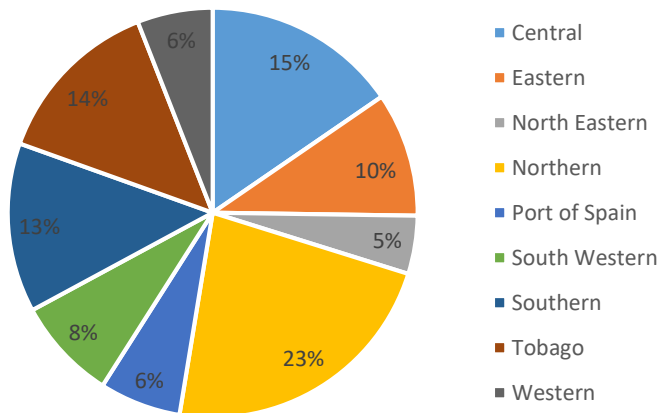
¹³ Based on the written report provided by MSDFS the highest type of offence was Threats, this was followed by psychological and emotional abuse and physical abuse. These reports also note a higher prevalence of female victims. Finally, the age range of victims tend to fall within the 30-59 age group.

Age Range of Victims

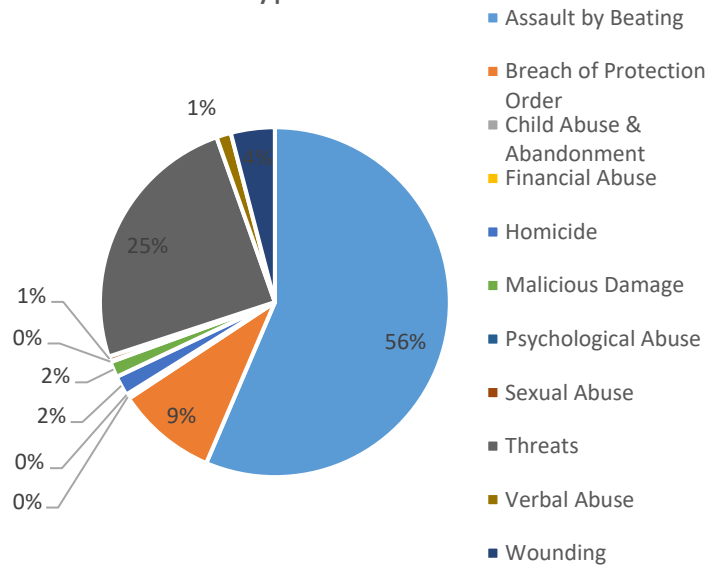


4.1.9. The graphs below summarize trends documented by the **Office of the Commissioner of Police**¹⁴.

Domestic Violence reports by Division

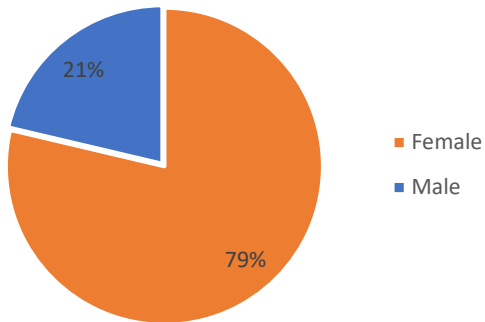


Type of Offences

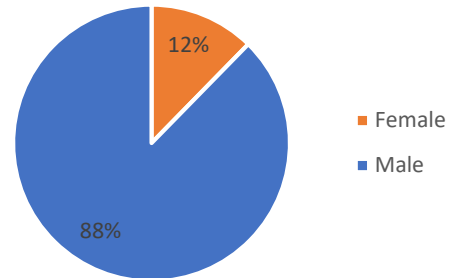


¹⁴ The data from the Office of the Commissioner of Police, the highest number of reports came from the Northern Division, this was followed by Central and Tobago regions. The highest type of offence reported was Assault by Beating followed by Child Abuse and Abandonment. Similarly to the data provided by MSDFS, the highest number of victims recorded were female. Conversely, the highest number of offenders recorded were male.

Gender of Victims



Gender of Offenders



Findings

Based on the preceding evidence, the Committee's findings are as follows:

- 4.1.10. The Committee commends the TIPS for the establishment of the Special Victims Department (SVD) as a separate Unit in January 2021. It was learnt that the Unit comprises the Child Protection Unit (CPU), the Gender Based Violence Unit (GBVU) and the Sexual Offences Unit (SOU).
- 4.1.11. Increased avenues for reporting Domestic Violence, amendments to the Gender Based Violence Act and increased awareness drives, resulted in an increase in cases reported for the period under investigation. While there has been a recorded increase of reports for this period, the Committee also noted that there is still an instance of underreporting which may ultimately misrepresent the actual level of Domestic Violence in the country.
- 4.1.12. Additionally, in terms of under-reporting, the Committee learnt that the Pandemic impacted DV investigations due to the restriction of movement of persons. Investigations were also disrupted by persons placed in quarantine and the inability to access persons to complete the investigations
- 4.1.13. The Committee noted some data gaps for specific criteria namely, additional demographic information, recidivism, total number of protection orders issued, number of persons who requested verbal warnings instead of pressing charges and follow up data showcasing their

present positions. The data gaps also included the impact of intervention strategies on victims and survivors.

- 4.1.14. While mention was made of the development of the Central Registry on Gender-Based Violence, the Committee learnt that not all data sources are being captured by/integrated into this registry. There was also mention of some stakeholders being reluctant to provide their data for this system and a general lack of usage of the GBV Central Registry System by stakeholders.

Recommendations

Considering the foregoing, the Committee recommends the following:

- A. Implementation of Data Drives – The present data collection practices could be improved and the overall process can be re-evaluated. For example, how interviewers are trained to ask questions about intimate partner violence, language and wording are areas where improvements are needed. Additionally, inclusion of more qualitative studies which examine how domestic and intimate partner violence is experienced in various socio-economic and cultural contexts and situations. Specific details highlighting these criteria can assist researchers and policy makers in creating ‘culture specific’ prevention and intervention strategies. This can be considered a medium-term activity for all agencies involved in data collection.**

- B. Within six (6) months of the presentation of this Report, there should be inclusion of additional data fields for the provision of more comprehensive and holistic information specifically by the TTPS. Data on recidivism for DV offenders, migrants (in light of the country’s growing migrant population) and LGBTQI+ communities is especially important. Better data about these groups, especially about the proportion of these groups being affected is important as this can help service providers meet their specific needs through prevention and intervention strategies.**

- C. The Committee notes a general recommendation made by several stakeholders for a standardized procedure for proper intake, monitoring, evaluating, discharge and follow-up data for offenders and survivors as this will play a major role in improving the quality of DV statistics available.

- D. By the next fiscal year (2023/2024) a Gender Based Violence Consolidated Database should be established by the Central Statistical Office (CSO). This should be a public database (functional and easy to navigate) that is standardized and receives all data from various agencies. While there may still be an issue of underreporting DV – a standardized National Database can provide reliable data that will have the potential for researchers, policy makers and related agencies in creating more attuned prevention and intervention strategies.

- E. Stronger relationships to be established between local police agencies and the communities they serve. Strengthening of community bonds is important with law enforcement to encourage reporting especially for the benefit of those who may have some scepticism concerning the effectiveness of police. Nurturing of community relationships with Police agencies can be considered a short term activity (done quarterly) that can contribute to long term impacts. These relationships can be fostered through the establishment of mentorship programmes and community awareness drives.

- F. Re-training specifically for staff of the TTPS Gender Based Violence Unit (and by extension the wider Police Academy) to receive specialized training on serving the LGBTQI+ community. Sensitivity and Diversity training should be available year round and should be available as ‘refresher courses’ at the police academy.

- G. Additionally, increased human resource capacity needed especially for first responders. Re-training and empowering first responders to appropriately receive and respond to DV can further encourage victims and survivors to be more open about their abuse, thus helping provide more reliable and accurate data through reporting. Retraining and empowerment can be facilitated in-house at respective agencies and done at most on a quarterly basis.

H. The Committee acknowledges and endorses the plan of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to establish a Vulnerability Registry, which aims to identify the vulnerability status of all households in Trinidad and Tobago. The Registry will be based on reports provided by the TTPS, the OPM, the MOE, state agencies and other NGOs. Through this registry, early intervention strategies could be implemented for families in need. It is expected that this registry can be developed one year after the presentation of this report.

OBJECTIVE 2: To examine the State’s policies, projects and initiatives aimed at providing support for Domestic Violence victims during the period March 2020 – March 2022

The Reporting Process

- 5.1.1. In their written submission, the TTPS indicated that a victim statement is critical to the investigation in order to charge the alleged offender and take them to court. Mention was made that oftentimes **victims/survivors do not cooperate with prosecutorial process and request that the alleged offender be warned verbally**. In cases such as these the TTPS would warn the alleged offender, note and close the issue as “Crime No Further Police Action.”
- 5.1.2. It was learnt that at the Children’s Authority, once a report of Domestic Violence has been received, and it is determined that a child is in imminent danger, the Authority’s Emergency Response Team (ERT) responds within twenty-four hours to investigate, offer psychological first aid and coordinate referrals for further psychosocial support services. If it is determined that the child is not in imminent risk, the intervention unit responds within two weeks to a month to conduct Investigations. It was learnt that under Section 4(7) of the Domestic Violence (Amendment) Act 2020, the Children’s Authority and by extension its Social Workers are empowered to apply for Protection orders where they have reason to believe that a child is in danger.

The Impact of COVID-19 on policies, programmes and State policies

- 5.1.3. All stakeholders indicated that COVID-19 had an impact on the delivery of policies, programmes and policies geared toward providing support to survivors and victims of Domestic Violence. While some stakeholders were able to adapt their present programmes and some support services virtually, there were some major challenges experienced by other stakeholders where the support required was only available in-person
- 5.1.4. In a written submission provided by “*The Shelter*,” it was mentioned that stay-at-home policies negatively impacted the ability of DV victims to relocate to safe houses.
- 5.1.5. In some cases, access to DV hotlines was also negatively impacted as some victims would still be at home with the perpetrator. It was noted by The Shelter that this would have also contributed to the inability of some victims to relocate to safety.

5.1.6. It was reported that despite the restrictions implemented during the pandemic, support services still continued; however, the delivery method had to be adjusted. Many support programmes such as counselling and psychological support transitioned to online platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, WhatsApp and traditional mediums such as radio, television and telephone.

Programmes

5.1.7. The **Spotlight Initiative** is a global, multi-year partnership to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls by 2030¹⁵. The initiative addressed family and domestic violence with specific focus on three target communities: Tunapuna/Piarco, Mayaro/Rio Claro and Tobago. The Committee learnt that Phase 1 of the initiative was completed in 2021 and is currently engaged in Phase 2.

5.1.8. According to the OPM-GCA, the rationale for selecting these communities was based on data collected in terms of the incidents of domestic violence in these areas. The initiative focused on capacity building and mobilizing persons to train others within the community.

5.1.9. Sensitization programmes are also conducted by the Children's Authority. Of the sessions conducted, sixty-one were conducted for children aimed at educating them on child abuse and child abuse protection. Other sessions were conducted for parents and guardians. **Appendix II** outlines the sessions held and their topics.

5.1.10. In October 2021, the Children's Authority launched a national multimedia campaign in partnership with the Spotlight Initiative and ICAN aimed at creating awareness and reducing incidence of violence against women and children. In the Authority's submission, it was mentioned that the estimated reach so far is six hundred and fifty thousand (650,000) persons via the platforms utilized.

5.1.11. Animations and media releases are frequently used to disperse information on the prevention of child abuse and violence.

¹⁵ [Spotlight Initiative Trinidad and Tobago Programme Report 2020 | Spotlight Initiative](#)

5.1.12. The MSDFS highlighted some of its main initiatives targeting the prevention/reduction of Domestic Violence. These include:

- a. the reintroduction of the Community Lay Responders Programme;
- b. the reintroduction of a Critical Incidence Programme;
- c. the National Parenting Programme;
- d. Social Services Empowerment (SSE);
- e. the Social Transformation and Empowerment Programme- Uplifting People (STEP-UP); and
- f. the UN Women Foundations Programme: Strengthening Preventative Approaches to Address Gender Based Violence in the Caribbean.

5.1.13. It was noted that there is collaboration among many entities for the hosting and delivery of programmes dealing with DV. There is frequent partnership between the MSDFS, OPM-GCA, and TTPS among others. The Spotlight initiative alone has identified key partnerships with the aforementioned but also including the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of National Security, Ministry of Planning and Development, the Judiciary of Trinidad and Tobago, Regional Corporations, Women's Rights Organizations and National and grassroots organizations¹⁶. Partnerships among these entities allow for the implementation of projects and the delivery of sensitization and education programmes.

5.1.14. The Committee learnt that there are future plans for collaboration between the MSDFS, the TTPS and other Ministries state agencies and NGOs, CBOs and FBOs to conduct community outreach programmes throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

Support Services

5.1.15. The MSDFS is in the process of establishing a 24-hour crisis hotline to facilitate the public in accessing psychosocial support outside of regular working hours, weekends and public holidays.

¹⁶ [Spotlight Initiative Trinidad and Tobago Programme Report 2020 | Spotlight Initiative](#)

- 5.1.16. NGOs are frequently engaged in providing support services such as economic empowerment (business training etc.) psychosocial support, legal aid in some instances, community outreach and education.
- 5.1.17. During the case management process at the Children’s Authority, psychosocial support is provided to children and their families. This includes psychoeducational counselling, referrals for therapeutic or psychiatric interventions. Other support services offered include parenting training, mediation, co-parenting, referral for assistance with social welfare and housing.
- 5.1.18. NGOs voiced that financial constraints remain a major challenge in assisting Domestic Violence survivors and victims especially in terms of securing and managing safe-housing. One organization mentioned receiving a subvention of \$7500 despite having operational costs exceeding \$60,000 monthly.
- 5.1.19. Personal financial constraints also had an impact on securing accommodation for many victims and survivors. It was noted that survivors were unable to pay their rent during this time due to financial constraints. Some were evicted with their children or were engaged in coercive relations to secure housing for themselves and their families.

Communication Strategies and Public Education Drives

- 5.1.20. Virtual sensitization and public education sessions were held by most entities.
- 5.1.21. NFSD also maintained a Public Awareness Radio Programme called “It’s Family Time, Let’s Talk” and this was extended to a television series of the same name. The programme highlighted family related issues and the services of the NFSD. It was noted that one session addressed Domestic Violence.
- 5.1.22. The OPM-GCA hosted a radio series called SPEAK: A Conversation for Men in July 2020. The radio series sought to address men on issues such as violence, parenting, relationships and

mental health. OPM-GCA's submission indicated that there were six (6) segments successfully held and they also facilitated live call-in sessions¹⁷.

Findings

Programmes, Policies and other support services are important for providing victims and survivors of domestic violence with the necessary information and resources they need. Programmes, Policies and other services often create a safety net for victims and survivors, helping them with locating safe housing, psychosocial support, food security, financial assistance and ideally, empowering victims to build a new life for themselves and their families. Programmes, policies and other support services observed locally include hotlines, shelters, multi-sectoral awareness programmes, food and financial grants, legal and psychosocial support.

Based on the preceding evidence, the Committee's findings are as follows:

- i. Despite the restrictions implemented, most support services continued during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ii. COVID-19 regulations had an impact on the delivery of programmes and support services during the identified period. One of the positive impacts discussed was the opportunity to leverage virtual platforms to engage persons especially for education and awareness drives. Traditional modes of communication, such as telephone, television and radio were also utilized during this time.
- iii. While work continued in most cases, restrictions negatively impacted the extent of which organizations could fully support victims and survivors. Lockdown regulations affected the manner in which victims and survivors could reach out for support to and report incidences of Domestic Violence they were experiencing.
- iv. Virtual Court proceedings had a positive impact on victims and survivors as they felt safer and experienced an overall sense of comfort as they were no longer in a physical court room with the offender.
- v. While the use of digital tools was heightened – access to technology was difficult for some. For example, victims and survivors had no access to devices or internet to attend court. Others who

¹⁷ See Appendix III for more details on other programmes provided.

lived with their abusers may not have been able to reach out for support due to being monitored. Some victims/survivors attempted to find alternative and creative ways to access the help they needed.

- vi. Funding continues to be a major challenge for agencies that support domestic violence victims and survivors. It was mentioned in a submission that the current financial support is ‘woefully inadequate.’ The processes to receive funding were described as convoluted and did not seem to contemplate the urgency of most situations.
- vii. An influx of persons needing shelter during the COVID19 pandemic highlighted the current limitations of safe houses, regarding availability, space and capacity. This challenge was also compounded by the fact that some victims and survivors had limited or no support networks to assist with alternative accommodation.
- viii. During the COVID-19 stay-at-home policies, it was mentioned that the restriction of movement meant that victims/survivors were reluctant to leave their homes without the assistance of police for fear of arrest.
- ix. It was noted that there was an increased strain in resources especially for NGOs. The support services which they provided pre-pandemic often included economic empowerment grants, legal and information support increased, but NGOs also noted a drastic increase in basic services such as food hampers, and rent support.

Recommendations

In light of the foregoing, the Committee recommends the following:

- A. The OPM-GCA in collaboration with the MSDFS should resume work on the Strategic Action Plan to End Gender Based Violence and Sexual Violence. The revival of this Action Plan can update data and address holistic and inclusive prevention and intervention strategies as well as the inclusion of effective responses to DV. The report should be revised to reflect such and resubmitted to Cabinet within six months of the presentation of this report.**

- B. The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with NGOs and private agencies should develop a comprehensive and inclusive Health and Family Life Education programme for schools. The revision and strengthening of existing programmes do not require a vast increase in funding allocation and can be as effective in addressing DV and GBV. This is a medium term strategy and initial iterations of the programme can be based off existing toolkits from UNESCO and facilitated in-house by teachers or through education drives hosted by the NGOs and private agencies.
- C. The Committee acknowledges the recommendation made by the Alliance for State Action to end Gender based Violence for consideration to be given to revising the Domestic Violence Act to include people of the same sex who are cohabiting or in visiting relationships, in addition to revision to reflect specific cultural nuances such as households including family of friends or friends of friends – all of whom are presently excluded from the protection of the Domestic Violence Act. Revision of the act can work toward providing all-inclusive protection.
- D. Provision of a safety plans – All reports of DV (whether a protection order was granted or not) should be accompanied by a safety plan. This can offer some support and relief to persons who are afraid of reporting their abuse.
- E. Nationwide updated Communication Strategy on DV. The communication strategy should be engaging enough to capture the attention of various age groups, be gender sensitive and take into consideration different socio-economic and cultural nuances found within Trinidad and Tobago. This is seen as an on-going endeavour and should be spearheaded by the OPM-GCA in collaboration with MSDFS.
- F. Improvement of the overall access to support – while there are programmes available, there needs to be improved timely access to social support services that address the consequences of abuse to help survivors stabilise and rebuild their lives. This includes shelter and medical, psychological, legal, and economic and other counselling and support services. Access to support can be initiated by explicit steps outlined on social media platforms and across traditional media by each providing agency.

- G.** Within the next six months, there should be an increase of prevention and Intervention strategies (through training programmes, psycho-social support, education and empowerment) targeted specifically for men. Additionally, the development of more widespread mentorship programmes for boys and men is important. These programmes can be developed and facilitated by both Public and Private Sector agencies.
- H.** Improved monitoring and evaluation of existing programmes and intervention policies. This will greatly assist with the further improvement and development of strategies for targeted groups. This can be done in-house by each Ministry/Agency that administers intervention in any capacity, however, any data collected should be shared and should feed into the Gender-Based Violence Consolidated Database every quarter.
- I.** Regular, mandatory follow up and contact with persons affected by protection orders (victims and perpetrators) by social workers and the TTPS to monitor compliance and for assessing the need for further support and intervention.
- J.** Increased electronic monitoring for repeat offenders of domestic violence is needed. This electronic monitoring system can be expected by the end of the next fiscal year (2023-2024) and should be a collaborative effort among the Judiciary, Ministry of National Security and the TTPS.

OBJECTIVE 3: To examine the capacity of State-funded organisations and institutions to provide adequate support to victims of Domestic Violence for the period March 2020 – March 2022

Funding Capacity

- 6.1.1. Funding for organisations/institutions/policies and programmes varied across different entities. While there was generally no criteria explicitly expressed for the variations in funding allocations, some entities mentioned that they are woefully underfunded and that negatively influences their ability to fulfil their mandates. While most submissions outlined state funding, other forms of donations (food hampers, computers/equipment, clothing etc.) were also noted.
- 6.1.2. The Committee learnt that for the establishment of the Divisional Special Victims Department (under which the Gender Based Violence Unit falls) a total of one million, eight hundred and twenty-eight thousand, seven hundred and fifty-one dollars and sixty-three cents (\$1,828,751.63) was spent under the Public Sector Investment Programmes (PSIP). For fiscal 2019-2020 and 2020-2021, funding was spent on upgrade works at various police stations, establishment of the SVU at the San Raphael Police Station and accommodation for the Gender Affairs and Sexual Offences Unit at the old Ministry of Education Building, St. Clair.
- 6.1.3. During the period March 2020 and March 2022, the OPM-GCA provided one off grants in order to provide support to survivors of domestic violence in the sum of one hundred and thirty thousand, nine hundred and eighty five (\$130,985.00) to seven organizations.
- 6.1.4. For the same period the MSDFS provided a total of four million, six hundred and ninety-six thousand, three hundred and seventy-five dollars (\$4,696,375.00). Of the seven organizations financially supported, five organizations received an annual subvention, disbursed quarterly, while two organizations received one off grants.
- 6.1.5. For the years 2020 to March 2022, the Children’s Authority received a total of one hundred and ninety million dollars (\$190,000,000.00)¹⁸, however it was reported that in many instances

¹⁸ For the year 2020, the CA received a total of \$68.9 Mn. State funding increased in the year 2021, as The Authority received \$88.70 Mn. At the time of the public hearing, the Authority was able to provide the total amount of State funding received up to the period March 2022. The Authority received a total of \$32.40 Mn. for the period March 2022.

the financial (and technical) support resources available for children in DV situations are insufficient to meet the required needs.

- 6.1.6. In some instances only financial support was provided to the requesting organizations. However, other forms of assistance also included knowledge sharing and capacity building initiatives were provided.

Safe Housing

- 6.1.7. Shelter capacity varies based on facility size but oftentimes the capacity at these shelters is unable to meet increasing demands. Many shelters are closing down or are unable to function optimally, primarily due to a lack of funding.
- 6.1.8. Most shelters cater to women and children, leaving a large gap for men and boys who are also victims of Domestic Violence. It was mentioned by representatives from the office of the Prime Minister, Gender and Child Affairs, that a Domestic Violence Shelter would be set up but a specific timeframe for this was not provided.
- 6.1.9. During the second public hearing which was held with NGOs, the Trinidad Shelter for Battered Women and Children reported that there were no shelters in Tobago but there are Gender Based Violence (GBV) officers stationed there. At the time of the hearing, it was briefly discussed that a property was awarded by the Tobago House of Assembly to establish a Shelter.
- 6.1.10. Emergency and Transitional accommodation is also severely lacking for marginalized groups in Trinidad and Tobago. In their submission, the Alliance for State Action to end Gender-Based Violence specifically noted that access to safe and affordable housing is a prominent issue faced by LGBTQI+ people. This issue has been exacerbated by economic constraints due to restrictions implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 6.1.11. During the hearing, the Committee learnt that the Children's Authority is presently facing a placement crisis. There are presently four centres under the Authority's purview, however, the CATT has seen an upward trend of four thousand cases of abuse per year. A placement crisis

means that it is often extremely difficult to find alternative placement for children, especially for siblings to remain together, or for child victims to remain with their non-offending parent.

6.1.12. In the instances where shelters can accommodate persons, some are not properly funded and are unable to provide the care required.

6.1.13. It was further discussed that shelter shortages can contribute to further trauma and the continuation of a cycle of abuse. The CATT explained that while they try not to separate children from their non-offending parent, due to limited spaces at shelters, alternative placement has to be sourced which may mean children may be separated from their parent or siblings. This separation often leads to the trauma experienced by victims. Furthermore, when victims are unable to find shelters, or the shelters are unable to meet capacity demands, many victims return to abusive homes when no other alternative can be located.

6.1.14. Safe housing for children was also discussed. Specifically in terms of improving capacity at children's homes a brief discussion regarding licensure was held. The essential purpose of licensing is to provide basic protection to prevent harm to children¹⁹. Generally, licensure assists with oversight and assists with the approval of basic standards of care, proper infrastructure, monitoring compliance and enforcement. At present,, there are children's homes that have not met the standards required for the issue of a license but continue to operate²⁰. Improper standards and lack of general oversight can put child victims of DV at further risk of abuse or insufficient care. The issuance of a license to existing and potential safe housing for children can ensure that certain minimum standards for care and protection are preserved²¹.

Administrative Capacity

6.1.15. Staff shortages were observed in some of the submissions provided by the entities.

¹⁹ [CCEEPRA Licensing and Quality Brief \(hhs.gov\)](https://www.hhs.gov/cceepra-licensing-and-quality-brief)

²⁰ Safeguarding Children in Community Residences and Child Support Centres in Trinidad and Tobago Dec 2021

²¹ *ibid*

6.1.16. Submissions also reported that there are limited human resources available to treat with the volume of needs. Furthermore, there are extremely limited options for specialized therapeutic interventions for young children.

Findings

Based on the preceding evidence, the Committee's findings are as follows:

- A. Despite allocations provided by the State, many shelters state that the funds received are insufficient to efficiently manage daily operations. Shelters are closing primarily due to a lack of funding. These closures also impact the remaining shelters as the present (limited) capacity becomes further strained. While it was mentioned that Government intends to open more shelters, NGOs have stated that there needs to be more support for the shelters that currently exist²².
- B. There is an overall shortage of safe houses and shelters especially for minority groups (LGBTQI²³+ and migrants) as well as male victims of Domestic Violence. Specifically for the minority groups, the pandemic and its associated restrictions have highlighted the need for safe houses in addition to financial and food assistance²⁴.
- C. In some cases, there are certain restrictions that pose challenges for victims and survivors to find safe-housing. Besides capacity constraints, there are age and sex restrictions as well as limits on the length of stay placed on residents.
- D. The Committee acknowledges the development of a multi-sectorial task force by the OPM-GCA to review recommendations and develop a work plan to address gaps previously identified in a report on care at some children's homes. The Committee learnt during the public hearing that gaps have been identified at children's homes and places of care. Subsequently, a task force has been set up to look at the recommendations to develop a work plan. It was specifically mentioned by the OPM-GCA, that meetings with agencies and representatives have been taking

²² [Shelters need \\$\\$ to save women's lives - Trinidad Guardian](#)

²³ ²³ [CAISO wants more protection, safe houses for LGBTQI+ community - Trinidad Guardian](#)

²⁴ *ibid*

place to deal with this issue. The task force is multi-sectoral and some services and resources have already been volunteered to rectify some of the gaps discovered.

- E. It was noted that there are still some issues concerning licensing –specifically dealing with infra-structural matters. The OPM-GCA has been discussing some of these issues regarding licensing with the CATT, dealing with infrastructure and similarly related issues. This matter has been under the consideration of the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity.
- F. Emergency and transitional homes are critically needed. While emergency shelters are a source of immediate safety short-term, Transitional housing is important to provide victims of a housing option as well as supportive services for a longer period of time. Transitional housing facilities could give survivors the time and services needed to achieve goals for long-term safety and stability²⁵.
- G. Concerning human resource capacity, it was noted that despite having the existence of several agencies providing services to address domestic violence and referrals are made to these agencies for psycho-social support, there are usually lengthy waiting times for cases to be assigned within these agencies due to the high demand for these services. This often impacts intervention timeframes which oftentimes results in continued abuse in the home.
- H. Extremely high caseloads negatively impact caseworkers’ ability to provide necessary support and intervention in a timely manner.

Recommendations

In light of the foregoing, the Committee recommends the following:

- A. **Overall increase of safe housing/shelters needed in Trinidad and Tobago. There is need for an increase of shelters specifically for abused men and boys. The state should also support the establishment of shelters that serve the LGBTQI+ community. Furthermore, in light of the growing migrant population, there should also be safe hous-**

²⁵ [Transitional Housing Programs and Empowering Survivors of Domestic Violence | OVV | Department of Justice](#)

ing/shelters available. This recommendation can be pursued through a multi-ministerial approach, in collaboration with private sector stakeholders and NGOs. This should be spearheaded by the OPM-GCA in collaboration with the MSDFS.

- B. Transitional housing or Transitional housing programmes to assist survivors in the path to safety and stability is needed. Transitional housing can support economic empowerment and survivor autonomy by not only providing safe housing (a basic primary need) but by providing the tools and a foundation to establish economic self-sufficiency through ameliorative and transformative goals for their futures. The establishment of transitional homes can be initiated by the next fiscal year (2023-2024) and should also take a multi-ministerial approach with the MSDFS, OPM-GCA, MHUD as well as collaboration among private sector stakeholders and NGOs.
- C. Filling of vacancies will assist with critical staffing shortages and boost agencies' services. The filling of these vacancies should also assist with improving the administrative processes, to manage reports and responses in a timely manner. Vacant positions mentioned in written submissions to the Committee from the MSDFD should be filled as soon as is practicable taking into account budgetary releases. Additionally, human resource capacity should be increased at the Children's Authority, considering the high caseloads mentioned in their submission. The Committee anticipates that efforts to create additional positions to increase staff capacity would commence within fiscal 2022-2023.
- D. Expansion of hotline services – establishment of dedicated hotline services for persons with protection orders to report breaches or threats of breaches for immediate police response. The establishment of this hotline service can be spearheaded by the MSDFS in collaboration with the TTPS and should be officially launched six months after the presentation of this report.

OBJECTIVE 4: To evaluate the effectiveness of support provided to Domestic Violence victims by the State for the period March 2020 – March 2022

Present Monitoring and Evaluation Processes and Procedures

- 7.1.1. Monitoring and Evaluation of support services was mentioned by the CATT, MSDFS and the TTPS. There was little variation in the steps taken by these entities for M&E. These entities undertake self-monitoring of their own programmes and services as well as the monitoring and evaluation of outsourced services. The general steps outlined by the entities are listed below:
- a. measuring of performance against key performance indicators;
 - b. clinical feedback from professionals offering therapeutic and other psychosocial services;
 - c. follow up calls and visits to external agencies where referred clients may have attended
 - d. monitoring via wellness checks conducted by the TTPS; and
 - e. the MSDFS utilizes a Monitoring and Evaluation Framework Virtual Platform, tracks the progress of programmes and initiatives. Feedback forms and reports are also provided.
- 7.1.2. The OPM-GCA stated in their submission that the effectiveness of subventions, grants and other services that they implement are assessed by both financial and non-financial criteria. These criteria are implemented prior to the disbursement and reviewed upon receipt of reports by receiving organizations.
- 7.1.3. It was noted that the monitoring and evaluation of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) would fall under the remit of certain ministries. For example, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services' Monitoring and Evaluation Division (MED) is responsible for assessing and evaluating NGOs under its purview inclusive of those that lend support to domestic violence victims. Evaluation reports provided by the Ministry provides recommendations on steps for improvement.
- 7.1.4. The TTPS also mentioned conducting wellness checks in the form of telephone checks and in person visits. Additionally, follow up conversations are conducted with State Agencies via email

to determine whether the social support was accessed and if follow up sessions are conducted with victims.

- 7.1.5. The Committee learnt that the OPM-GCA is collaborating with UNFPA to upgrade and convert the Central Registry on Domestic Violence to the Central Registry on Gender Based Violence. A central registry not only helps with observing trends and creating tailored policy and intervention strategies, but can also assist with the evaluation of these strategies. While stakeholders have been trained to use the new system, there are still some challenges experienced, mainly data migration issues, user functionality issues and reluctance to provide data to the new system.

Impact of COVID-19 on the effectiveness of support provided by the State

- 7.1.6. COVID-19 affected many agencies and ministries ability to undertake evaluation of State's support intervention.
- 7.1.7. Issues faced during this period include staffing issues and the quick transition needed to take business and services online due to new COVID-19 protocols.
- 7.1.8. In some cases some agencies were not able to continue monitoring and evaluation during this time. The OPM-GCA indicated in their submission that they were unable to undertake an evaluation of state's support for DV victims mainly due to staff shortages.
- 7.1.9. Communication was identified as a major challenge in the early stages of the pandemic as a result of remote work operations and insufficient exchange of alternative methods for communication.
- 7.1.10. Alternative methods were explored to ensure that support was provided during this time to DV victims. This meant transitioning support remotely, either through telephone or via virtual platforms.
- 7.1.11. There were also reports of challenges experienced placing victims in shelters/safe houses during the pandemic, either due to reduced capacity or the new COVID-19 regulations.

7.1.12. Despite the challenges outlined, state agencies indicated that DV Victims were still able to access support during the period under investigation. Specifically, the OPM-GCA mentioned that during the Period March 2020-March 2022 three shelters reported that one hundred and ninety-two victims of DV were able to leave their abusers either temporarily in shelters or permanently. Additionally, services such as psychosocial support and counselling also continued during the pandemic.

Findings

Based on the preceding evidence, the Committee's findings are as follows:

- i. Monitoring and Evaluation of policy and programmes is usually done internally (i.e. most agencies are assessing and rating their own effectiveness of support services provided) this raises some question about the validity and accuracy of the effectiveness of support provided.
- ii. Support needed during the heights of the pandemic extended beyond the usual and included support for basic services, namely food hampers and support for rent payments. The economic impact of the pandemic on many victims and survivors of DV led to a strain on a support system that was already facing major constraints due to the increased demand.
- iii. The strain and difficulty in accessing certain resources was also reiterated by NGOs in their written submissions and during the second Public Hearing. For example it was mentioned that survivors reported not being able to access legal aid services as calls and emails went unanswered
- iv. While it was claimed that survivors were not able to access legal aid due to unanswered calls and emails, the Secretary to the Legal Aid Authority responded to this allegation during the 2nd Public Hearing. The response is quoted below:

“We adjusted our systems during the pandemic. We had and continue to have a team that monitors emails and responds accordingly. In addition to, as an essential service, we did not close. Staff would have been rostered but our data shows that our services continued digitally, in person and via telephone access. I would like the affected person to reach out so we can ascertain if there were any gaps in our systems during 2019 to 2020, and 2020 to 2021. Over 9,000 people in each period accessed us through the means previously stated.”

- v. This claim was also addressed during the **JSC Finance and Legal Affairs public** hearing held on June 24th 2022²⁶.
- vi. Limitations in assessment and evaluation may have contributed to the underestimation of shelters available to accept victims of DV during this time, thus subjecting them to further risk. With reference to the submission provided by the TTPS, difficulty to access safe houses resulted in victims receiving protection orders, living in the same house as the perpetrator.
- vii. While there was some benefit to providing remote services to victims and survivors, the move toward virtual support was not without its challenges. The benefits included a wider reach to persons accessing training and awareness programmes and also a greater sense of comfort for the victim/survivor during virtual court proceedings because they were no longer in the room with the perpetrator. However, the challenges faced included victims who were not technically-literate or had access to devices to meet required schedules.
- viii. Stronger monitoring and tracking of reports made is needed. In a written submission, ASA mentions survivors whose partners/abusers belong to the protective services have reported that officers sometimes refuse to take reports and those that have escalated have noted that files have ‘gone missing.’
- ix. While there was an increase in the sensitization and education/awareness drives by various agencies, there are limited monitoring initiatives in place to assess the effectiveness of these sessions.

Recommendations

In light of the foregoing, the Committee recommends the following:

- A. As proposed by the Alliance for State Action to end Gender-Based Violence, there needs to be a system of accountability to monitor compliance with police obligations e.g. issu**

²⁶ The verbatim notes for the JSC Finance and Legal Affairs can be found at the following link <https://parlcloud.ttparliament.org/index.php/s/2CjY67YadgyHADK>.

The claim was addressed by Mr. Richard Ragoobarsingh, Secretary to the Legal Aid Authority, on the last paragraph on page 52 as well as pages 53 and 54.

ance of a receipt of the report and investigative follow up.

- B. The MSDFS should develop and implement standardized risk assessment tools and procedures that can be used across different agencies and Ministries. This will assist with ensuring the provision of consistent support and safety of all victims and survivors of Domestic Violence. It is proposed that this standardized risk assessment toolkit can be developed within 6 months of the presentation of this report.

- C. Additionally, MSDFS and OPM-GCA should initiate the development of Standard Operating Procedures that are grounded in interagency coordination and incorporate clear referral pathways and timelines where necessary to improve responsiveness of service. The development of these SOPs can also be presented within 6 months of this report.

- D. Overall improvement in the Monitoring and Evaluation of intervention strategies is needed. There is also need for greater transparency from the state regarding allocation of resources and tracking the impact of those allocations. This tracking should include basic demographic and gendered data.

- E. Monitoring systems should be implemented for training programmes and awareness drives to ensure the effectiveness of these programmes to their targeted audience. While each organization usually conducts its own M&E, standardized criteria can be spearheaded by MSDFS. This criteria can be developed three months after the presentation of this report and should be made available via the Ministry's website.

Your Committee respectfully submits this Report for the consideration of the Parliament.

Mr. Paul Richards
Chairman

Mr. Esmond Forde, MP
Vice-Chairman

Mr. Avinash Singh,
Member

Mr. David Nakhid
Member

Ms. Vandana Mohit, MP
Member

Mr. Roger Monroe, MP
Member

Ms. Penelope Beckles, MP
Member

Mr. Rohan Sinanan
Member

March 21, 2023

APPENDICES

Appendix I – List of officials who appeared and provided oral evidence

Name of Official	Portfolio	Organization
Public Hearing Held on May 25, 2022		
<p>Mrs. Jacinta Bailey-Sobers</p> <p>Ms. Gaietry Pargass</p> <p>Mrs. Anne-Marie Quammie-Alleyne</p> <p>Name prohibited (participating anonymously)</p>	<p>Permanent Secretary Ag.</p> <p>Senior Legal Advisor</p> <p>Coordinator, National Policy on Gender & Development</p> <p>Asst. Coordinator, National Domestic Shelters</p>	<p>Office of the Prime Minister-Gender and Child Affairs Division</p>
<p>Ms. Jacqueline Johnson</p> <p>Ms. Kathleen Sarkar</p> <p>Ms. Cindy Heeralal</p>	<p>Permanent Secretary</p> <p>Asst. Director, National Family Services Division</p> <p>Coordinator, Non-Governmental Organisation</p>	<p>Officials of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.</p>
<p>Mrs. Sharon Morris-Cummings</p> <p>Mrs. Rhonda Gregoire-Roopchan</p> <p>Ms. Elizabeth Lewis</p>	<p>Director Ag.</p> <p>Deputy Director, Care Services</p> <p>Deputy Director Ag., Legal & Regulatory Services</p>	<p>Officials of the Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago</p>

Name of Official	Portfolio	Organization
<p>Mr. McDonald Jacob</p> <p>Mrs. Sharon Gomez-Cooper</p> <p>Mrs. Claire Guy-Alleyne</p> <p>Ms. Aisha Corbie</p>	<p>Commissioner of Police Ag.</p> <p>Asst. Commissioner of Police, Criminal Division</p> <p>Superintendent, Gender-Based Violence & Child Protection Unit</p> <p>Manager, Victim & Witness Support Unit</p>	<p>Officials of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service</p>
<p>Public Hearing Held on June 22, 2022</p>		
<p>Ms. Roberta Clarke</p> <p>Dr. Gabrielle Hosein</p> <p>Ms. Asiya Mohammed</p> <p>Ms. Safiyyah Acosta</p>	<p>President, Coalition Against Domestic Violence</p> <p>Representative, Institute of Gender and Development Studies</p> <p>Founder and Executive Director, Conflict Women Ltd.</p> <p>Outreach Coordinator WOMANTRA</p>	<p>Officials of the Alliance for State Action to End Gender-based Violence (ASA)</p>
<p>Mrs. Sherna Alexander-Benjamin</p> <p>Ms. Asha Garib</p> <p>Ms. Chimere Gibson Wadi</p>	<p>Anti-Violence, Social Protection, and Human Economy Consultant</p> <p>Clinical Psychologist</p> <p>Attorney at Law</p>	<p>Officials of the Organisation for Abused and Battered Individuals (OABI)</p>

Name of Official	Portfolio	Organization
Mr. Collin Mitchell	Chairman	Officials of the Trinidad Shelter for Battered Women and Children (TSBWC)
Ms. Sherron Harford	Vice Chairman	
Dr. Maria Gomes	Executive Committee Member Resident Care Coordinator	

Appendix II – Minutes of 12th Meeting

MINUTES OF THE TWELFTH MEETING OF THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE OF PARLIAMENT ON SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION,

This meeting was facilitated via the Zoom video conferencing program

PRESENT

Members of the Committee

Mr. Paul Richards	Chairman
Ms. Pennelope Beckles, MP	Member
Mr. Rohan Sinanan	Member
Ms. Vandana Mohit, MP	Member
Mr. David Nakhid	Member

ABSENT/EXCUSED

Mr. Roger Monroe, MP	Vice-Chairman
Mr. Esmond Forde, MP	Member
Mr. Avinash Singh	Member

Secretariat

Mr. Brian Lucio	Assistant Secretary
Ms. Nicole Brown	Researcher

CALL TO ORDER

1.1 The Chairman called the meeting to order at 9:40 a.m. and welcomed members present.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- 2.1 The Chairman advised that the following Members asked to be excused from the day's proceedings.
- Mr. Roger Monroe, MP; and
 - Mr. Avinash Singh,

CONFIRMATION OF MINUTES OF THE ELEVENTH MEETING HELD ON FRIDAY APRIL 29, 2022

- 3.1 The Minutes were confirmed without amendments on a motion moved by Ms. Penelope Beckles, MP and seconded by Ms. Vandana Mohit, MP.

MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

- 4.1 The Chairman highlighted the following matter:
- i. **Item 4.1, No. ii, page 2** – The Secretariat had not yet received MATT’s response on the practices observed when reporting on suicides.

PRE-HEARING DISCUSSIONS RE: 1st Public Hearing pursuant to an inquiry into the State’s capacity to provide support for victims of Domestic Violence and Family Conflicts (with specific focus on the availability of support mechanisms during the COVID-19 pandemic)

- 5.1 The Chairman indicated that later in the proceedings, the Committee will convene its 1st hearing with stakeholders pursuant to its *inquiry into the State’s capacity to provide support for victims of Domestic Violence and Family Conflicts (with specific focus on the availability of support mechanisms during the COVID-19 pandemic)*.
- 5.2 Members were advised that officials of the following entities were expected to participate in the day’s hearing:
- a. Ministry of Social Development and Family Services;
 - b. Office of the Prime Minister - Gender and Child Affairs;
 - c. Trinidad and Tobago Police Service; and
 - d. Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (CATT).
- 5.3 Members confirmed that they were in receipt of the following documents:
- i. Written Submissions from the entities listed above; and
 - ii. Issues Papers prepared by the Secretariat on the Written Submissions from Stakeholders.
- 5.4 The Committee discussed the approach to be taken to examine the Officials during the hearing.

OTHER BUSINESS

Proposed Date and Agenda for Next Meeting

- 6.1 The Committee agreed to next meet on Wednesday June 15, 2022 at 9:30 a.m. and convene its second public hearing pursuant to its inquiry into domestic violence during the COVID-19 Pandemic with the following stakeholders:
- a. Alliance for State Action to End Gender-based Violence (ASA);
 - b. Organisation for Abused and Battered Individuals; and
 - c. Trinidad Shelter for Battered Women and Children.

SUSPENSION

- 7.1 The Chairman suspended the meeting at 9:58 a.m.

PUBLIC HEARING RE: 1st Public Hearing on an inquiry into the State's capacity to provide support for victims of Domestic Violence and Family Conflicts (with specific focus on the availability of support mechanisms during the COVID-19 pandemic)

- 8.1 The meeting resumed in public at 10:15 a.m.

- 8.2 The following persons joined the meeting:

Office of the Prime Minister – Gender and Child Affairs Division (OPM-GCA)

- | | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Mrs. Jacinta Bailey-Sobers | Permanent Secretary |
| 2. Ms. Gaietry Pargass | Senior Legal Advisor |
| 3. Mrs. Anne-Marie Quammie-Alleyne | Coordinator, National Policy on Gender & Development |
| 4. Unspecified ²⁷ | Assistant Coordinator, National Domestic Shelters |

Ministry of Social Development and Family Services (MSDFS)

- | | |
|---------------------------|---|
| 1. Ms. Jacqueline Johnson | Permanent Secretary |
| 2. Ms. Kathleen Sarkar | Asst. Director, National Family Services Division |
| 3. Ms. Cindy Heeralal | Coordinator, Non-Governmental Organisation |

The Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (CATT)

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Mrs. Sharon Morris-Cummings | Director Ag. |
| 2. Mrs. Rhonda Gregoire-Roopchan | Deputy Director, Care Services |

²⁷ The unnamed official participated anonymously on account of National Security considerations

- | | |
|------------------------|--|
| 3. Ms. Elizabeth Lewis | Deputy Director Ag., Legal & Regulatory Services |
|------------------------|--|

Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS)

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| 1. Mr. McDonald Jacob | Commissioner of Police (Ag.) |
| 2. Mrs. Sharon Gomez-Cooper | Asst. Commissioner of Police, Criminal Division |
| 3. Mrs. Claire Guy-Alleyne | Superintendent, Gender-Based Violence & Child Protection Unit |
| 4. Ms. Aisha Corbie | Manager, Victim & Witness Support Unit |

Opening Statements

8.3 The chief officials of the aforementioned entities made brief opening remarks.

Key Issues Discussed

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with **Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS)**:

Overview

- i. For the period March 2019 to March 2022, there were 6250 domestic violence reports received by the TTPS of which 4921 were females and 1333 were males.
- ii. There was a noticeable increase in the number of persons reporting domestic violence during the period March 2019 to March 2022.
- iii. The formation of the Gender-based Violence Unit (GBVU) provided additional avenues for persons to report domestic violence cases.

Breach of Protect Orders

- iv. There were instances in which the Protection Order curtailed the actions of perpetrators.
- v. The victim, perpetrator and the station are apprised of the conditions of the Protection Order and receive copies of the Order.
- vi. In the event of the violation of a Protection Order occurs, the victim notifies the TTPS and the perpetrator can be arrested.
- vii. The charges for a perpetrator under the Domestic Violence Act only occurs when there is a violation of the Protection Order or the Bail conditions.

Key Observations

- viii. The challenge of obtaining a medical certificate for the investigation of domestic violence cases in a timely manner as medicals may take up to three weeks.
- ix. According to the TTPS, the increase in the number of domestic violence reports include the following factors:
 - a. cases of assault between dating couples are now recorded as a charge of domestic violence due the amendments to the Act;
 - b. Sensitisation sessions on the reporting procedure for domestic violence; and
 - c. The restriction of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- x. The need to inform the public via media conferences, on the amendments to legislation which will affect the recording of types of cases reported to the TTPS.
- xi. The multi –sectoral approach of the TTPS to sensitising the public and students on domestic violence.
- xii. The TTPS’ process to ensure the confidentiality of the information received from the victim.
- xiii. Unauthorised breach of confidentiality for the information received by the victims can be subject to disciplinary procedures.
- xiv. The TTPS utilises the definitions provided in legislation to differentiate corporal punishment from child abuse when a parent is chastising a child.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with **Office of the Prime Minister (Gender and Child Affairs Division) (OPM-GCA)**:

Overview

- i. The OPM-GCA in conjunction with UN Women are working towards the continued implementation of phase I and the implementation of phase II of the spotlight initiative on domestic violence.
- ii. The parameters used by the OPM to differentiate corporal punishment from child abuse when a parent is chastising a child.
- iii. A multi-sectoral taskforce has been formed to discuss the gaps and the actions taken to remedy the gaps identified from the report on children homes presented by the OPM.

Shelters

- iv. There is currently one shelter operated and fully funded by the OPM-GCA, while two shelters are funded by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.
- v. The shelters for male victims of domestic violence is scheduled to be fully operationalised by the end of 2022.

- vi. There is no restrictions on the age or gender of children allowed to stay at the sole shelter operated by the Government.
- vii. The Government operated shelter includes several psycho-social and reintegration programmes for the victims and their children housed at the shelter.
- viii. There are restrictions on the age limits of children at some privately operated shelters.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with **the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services (MSDFS)**:

Key Observations

- i. According to the MSDFS domestic violence is a learnt behaviour and the Ministry intends to treat with domestic violence holistically as a family issue via their parenting programme and their programmes in partnership with other agencies.
- ii. The MSDFS intends to establish a vulnerability registry which aims to identify the vulnerability status of all households in Trinidad, and will be based on the reports of domestic violence or vulnerability cases from the TTPS, the OPM, the Ministry of Education, state agencies and other Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).
- iii. The MSDFS is in the process of recruiting persons to fill the vacancies in their Units and the recruitment is projected to be completed by the end of fiscal 2022.
- iv. The Parenting Programme is currently operating virtually but there are plans to resume face-to-face sessions within communities by end of fiscal 2022.
- v. All the NGOs in receipt of subventions under the purview of the MSDFS have received their quarterly subventions for 2022, provided that they are in compliance with the requirements of the MSDFS.
- vi. The MSDFS' NGO Unit is currently collaborating with NGOs to improve the Governance and reporting processes NGOs under their remit and in receipt of subventions.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with **the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (CATT)**:

Key Observations

- i. There are currently four care centres operated by the CATT.
- ii. The need for additional funding for CATT to increase its capacity to treat with reported cases of child abuse and to allocate to care centres and the foster care programme within Trinidad and Tobago.
- iii. The CATT is currently auditing the security and monitoring mechanisms at the care centres and addressing other systemic issues.
- iv. TTPS assisting the CATT with the review of their security systems at the care centres.

- v. The OPM has provided assistance to the CATT to identify persons who are victims of drug use and drug abuse.
- vi. The CATT collaborates with the TTPS to determine the level of risks to the child once a report of domestic violence is received by the CATT.
- vii. The CATT's Emergency Response Unit aims to investigate and mitigate risk to a child within 24hours of receiving the report and determining that the child is in imminent danger.
- viii. The CATT treats child perpetrators of domestic abuse firstly, as a child and subsequently takes steps to provide intervention programmes to both the victim and the perpetrator to determine the cause for the behaviour of the perpetrator.
- ix. There has been no preliminary measures at care centres to remove alleged perpetrators of the child abuse as identified in the 'Jones Report'.
- x. The CATT's procedures require that the TTPS be contacted should children escape while in the care centres or in the custody of the Authority.
- xi. There are currently four psychologists at the CATT who provide intervention treatment to children in the cases reported to the Authority.
- xii. The current case load ratio for case managers at the CATT is 1:100 cases.

ADJOURNMENT

9.1 The meeting was adjourned accordingly at 12:20 p.m.

I certify that these Minutes are true and correct.

Chairman

Secretary

June 17, 2022

Appendix III – Minutes of 13th Meeting

**EXCERPT MINUTES OF THE NINTH MEETING OF THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE OF
PARLIAMENT ON SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION,
HELD ON FRIDAY JUNE 22, 2022**

This meeting was facilitated via the Zoom video conferencing program

PRESENT

Members of the Committee

Mr. Paul Richards	Chairman
Ms. Pennelope Beckles, MP	Member
Mr. Esmond Forde, MP	Member
Ms. Vandana Mohit, MP	Member
Mr. Avinash Singh	Member
Mr. David Nakhid	Member

ABSENT/EXCUSED

Mr. Roger Monroe, MP	Vice-Chairman
Mr. Rohan Sinanan	Member

Secretariat

Mr. Brian Lucio	Assistant Secretary
Ms. Nicole Brown	Researcher

CALL TO ORDER

1.2 The Chairman called the meeting to order at 9:40 a.m. and welcomed members present.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

2.2 The Chairman advised that the following Members asked to be excused from the day's proceedings.

- Mr. Roger Monroe, MP; and

- Mr. Rohan Sinanan.

CONFIRMATION OF MINUTES OF THE EIGHTH MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 08, 2021

3.1 The Minutes were confirmed without amendments on a motion moved by Ms. Penelope Beckles, MP and seconded by Mr. Esmond Forde, MP.

MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

4.2 No matters were raised.

CONSIDERATION AND APPROVAL OF THE COMMITTEE'S DRAT REPORT ON AN INQUIRY INTO THE IMPACT OF WORK-FROM-HOME AND OTHER ALTERNATIVE WORK ARRANGEMENTS, POLICIES AND INITIATIVES ON PUBLIC SECTOR PRODUCTIVITY AND SERVICE DELIVERY

5.1 The Chairman advised that the Secretariat was in the process of finalising the draft of this report and that upon its completion, the document will be circulated for the consideration and feedback of members. A discussion ensued.

5.2 The Committee agreed that:

- a. the consideration and approval of the Report will be conducted via e-mail round-robin; and
- b. Members would provide feedback by Tuesday June 28, 2022.

PRE-HEARING DISCUSSIONS RE: 2nd Public Hearing pursuant to an inquiry into the State's capacity to provide support for victims of Domestic Violence and Family Conflicts (with specific focus on the availability of support mechanisms during the COVID-19 pandemic)

6.1 The Chairman indicated that later in the proceedings, the Committee will convene its 2nd hearing with stakeholders pursuant to its *inquiry into the State's capacity to provide support for victims of Domestic Violence and Family Conflicts (with specific focus on the availability of support mechanisms during the COVID-19 pandemic)*.

6.2 Members were advised that officials of the following entities were expected to participate in the day's hearing:

- a. Alliance for State Action to End Gender-based Violence (ASA);
- b. Organisation for Abused and Battered Individuals (OABI); and
- c. Trinidad Shelter for Battered Women and Children (TSBWC)).

6.3 Members confirmed that they were in receipt of the following documents:

- i. Written Submissions from the entities listed above; and
- ii. Issues Papers prepared by the Secretariat on the Written Submissions from Stakeholders.

6.4 Members confirmed that they were in receipt of the following documents:

- iii. Written Submissions from the entities listed above; and
- iv. Issues Papers prepared by the Secretariat on the Written Submissions from Stakeholders.

OTHER BUSINESS

Consideration of Work Programme

- 7.1 The Committee agreed to add the following topics to its Work Programme:
- a. Second Follow-up inquiry into an examination of existing arrangements and possible options for regulating geriatric care facilities/old age homes in Trinidad and Tobago; and
 - b. An inquiry aimed at addressing the availability and accessibility of social support services by those persons falling below the social safety net.

Proposed Date and Agenda for Next Meeting

- 7.2 The Chairman reminded Members that the Standing Orders prescribe that the Parliament must proceed on recess from the first week in July 2022 to the first week in September, 2022. As such this would most likely be the Committee's last meeting until the end of the recess period.

SUSPENSION

- 8.1 The Chairman suspended the meeting at 9:58 a.m.

PUBLIC HEARING RE: 1st Public Hearing on an inquiry into the State's capacity to provide support for victims of Domestic Violence and Family Conflicts (with specific focus on the availability of support mechanisms during the COVID-19 pandemic)

- 9.1 The meeting resumed in public at 10:15 a.m.

- 9.2 The following persons joined the meeting:

The Alliance for State Action to End Gender-based Violence (ASA)

- | | | |
|----|----------------------|--|
| 1. | Ms. Roberta Clarke | President, Coalition Against Domestic Violence |
| 2. | Dr. Gabrielle Hosein | Representative, Institute for Gender and Development Studies |
| 3. | Ms. Asiya Mohammed | Founder and Executive Director, Conflict Women Ltd |
| 4. | Ms. Safiyyah Acosta | Outreach Coordinator, WOMANTRA |

The Center for Nonviolence, Research, and Development

- | | | |
|----|--------------------------------|--|
| 4. | Mrs. Sherna Alexander-Benjamin | Anti-Violence, Social Protection, and Human Economy Consultant |
| 5. | Ms. Asha Garib | Clinical Psychologist |
| 6. | Ms. Chimere Gibson Wadi | Attorney-at-Law |

Trinidad Shelter for Battered Women and Children (TSBWC)

- | | | |
|----|---------------------|---------------|
| 4. | Mr. Collin Mitchell | Chairman |
| 5. | Ms. Sherron Harford | Vice Chairman |

Opening Statements

9.3 The chief officials of the aforementioned entities made brief opening remarks.

Key Issues Discussed

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Alliance for State Action to End Gender-based Violence (ASA)**:

Overview of the Coalition of Member Organisations of ASA

- i. ASA is a network of organisations working to end gender-based violence that monitors the activities of State agencies and advocates for greater State accountability.
- ii. ASA believes that the State has a non-negotiable obligation to provide sufficient support to address the causes and consequences of gender-based violence. This includes the ongoing leadership to engage state institutions and agencies to effectively address matters of constitutional, legal and human rights and resources necessary to discharge this obligation.

- iii. The Government and its agencies have been engaged in legislative actions and several initiatives to address GBV, often in conjunction with relevant NGOs over the last three decades.
- iv. While these initiatives are commendable, the State needs to undertake further initiatives that are sufficient to adequately and efficiently address the scale of the challenges and the scope of problems related to the causes and consequences of GBV.
- v. ASA has submitted a draft strategic action plan to end gender-based and sexual violence addressing these matters aimed at influencing the development of more comprehensive policies on GBV.
- vi. According to ASA, this document was reviewed by Cabinet in 2016.

Reporting and Data

- vii. Incidents of violence against women are severely under-reported, especially to state agencies.
- viii. Recording of reports is very deficient, which frustrates the ability of response mechanisms to facilitate timely and effective support services.
- ix. There is inadequate sharing of data among response sites, hence a lack of consistent data necessary to adequately assess and address the true scope of problems during the pandemic.
- x. Statistics on domestic violence differ among the major reporting agencies such as the TTPS, 800-SAVE and the Child Protection Unit.
- xi. However, it has been noted that there was a general increase in domestic violence, economic challenges and displacement of victims.
- xii. For the period March 2020- March 2022, TTPS received more than 6,000 reports of domestic violence compared to March 2018 to March 2020, where there were 2,710 reports of domestic violence.
- xiii. ASA cannot necessarily make a determination of whether there was an increase in instances of domestic violence or simply an increase in reporting as there was the development of the TTPS App, which made it easier to report domestic violence.
- xiv. Data from the Trinidad and Tobago Central Registry highlighted that:
 - a. from January to October 2020, over 4,500 calls were made representing an increase of 119 per cent in calls received when compared to the same period for the previous year; and
 - b. from January to August 2020, there were over 1,000 reports received which represented a 55 per cent increase when compared to the same period for the previous year.
- xv. The 2018 Women's Health Survey, which was the first national prevalence survey conducted in Trinidad and Tobago, stated that one in three women report violence—physical or sexual violence in their lifetime.
- xvi. The data also suggested that in the 12-month period prior to the study being published, the number was significantly higher.
- xvii.** The study also showed that of the women who experienced violence, only 7 per cent report to the police and 2 per cent or less report to state agencies.

Services

- xviii. A range of support services were provided online during the pandemic, with varying degrees of effectiveness. However, legal aid services were severely constrained.
- xix. Women and girls form the great majority of victims. However, equitable support needs to be provided to men and boys who are victims.

Financial and Administrative Priorities

- xx. There needs to be greater transparency regarding how financial allocations are made toward supporting GBV initiatives.
- xxi. Tracking the impact of financial allocations and assessing gender equity in distribution of grants is paramount.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Centre for Non-violent Research and Development**

Overview

- i. The State needs to share its power to create equitable access to supporting resources for people experiencing domestic violence.
- ii. The state needs to provide bridging social capital and sustainable resources to prevent violence, protect people experiencing violence and to hold perpetrators accountable.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Trinidad Shelter for Battered Women and Children (TSBWC)**:

Overview

- i. The shelter was established in 1987 and offers a multiplicity of services essential to the support of women and children.
- ii. TSBWC is significantly constrained by the ongoing challenge of severe financial deficiency.
- iii. Services offered include medical care, therapeutic counselling, school placement for the children, skill set training, legal support and assistance with housing. We offer many more
- iv. There were no shelters for domestic violence victims in Tobago. However, the THA has recently allocated a property for this purpose.

Summary of Major Common Issues

- v. Member entities of the coalition that serve the population of victims of domestic violence perform different but complementary functions. They face some similar and some unique challenges. There are fundamental issues that relate to their success in addressing the realities of domestic violence, including causes and consequences.

- vi. Domestic violence is a complex matter and its consequences are severe. Addressing both causes and consequences require a multifaceted approach with appropriate resources designed and managed to enable and facilitate effective, sustainable intervention programmes. These include:
 - A multidisciplinary team of experts, including social psychologists and other human services professionals with expertise suitable to conduct appropriate research to inform the design and management of enhanced intervention programmes.
 - Development of comprehensive education and targeted communication programmes to tackle cultural issues that fuel the causes and resist the mitigation of domestic violence.
 - Programmes must be developed and implemented to educate and sensitise specific population sectors, including cohorts among early childhood groups, adolescents and young adults as a means of effecting changes in values and awareness leading to significant reduction in domestic violence.
 - The overall management of intervention programmes which are designed for improved effectiveness should include ongoing impact assessment.
 - Accelerated review of the dormant 2016 Draft Strategic Action Plan and its recommendations to inform policies and programmes of intervention.
 - Urgent review of the financial requirements to sustain effective programme implementation; and significant improvement in state financial allocations for programme support.

ADJOURNMENT

10.1 The meeting was adjourned accordingly at 12:22 p.m.

I certify that these Minutes are true and correct.

Chairman

Secretary

November 11, 2022

Appendix IV – Verbatim Notes of 12th Meeting

VERBATIM NOTES OF THE ELEVENTH VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION HELD (IN PUBLIC) ON WEDNESDAY, MAY 25, 2022, AT 10.15 A.M.

PRESENT

Mr. Paul Richards Chairman

Mr. David Nakhid Member

Ms. Penelope Beckles Member

Ms. Vandana Mohit Member

Mr. Brian Lucio Assistant Secretary

Ms. Nicole Brown Graduate Research Assistant

ABSENT

Mr. Esmond Forde Vice-Chairman [Excused]

Mr. Rohan Sinanan Member [Excused]

Mr. Roger Monroe Member

Mr. Avinash Singh Member

OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER-GENDER AND CHILD AFFAIRS

DIVISION

Mrs. Jacinta Bailey-Sobers Permanent Secretary

Ms. Gaietry Pargass Senior Legal Advisor

Mrs. Anne-Marie Quammie-Alleyne Coordinator, National Policy on Gender & Development

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MINISTRY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY SERVICES

Ms. Jacqueline Johnson Permanent Secretary

Ms. Kathleen Sarkar Asst. Director, National Family Services Division

Ms. Cindy Heeralal Coordinator, Non-Governmental Organization

CHILDREN'S AUTHORITY OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Mrs. Sharon Morris-Cummings Director Ag

Mrs. Rhonda Gregoire-Roopchan Deputy Director, Care Services

**Ms. Elizabeth Lewis Deputy Director Ag., Legal &
Regulatory Services**

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO POLICE SERVICE

Mr. McDonald Jacob Commissioner of Police Ag.

Mrs. Sharon Gomez-Cooper Asst. Commissioner of Police, Criminal Division

Mrs. Claire Guy-Alleyne Superintendent, Gender-Based Violence & Child Protection Unit

Ms. Aisha Corbie Manager, Victim & Witness Support Unit

Mr. Chairman: Good morning and welcome everyone to the viewing and listening audience to this the Twelfth Meeting of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration. This is the Committee's first hearing with stakeholders pursuant to its enquiry into the State's capacity to provide support for victims of domestic violence and family conflicts, with special focus on the availability of support mechanisms during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Members of the public are invited to submit your comments and questions to the Parliament's social media platforms, including YouTube channel ParlView, or via our Facebook and Twitter platforms. I am the Committee's Chairman, Paul Richards. The stakeholders before us today include the Office of the Prime Minister, Gender and Child Affairs; Ministry of Social Development and Family Services; the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago; and, of course the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. At this time I would like to invite members of the committee to introduce themselves, starting with member Beckles.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. There are two members who will join us in process, member Rohan Sinanan and member Esmond Forde, MP. The two members who have asked to be excused today include member Roger Monroe and member Avinash Singh.

The enquiry's objectives include the four following objectives:

1. To examine trends in domestic violence in Trinidad and Tobago for the period March 2020 to March 2022, compared with previous periods.
2. To exam the State's policies, projects, initiatives aimed at providing support to domestic violence victims and survivors.
3. To examine the capacity of State-funded organizations and institutions to provide adequate support to victims of domestic violence.
4. To evaluate the effectiveness of support provided to domestic violence victims by the State for the period March 2020 to present.

At this time I would like to invite opening statements from the leads of the four stakeholder groups with us today. We can start with Mrs. Jacinta Bailey-Sobers, who is the Permanent Secretary in the Office of the Prime Minister, Gender and Child Affairs. Mrs. Bailey-Sobers.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Thank you very much, Chair. Good morning to you and to members of the committee, to officers of Gender and Child Affairs Division here with me this morning, my colleagues from the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago, the TTPS, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, members of the public viewing and listening to the session.

The Gender and Child Affairs Division is committed to serving the needs of society through the implementation of its important mandate. We are happy to be a part of this session and to provide information on the support we lend to victims of domestic violence and family conflicts, and to also receive suggestions, Chair, on how our services and systems may be improved. This session is indeed a timely one and coincidentally it is occurring simultaneously with the launch of the essential services package to women and girls who are victims of violence in Trinidad and Tobago in another place.

The ASP focuses on the minimum standards for gender-based violence in emergency prevention and response programme. Very briefly, Chair, I wish to inform those who may not be aware that the Gender Affairs Division is the national focal point for gender and development in Trinidad and Tobago and its mandate includes the promotion of principles of gender equity, equality through— [Inaudible] including the development of gender-sensitive policies and programmes, and of course, the Draft National Policy on Gender Development guides the work of the division.

The division also has responsibility for the hotline, 800-SAVE and also the one government-run shelter. Gender and Child Affairs Division looks forward to the upcoming rich discussions, Chair, in terms of the area that you are focusing on this morning. Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you, Mrs. Bailey-Sobers. And, of course with you would be Ms. Gaietry Pargass, Senior Legal Advisor; Mrs. Anne-Marie Quammie-Alleyne, Coordinator, National Policy on Gender and Development. And we just want to advise that your Assistant Coordinator, National Domestic Shelters will not be identified visually or by name. Is that correct?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: For security reasons. So we just want to advise that. So if you defer to that person we will identify the person only as the Assistant Coordinator, National Domestic Shelters. Thank you. We move now to Ms. Jacqueline Johnson, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, to present brief opening remarks and also present the members of your team with us today.

Ms. Johnson: Good morning, Chairman, members of the Committee and my fellow colleagues. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services provides a range of social services in support of vulnerable persons. One of the key divisions involved in supporting families and victims of—and perpetrators of violence is the National Family Services Division. We are pleased to be part of this appreciative and constructive enquiry, given the objectives outlined. I thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much. And the other members of your team include Ms. Kathleen Sarkar, who is the Assistance Director, National Family Services Division and Ms. Cindy Heeralal, Coordinator, Non-Governmental Organization. Is that correct?

Ms. Johnson: Correct.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much. We move now to Mrs. Sharon Morris-Cummings, Acting Director of the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago to deliver opening remarks. Go ahead please, Mrs. Morris-Cummings.

Mrs. Morris-Cummings: Good morning, Mr. Chair. I thank you. Members of the Joint Select Committee, representatives of partner agencies, Gender and Child Affairs Division of the OPM, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, and the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, members of the viewing public, including our nation's children. Thank you for affording the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago the opportunity to contribute to today's enquiry on the capacity of the State to provide support for victims of domestic violence and family conflicts.

Allow me to take this opportunity to extend our condolences to the families, in particular the children who have lost their parents as a result of domestic violence, especially in light of what we have seen in recent times. The Authority is committed to the care, protection and rehabilitation of children who come to its attention. Therefore, we will continue to work with agencies within the child protection sector to provide the relevant support to children and their families who are exposed to abuse and trauma.

Domestic violence is certainly one context in which many children experience trauma and we are aware that much more is required to be done to identify and then address the root causes of this scourge. Very often, parents are oblivious to the fact that children are impacted by violence in the home among adults. In fact, more proactive work needs to be done with families to reduce the number of children needing care.

While more shelters are required, there is need for expanded counselling services to deal with survivors' trauma, access to skills-based and mentorship programmes, low-cost housing options and job opportunities, so that survivors have independent living options when they leave the perpetrators and the shelters. Therefore, we welcome today's discussions and to hear ways in which the system can be improved. I thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much, Mrs. Morris-Cummings, Acting Director of the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago. And with you on your team today also are Mrs. Rhonda Gregoire-Roopchan, Deputy Director, Care Services; and Ms. Elizabeth Lewis, Deputy Director Acting, Legal and Regulatory Services. Is that correct?

Mrs. Morris-Cummings: Yes, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much, and now we move to the Acting Commissioner of Police, McDonald Jacob. Acting Commissioner Jacob, please go ahead with your opening remarks and introduction of your team. Commissioner? Commissioner Jacob, are you hearing us? I think we may be having some sort of technical issue. We will come back to Commissioner Jacob. As I indicated before, the objectives are:

1. To examine trends in domestic violence in T&T, for the period March 2020 to March 2022, compared with previous periods.
2. To exam the State's policies, projects, initiatives aimed at providing support for victims and survivors of domestic violence.
3. To examine the capacity of state-funded organizations and institutions to provide adequate support to victims of domestic violence.
4. To evaluate the effectiveness of support provided to domestic violence victims and survivors by the State for the identified period March 2020 to present.

Have we gotten that issue with the TTPS sorted out yet? Acting Commissioner Jacob?

Mr. Jacob: Are you hearing me? Good morning.

Mr. Chairman: Yes, we are hearing you now. Go ahead, Commissioner. Thank you.

Mr. Jacob: Sorry about the delay.

Mr. Chairman: Not a problem.

Mr. Jacob: Again, I want to thank you very much, Chair and to the entire Joint Select Committee and all other departments who are participating in this morning's session and members of the public.

The Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, as we are aware, we are the primary law enforcement agency, as it relates to domestic violence, the enforcement of domestic violence. Fortunately for us, the present Domestic Violence Act is actually a procedural Act that indicates exactly how the police should in fact operate, from the time of a report being made to the police. And even, in instances where we have to enter premises, when we have set up our Special Victims Department, which includes the gender department, our Gender-Based Violence Unit, and in setting up the Special Victims Department is to deal both with the aspect of dealing with domestic violence, dealing with young persons, where we have the Child Protection Unit and also sexual offences. Because, from our experience, there is some interlink when there are reports made dealing with the three different factors. We also provide that psychosocial support, interim psychosocial support to victims. So our Victim Support Unit also plays a very, very important role as it relates to that aspect to deal with both primary and secondary victims and later on to deal with the survivors of domestic violence.

We are in partnership with the NGOs and the other government departments in order to deal with this in an effective manner. Again, with my team here this morning, we are here to present, from the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service side, how we can really operate in partnership to bring and to get rid of this scourge that we are having in our country, as it relates to domestic violence which, on several occasions, really ends up in the death of individuals. So, again thank you very much and we are here to make our contribution and to work as a team to deal with the situation.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you, Commissioner. And, of course, with the Commissioner today is Mrs. Sharon Gomez-Cooper, Assistant Commissioner of Police, Criminal Division; Mrs. Claire Guy-Alleyne, Superintendent, Gender-Based Violence & Child Protection Unit; and Ms. Aisha Corbie, Manager, Victim & Witness Support Unit of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. For the purposes of this enquiry, we are going to identify the definition of domestic violence as provided by the Gender-Based Violence Unit, that is the Schedule of Offences outlined in the Domestic Violence Act, Chap. 45:56 as amended. Under the Act:

“domestic violence’ includes physical, sexual, emotional or psychological

or

financial abuse committed by a...”—respondent against a person who is in a domestic relationship with the respondent. And in relation to “domestic relationship”, it means:

“...the relationship between a respondent and a person, where the person—” —is any one of the following: “(i) a spouse or former spouse;

(ii) a cohabitant or former cohabitant;

(iii) a child;

(iv) a dependant;

(v) a relative;

(vi) a person who has agreed to marry the respondent whether or not that agreement has been terminated;”

And—

“...in relation to the respondent—

(i) a person in a visiting relationship; or

(ii) a person in a dating relationship;”

So the amended Act has been quite widely amended to include some of the circumstances that have evolved over years, in term of domestic situations in Trinidad and Tobago.

I want to thank the TTPS for the information they provided to the Secretariat because it gives us a data-driven look at the phenomenon as it exists in Trinidad and Tobago to March 2022. And, if we look at the data provided by the TTPS for the period March 2018 to March 2020, there were 2,710 reports of domestic violence received by the TTPS. So for March 2018 to March 2022, 2,710 reports.

When we compare the same period March 2020 to March 2022 that rose significantly from 2,710 to 4,857 reports of domestic violence. That is a striking increase to me. That is one of the first things that struck out to me by the data provided by the TTPS which, by my simple calculations, roughly translates to just under seemingly seven reports a day in various categories. If we break it down by division, in terms of the total number of domestic violence reports for the period March 2019 to March 2022: Central Division, 964; Eastern Division, 613; North Eastern Division, 287; Northern Division, 1,423; Port of Spain, 402; South Western, 506; Southern Division, 835; Tobago, 848; and the Western Division, 372. Now keep in mind that is for the period March 2019 to March 2022. So I want to keep the time frames in context and that is a total of 6,250 reports of domestic violence between March 2019 to March 2022.

Now, if we keep the time frame in mind, according to the data we are seeing around the world, it corresponds with the start of the pandemic into the pandemic. Right? In terms of the types of offences, in terms of data provided for the same time period March 2019 to March 2022: assault by beating, 3,526; breach of protection order, and we are going to asterisk that for later reference, 581; abuse and abandonment, 23; financial abuse, 4; homicide, 115; malicious damage, 91; psychological abuse, 5; sexual abuse, 28; threats, 1,539; verbal abuse, 84; wounding, 254, which corresponds to a total of 6,250 again, between the period March 2019 to March 2022. Disaggregated by gender: female reports, 4,921; male reports, 1,333.

And for the period of March 2019 to March 2021, in terms of responses, female responses—and let me just get this right—there were 575 female offenders and 4,061 male offenders. So I would like to thank the TTPS, because that data is of great use to us understanding the progression of the phenomenon pre-pandemic and certainly the sharp rise in numbers from March 2019, which corresponds with the start of the pandemic into March 2022.

Let me start the first question and I would defer to my colleague, member Beckles in short while. To the TTPS, what are the factors that your analysis department may have come up with that may have contributed or may be contributing to that significant rise in reports of domestic violence? I do not know who from the TTPS would like to take that.

Mr. Jacob: Well, in the first instance, the change in the law had a significant effect when we included persons in dating relationships in 2020. Before that, our data will not include persons in dating relationships. That would have gone under what we call, basically altercation. Therefore, from 2020, it will now be included under the whole aspect of domestic. That is one.

Number two, we now, by the establishment of our Special Victims Unit which you all would all know as the Gender-Based Violence Unit, and they went about, throughout our country in doing the awareness of the whole aspect of domestic violence and providing that comfort and confidence to persons out there who wish to make reports. Thus, the dark figure reduced tremendously during that period, where persons were willing to come forward and make reports, not just to carry up the numbers, but be provided with the solutions and the treatment that was required in order to deal with their issues. So thus, those are two of the main factors that really caused the figures to go up, in spite of the pandemic, in addition to the pandemic. So, how we—go ahead.

Mr. Chairman: So, if I am correct in understanding, one, the reporting mechanism where persons in dating relationships were now able to report, one.

Mr. Jacob: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: And two, the other issue you identified, do you get a sense, because this is phenomenon, data that has been recorded around the world, the fact that people were, in many cases when the lockdowns occurred, domiciled together for long periods would have been a contributing factor because that is one of the factors that other jurisdictions have identified, in terms of issues that would be resolved in domestic situations, that would have been intensified or exacerbated because of the pandemic and the lockdown periods.

Mr. Jacob: Yes. We are also saying that is also a factor but we also wanted to include those other variables, because we do not want it to ascribe to just the increase, only in relation to the pandemic. And there are some other things that the Gender-Based Unit did also. So I will pass on to Ms. Guy-Alleyne to explain how the outreach that they implemented, that more than likely may have encouraged persons to go about coming, even during the pandemic and with the technology, to make reports. Mrs. Guy-Alleyne. Thanks.

Mrs. Guy-Alleyne: Good morning, Commissioner. Good morning, Chair. Good morning to our colleagues and the entire listening population. We are so happy to be here this morning because domestic violence, gender-based violence is a scourge in society. And I am saying that we can get rid of this scourge once we work together.

Now, in 2020, with the formation of the Gender-Based Violence Unit within the TTPS, which is now under the Special Victims Department, we approached this scourge very aggressively. What we tried to do also was to ensure that we had enforcement of the laws that were available to us. For example, within the TTPS we try to ensure that we spread the word between that we are operating with a zero tolerance approach when it comes to domestic violence reports. We also used the platform of the Zoom, the Teams in order to spread the word throughout Trinidad and Tobago as to how, what is domestic violence. Because a lot of persons, what we recognize, they were in domestic violence relationships and they were not even aware. So we brought about that awareness and we also, we taught the public how to navigate their way to the police, so that we can be able to investigate these matters. So we created an atmosphere where persons were comfortable to come forward. We allowed them to let them understand how they can make reports, for example, through the 999, through the online reporting, as well as the TTPS app. So all of these avenues created that avenue where persons were able to make more reports and these reports to be investigated.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. One more question before I pass on to my colleague, member Beckles. In terms of the types of offences you listed in your data provision, assault by beating, 3,526; threats, 1,539. What strikes out to me is the breach of protection order, 581. First of all, define for us what is your breach of protection order? What constitutes that and how does the TTPS respond to that? What are the avenues available under the law, to the TTPS in terms of breach of protection order and how does that affect persons who have obtained protection orders because they feel their lives are threatened, or their lives have been threatened, and how does the law—? It has been a topic of discussion in the public domain about the responsible protection orders and if they are as effective as they should be, not necessarily casting blame but trying to understand how they are supposed to work.

Mr. Jacob: Well, I will start from the last comment that you made. Right? What is happening is that it is very difficult and what we do not do is the measurement to see how many protection orders in itself provided protection for persons.

However, when a protection order is violated and someone is hurt, yes we put in out there in the public, but we want to say from our side that in fact protection orders are in fact working well and we have seen several perpetrators curtail their behaviour as a result of protection orders.

According to the Domestic Violence Act in itself, you have the protection— or you have first where you can have an undertaking that when the matter comes before the court, an individual can in fact volunteer and say, “Well, as this matter is going on, I will curtail myself from doing X, Y and Z”. It might be being within interfering, being 200yards of the victim and stopping some of their activities. So that will be the agreement within the court and that undertaking falls under the aspect of a protection order, but a certain type.

Then you have the interim order, which is also where the court will make that interim order for a period, as the matter is before the court and being heard. When the matter is completed before the court then you will have the actual protection order. But in all instances, this order that is made, either of the three orders, it is sent to the police, to the station district, that the station will know in fact there is in fact this order out there. Also, the person who made the report, the victim, will also have a copy of that order. And the person responsible, he also, the defendant, he will also be served with that protection order, knowing all the conditions. And the magistrate will also inform him of the conditions and he must not violate it.

It works like that, and if it so happens that he violates the order, the person, he or she violates the order, let me put it in that context, they can contact the police and the protection order now gives the police the opportunity that they can institute an arrest. Because as you are aware, some of the offences that you are looking at, like basic assault and beat, and as we said it could be financial, it could be several different forms of domestic violence that may occur. The police may not be in a position that they can in fact institute an arrest because of the particular offence unless it is committed within their view.

But the protection order now gives the police that power that once they violate it, just coming within 100 yards, just making calls to the person and violating the law, then the police now is given that powers of arrest that they can arrest that person and bring that person before the court. So the protection order gives the police that extra power even though we may be dealing with matters which may not, in normal terms, give the police powers of arrest.

10.45 a.m.

So basically that is what the protection order is about, it is a shield, right, the protection order and the Domestic Violence Act, as I said, it is a shield, it is not a sword because it is linked to the other legislation like the Summary Offences Act, the Offences Against the Person Act, which comes in there so the charges, the only time the charges would come under the Domestic Violence Act is when they violate the protection order or violate the bail conditions. So that it what it is all about, providing that extra impetus and powers to the police that they can in fact act to protect victims of domestic violence.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you, Commissioner. Member Beckles, go ahead, please, the floor is yours. I think member Beckles probably got bumped off. While we wait for member Beckles to come back in, I will open the floor to other members of the Committee to pose questions to the TTPS.

Mr. Nakhid: Yes please.

Mr. Chairman: Member Nakhid, go ahead please.

Mr. Nakhid: Acting Commissioner Jacob?

Mr. Jacob: Yes, good morning, how are you?

Mr. Nakhid: I am fine, thank you. I am just looking for a matter of procedure since you have with you, Ms. Guy-Alleyne, I think it is, who is in charge of gender and child. I am just looking at a matter of procedure. If for example we have a body, like the Children's Authority, who has a complaint, somebody escaped from the Authority, would they contact first the police service? What would be the procedure?

Mrs. Guy-Alleyne: Good morning, Mr. Nakhid, repeat your question—repeat your question again, please. Thank you.

Mr. Nakhid: Okay, since you are in charge of gender and child abuse, I think you are, I am asking, if a body like the Children's Authority, the wards in their care, the children in their care, if they escape from that authority, one of the homes in that Authority, what will be the procedure as regards the Children's Authority, would they contact you first of all?

Mrs. Guy-Alleyne: Yes, they would contact us but however, their first port of call would be to make contact with the station district in which the institution is at the time.

Mr. Nakhid: Okay, so they would contact the TTPS.

Mrs. Guy-Alleyne: Yes.

Mr. Nakhid: All right. Would that call be recorded, would you have data?

Mrs. Guy-Alleyne: Yes, Sir, yes, Sir.

Mr. Nakhid: Okay. All right. Well, since I am not one to dawdle on ceremony, we have had recent cases and I am concerned about, of course, as we all are, to maintain the credibility of the TTPS in all circumstances, we are fully in support of the work that you do. So I am asking would you make available to the Committee, the Chairman, a recorded call or the data that verifies that the Children's Authority called to you—

Mr. Chairman: Member Nakhid?

Mr. Nakhid: Yes?

Mr. Chairman: That is not the remit of this Committee.

Mr. Nakhid: It is not?

Mr. Chairman: No, it is not.

Mr. Nakhid: Why is it not, Chairman?

Mr. Chairman: It is not the remit—we are inquiring into the systems and processes to deal with domestic violence cases and you are asking about a specific case in this instance, and that is not necessarily the remit of this Committee to provide whether or not a call was made to—

Mr. Nakhid: Chairman, there is not a specific case—

Mr. Chairman: Yes. Member Nakhid, I am ruling, please move on from that line of questioning. Are you—do you have other questions?

Mr. Nakhid: Yes, I do. Mr. Chairman: Go ahead please.

Mr. Nakhid: To Acting Commissioner Jacob. Acting Commissioner Jacob?

Mr. Jacob: Yes, I am hearing you. Yeah, go ahead.

Mr. Nakhid: Okay, I am not hearing you.

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead, member Nakhid.

Mr. Jacob: You are not hearing me?

Mr. Nakhid: Okay, it was widely reported and I am just looking for some clarification. What are the updates, or can we get an update as to that situation where Simeon Daniel and Antonio Francois were killed and it was widely reported that the people that killed them were dressed in police uniforms, do you have any updates to give us on that?

Mr. Chairman: Member Nakhid, if it is a criminal investigation ongoing, this is not—

Mr. Nakhid: Chairman, Chairman, Acting Commissioner Jacob can tell me that, he can tell me it is ongoing.

Mr. Chairman: Member Nakhid, this forum is not for that. Please. You have any other questions?

Mr. Nakhid: Not at this time, Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Member Beckles, I see you are back, go ahead please.

Ms. Beckles: Oh, gosh, finally, so I missed most of—I am not even certain where you are, you realize that I was—

Mr. Chairman: We are with the TTPS and you can go through your issues paper. So that is fine—

Ms. Beckles: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: You are welcome.

Ms. Beckles: Okay, so. Yes, so that is—thank you, Chairman. Can I first ask, what is the relationship between the RHAs and the TTPS regarding persons who enter hospitals for assistance and are suspected victims of domestic violence?

Mr. Chairman: Commissioner?

Mrs. Guy-Alleyne: Yes, good morning. The relationship between the RHAs and the TTPS is one that I would describe as fair, in that sometimes we experience a bit of difficulty in obtaining medicals for our investigation. For example, if a medical is conducted today, we have to make an application for that medical. And in some instances, it takes about three weeks to obtain that particular medical. And that sort of stymies our investigation in some cases. For example, if it is a simple assault by beating, I can give the instruction to proceed without the medical, but when we have stuff like broken wounds, broken bones, we need—the medical is critical during this investigation, in order to classify the crime to charge for. So that is one issue that we have with respect to the RHAs at the moment.

Ms. Beckles: All right, thank you very much. And I just want to make reference to your submission that indicated for the period March 2018 to March 2020, 2,710 reports of domestic violence cases were received and for March 2020 to March 2022, 4,815 reports were received. So I would just like to ask, given that there has been an increase of 2,105 reported cases, what plans are the TTPS in conjunction with other agencies and NGOs intending to implement to reduce the number of domestic violence cases? And if I could just ask two more in relation to that. What are the TTPS procedures, should a victim with a protection order file a report of domestic violence with the TTPS? And the last one from this category is—how effective have the protection orders been for victims against their perpetrators? Thank you very much.

Mr. Jacob: Just repeat the first part of your question please.

Ms. Beckles: Yeah. Okay. So it is really, just to say that the fact that there is an increase on the reported cases, what plans does the TTPS in conjunction with other agencies and NGOs intend to implement to reduce the number of domestic violence cases? So it is just whether you are working in conjunction with other agencies and NGOs.

Mr. Jacob: Well, definitely we have that coordination. We had meetings with the various government departments and Mrs. Guy-Alleyne would go a little deeper in that relationship, and how we can work together and go into the communities in order to educate persons and bring them up to scratch in how to really and truly deal with the whole aspect of domestic violence. We have several programmes in place, but the part I really want to deal with before I hand over to Mrs. Guy-Alleyne, right, who are the operators and they will explain that in relation to what I said earlier, that some of the numbers that we are seeing, number one is, because of the change in the law, where we now include the persons in a dating relationship, you know, will fall under domestic violence from since 2020 and before, that was not included. So the numbers now will increase because before, even though persons were making reports concerning relationship issues, it went simply under the normal assault and beat, or the normal malicious damage. It would just fall under the normal acts. Right? And if it is a murder, it goes under altercation. Now, it will be placed purely under domestic violence. And then the effort made by the Special Victims Unit officers by going out there, and educating the population and about the reporting procedure and they recognize that our victim support officers are also there to provide that psycho-social support, and refer them to the other agencies to get help to resolve their family issues, persons were more willing to come out and make reports. And again, we had the issue of the pandemic. So I just wanted to emphasize that in relation to the numbers to say that a lot of these reports were being made even before, but it is now being recorded and placed under domestic violence. And I would now hand over to Mrs. Guy-Alleyne to answer the other—

Ms. Beckles. Just before Mrs. Guy-Alleyne responds, thank you very much, Acting Commissioner. So it means that I think that explanation would probably need to be communicated a little more to the public because, you know, the interpretation, or the assumption is that there is this substantial increase in domestic violence as distinct from what you are explaining now. So I think that may—it may be interesting if the public is actually made aware of that, thank you very much.

Mr. Jacob: Definitely and through our corporate communication we will do some work and our media ambassadors to alert the public in relation to the change, because it can, that can spiral out of control in relation to that aspect of domestic violence. And I could remember years ago, we had a similar situation with kidnapping and kidnapping for ransom. And when they went to the point to say

that Trinidad and Tobago is a kidnapping capital, but then we had to spend time to explain to them the difference between kidnapping and kidnapping for ransom. And we had made a change in the law at that time and we pulled out kidnapping for ransom but there were some persons who were actually just ascribing the normal kidnapping like kidnapping for ransom. So we will do the work and will alert the public, right, when we have our press conferences, or our media ambassadors to alert them of that phenomenon. So thank you. Mrs. Guy-Alleyne.

Mrs. Guy-Alleyne: Yes, Ms. Beckles, I want to thank you for your question. Because within your question itself is the answer and the solution to eradicating gender based violence, domestic violence in Trinidad and Tobago. Now, the police, we cannot do it alone. And we must have a sort of a multi-sectoral, or a multi-prong approach to gender based and domestic violence within Trinidad and Tobago. We each have a part to play, the NGOs, the judiciary, you know, the medical institutions, the police, we all have a part to play. And we have had relationships—recently, Commissioner would have had a meeting with the Ministry of Social Development. And we are coming up with a plan in order to work together to be able to approach DV in a sort of, you know, structured and aggressive way.

We also have where the Special Victims department, Gender Based Violence Unit, we continue and we would aggressively pursue outreach and sensitization within Trinidad and Tobago to continue to bring that awareness. Because one of the things that I observe when we do this sensitization, is that a lot of persons are in domestic violence relationships and they do not know—they do not realize that here is what, I am in a domestic violence relationship. And we sort of let them understand how they can make the report. It may not be for the matter to even go to court but just that sort of intervention in the early stages of that domestic violence relationship can prevent the domestic violence from continuing. Because I am of the belief and I am sure the Commissioner and the executive and everyone here today is of the belief that we can eradicate DV from this country.

We need to eradicate it so that—and we are also having a programme because we have to have this conversation from a very, very, very, very early stage in one's life. We are also liaising with the schools to sensitize children from a very young and tender age, because some of the violence we are seeing in school, this violence is perpetrated in school. But I am of the opinion that some of these things are happening in the home. Children are taught that you deal with conflict with violence. And we need to change that narrative in Trinidad and Tobago, we need to let persons understand how to socialize and conflict will always happen. But how we deal with the conflict and we have to have the conversation from a tender age, how we deal with the conflict is important. Yes?

Mr. Chairman: Member Beckles, we have time for one more question for the TTTPS, then we move to member Mohit, for the Office of the Prime Minister, Gender and Child. So one more question, please, member Beckles.

Ms. Beckles: All right. So that, what I would ask is that—let me ask, what are the— your submissions stated that the accessibility of victims' information through external police stations is out of control of the unit at this stage? What are the confidentiality procedures for the protection of victims' information at external police stations? And what are the penalties if there is a breach of confidentiality of the victims' information?

Mr. Jacob: Now, you are aware that we have 72 police locations throughout Trinidad and Tobago. And in spite of having the Special Victims Unit, and they are based in what we call regions, most of our reports would be made at the police stations. When these reports are made, they actually

are made and go on a coded crime and incident report form, which then goes onto the police records management database, onto this database. And then the forms are now filed and secured by the SDO in charge of the station. The reports must be there and—but the question of confidentiality is more based on when most of the investigators whether it is from the station, and in most of the times it is from the Special Victims Unit will conduct the investigations, that is where, the in depth statements are taken from the victims and witnesses and kept in a file that is not accessible to anyone but the investigator and the teams who will be dealing with the investigation.

So the only thing that will be present, will be available in the initial stages, is in fact the initial report made by the victim. It will also be available, the basic report would also be available to the crime analysis who now will be putting all the data together to do the analytical work to provide some of the information that is provided by our— [Technical difficulties] today. So our system, our records management database is designed in such a way that even though information goes onto it, there are only certain persons have certain privileges. So some persons just have privileges to query and view, and some persons have privileges to go deeper within the system. So there—

Ms. Beckles: So can I just—so based on your question, because I know the Chairman, might have to wrap up. So is it that you are saying that the public can feel relatively comfortable that there is a process in place for the concerns as it relates to confidentiality?

Mr. Jacob: Yes, definitely. And anyone who entered the database who have access and they put in their password to enter and if anything is done, we will know. And then action is taken.

Ms. Beckles: Is there any penalty in the event that that actually happens? Or do you find it very rare for something like that to happen?

Mr. Jacob: It is rare it happens, but our Police Service Regulations cater for that, where the persons and through our discipline process, if any information is extracted and provided anywhere, and they are not authorized, they can in fact be disciplined—

Ms. Beckles: Disciplined.

Mr. Jacob:—subject to disciplinary proceedings.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you, as we segue to the Office of the Prime Minister, Gender and Child Affairs Division, I have one question for the TTPS which is a question that can also be answered by the Office of the Prime Minister, Gender and Child Affairs Division and then we will go to member Mohit for the interrogation of that entity before us. And the question, firstly to the TTPS, and then to the OPM, Child and Gender is in relation to reports of child abuse in the context of we have seen in the media in recent times, where people are—some people have seemingly crossed the line in terms of what they consider punishment, which in some people's opinion translates to child abuse. In one, we just had a case in the public domain where a child was taken for supposed correction, and ended up according to the autopsy to have significant internal injuries. What is the TTPS protocol on that, in the context of protecting children from abuse, shrouded or masquerading as punishment, or correction or discipline? And that question can also go to the Office of the Prime Minister, Gender and Child Affairs, because it has been a primary discussion in the public domain recently where corporal punishment is allowed for parents of children, but different people have different interpretations of

how far that can go. In some instances, many people believe it translates into child abuse and violence against some children.

Mr. Jacob: Well, the criminal law is clear in relation to the chastisement of children and going over the line. And once reports are made to us, and we are aware of the— [Technical difficulties] the depth of correcting, and we would see in those instances, we investigate and we would go by the DPP where we get instructions in some instances to charge for murder if there was in fact, the intent and in some instances for manslaughter, where the person was so negligent in their actions, it caused the death of the child and even in instances, where we find young persons, these children were drowned in these makeshift pools, you know, we have instances like that. So the Children Act is clear in relation to the neglect by persons who are responsible for our young persons—[Technical difficulties]

Mr. Chairman: I am going to ask the question, I am not being facetious in the slightest bit. What is the line? And I know we all should know what the line is, in terms of children being physically harmed or psychologically harmed or emotionally harmed. But the society is so diverse and people have different perspectives on what this line is, and it cannot be that the line is when the child is killed, or seriously injured, there must be some sort of understanding as to what this line is, that constitutes discipline as opposed to abuse. And that—and there to me is the vagary lies.

Mr. Jacob: You see, the law in itself, as I said, the criminal law is there and if a child is beaten beyond a particular—causing injuries or so to the child, it amounts to an offence. The line is sort of blurred in relation to it. But the point is, is that in the criminal law, they allow the chastisement of the child but to what extent and you cannot go to that point to beat a child, or to harm a child to the point where the child sustains injuries. Injuries—any sort of injuries to the skin, to the bones or whatsoever, that amounts to a criminal act and the person will in fact be charged. So when persons assault the children and they are taken to the hospital, or neighbours or so make the report to the police and we go there, we will take the person to the doctor, the DMO and according to the medical that we have, we will in fact charge the persons and it is for all the different offences, assault occasioning actual bodily harm, once it goes—reaches that level, which is a low level, assault occasioning basic, actual or basic assault and beat, and there are injuries, the person will be charged. So it is a very, very thin line and sometimes the medical, right, and the information from the child, we will decide whether or not the person should be charged.

Mr. Chairman: Member Mohit, go ahead please. Thank you, Commissioner and team. Member Mohit, go ahead please.

Ms. Mohit: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Chair, to the Office of the Prime Minister, Gender and Child Affairs Division, as I continue, in terms of the report submitted, you know, the submission indicated that the Spotlight Initiative addresses family and domestic violence with specific focus on Tunapuna/Piarco, Mayaro/Rio Claro, as well as Tobago. In terms of the responding agency for the benefit of the viewing public, can you please explain the rationale for focusing on these particular communities? And in addition to that, the Spotlight Initiative also spoke of planning activities for phase two, can you state for us what are the key components of this particular phase two?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: For the question—member, are you hearing me properly?

Ms. Mohit: Not so well but I will try my best.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Okay, I would also try to remove my mask for a short while, that might be a hindrance. Are you hearing me better?

Ms. Mohit: Hearing you better.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Great. So thanks for the question. Yes, those communities, of course, were selected based on the data we would have received, we will have data within the division which would have been collected, and we would have identified these three areas in terms of the incidents of domestic violence. So, the projects would have been identified to be conducted in these areas. Of course, you would have received the information in terms of the Spotlight or the fact that there are six particular areas that are covered, “Pillars” they call them, related to legislation, related to institutions, related also to the services that are provided, and so on. So these various areas were covered even within the areas that were selected. But in particular, the projects in those areas were related to the organizations, especially the community service organizations in those areas that treat with domestic violence.

So, capacity was built with respect to those organizations to ensure that they could provide a more effective service. And also, we had persons who were mobilized in the area and were trained up, so that they could also train others in terms of identifying, sensitizing, educating about domestic violence and the processes and procedures to treat with it. So those were some of the areas that were addressed within that aspect of the project.

Now, of course, under the different Pillars that I spoke about, legislation, services, institutions, there were a number of projects that were undertaken through the Spotlight. You asked about phase two, phase two is going to address more or less those projects that started in phase one, but were not completed and also to expand those that were implemented but worked well. So for example, under gender and child affairs, we had a Foundations Programme and that fell under strengthening and changing attitudes towards gender-based violence, where persons were trained up to go out and train others in terms of changing their behaviour, changing their attitude and we are continuing in phase two to treat with some new target groups. We are working with an organization with persons with disabilities, we are working with the prison and we are working with one other group training them up within this area of sensitization and education and changing behaviour towards domestic violence so that they now could go into their institutions and do the same. So, you have that ripple effect. So that is one area where there is going to be an expansion, and there are also expansions in the area of education with respect to the health and family life education curriculum with the police, with the Judiciary and so on.

11.15 a.m.

Ms. Mohit: Thank you very much. Mr. Chairman. In terms of the TTPS figures, as well as the figures outlined under Gender and Child Affairs, how strong is your relationship with the TTPS and how strong was that in terms of determining these particular areas and Pillars by which you have worked, in terms of, you know, the Spotlight Initiative, seeing that, you know, the TTPS is attempting so hard in terms of attacking domestic violence?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Okay. We have a very strong relationship with the TTPS, of course, because they are part of the framework for addressing domestic violence. And under the Spotlight Initiative,

they played a very important role under both the legal and the policy framework, and also the area of institutions. So, a number of projects were done with the Judiciary and the TTPS. And, of course, as part of the Spotlight, there is also a committee, a multi-sectoral committee that was responsible for working with the UN Women which is the main UN agency responsible for the Spotlight to implement the projects. So, the TTPS played a very important role and they do play an important role with us in terms of what we do. Sensitization, education and also just simply the process for reporting in terms of our shelters and so on. They are the ones that actually identify most of the persons that end up in these—the sole government shelter. So we have to work very closely with the TTPS.

Ms. Mohit: Sure. Thanks a lot. Mr. Chair, before I move to the next question, in looking at all the reports provided to us, the TTPS figures are very high as compared to the other reports in terms of dealing with domestic violence. And one of the things that I would like to recommend is that, futuristically, if we can have some form of succession added in terms of a column or so in terms of reporting, so we are aware of the type of assistance agencies are providing to TTPS if we are labelling and stating this as an aggressive approach, so that the members of the public are privy to this information. So, one, it deters and the other one is that persons can feel free to come forward. So with that being said, I will move to my other question, Mr. Chair.

In terms of your submission, it would have indicated that Gender and Child Affairs provides support to safe houses operated by NGOs. Can you state for us what is the nature of this support provided to safe houses operated by NGOs?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: We have one shelter that is run by the Government which we provide full support and funding to. The support that we will provide to the other shelters which are really privately-run shelters, is providing support financially through the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. So, we fully fund the Government-run facility, but the other private facilities, I think, two of them are funded by social development.

Ms. Mohit: What is the reporting mechanism in terms of these particular agencies or support—well, the safe houses, NGOs, et cetera, that you provide support to? What is the reporting mechanism? Because you are providing financial support, of course, but you must have some form of reporting mechanism. Are you provided with that?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: So, on our side, with respect to the Government shelter that we operate, we have reports coming back to the central office. Every month we have reports coming back. We are aware of how many persons are there and that general operation, because we have oversight of that. But in terms of the private organizations, we do not provide them with finances. It is social development and I would imagine that they have a reporting system. They may wish to speak to that.

Ms. Mohit: Another question for you would be that of, in terms of male victims of domestic violence, because your submission indicated that there were no shelters for male victims of domestic violence. Can you state for us why there are no shelters for male victims of domestic violence and whether the Ministry believes that there ought to be shelters for male victims of domestic violence? Because we have just heard it from the TTPS, a lot of reports include male victims.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: So, yes, the division works on the principle of equity, and so we also have planned the setting up of a facility for males. Actually, it was always on the drawing board, however,

we had to shift the terms of our plans, because of need. There was a greater need for shelters for women with their children, and so we also had a collaboration with the Children's Authority where they were in need of a facility as an emergency. And so, we would have agreed that we would give that facility to them to house children that needed to be accommodated, and we are now working on the establishment of that shelter for the males. So, we received approval from the staff and we are working. We already have the facility. It is just to actually do the infrastructural works to set it up. And we are trusting that, you know, by before the end of the year, we would have that facility up and running for the males.

We also got approval to work on a male facility for rehabilitation of perpetrators, and we are also very assiduously working on that particular one, because we feel that it is going to make a dent in the entire situation, especially with respect to restraining orders. Because once a male perpetrator gets that order or is served that order, we know sometimes what could happen, and if we have this facility where they could go and get help, we feel that it is going to reduce the incidents of harm when it comes to women when these orders are served.

Ms. Mohit: Sure. In terms of your submission, all five safe houses used by the OPM Gender and Child Affairs are equipped to accommodate female domestic violence victims and their children. Can you state for us if whether there is any restriction on the age and/or gender of children that can be accommodated at these facilities and, if yes, please state? Can you also state for us how does Gender and Child Affairs maintain the confidentiality of the location or locations of these safe houses, and whether there have been any instances where perpetrators were able to discover the location of these facilities? And, if yes, if you can state for us, how this was dealt with, of course, you know, protecting persons?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: So, I am aware that the shelter that is government-run, there is no restriction with respect to children. Even with the boys, they could actually be accommodated up to 18, which, you know, they are still a child, under 18, of course. And with the private shelters, I believe there are some restrictions. I will ask our shelter administrator to provide information on this and some of the questions that you just asked.

Asst. Coordinator: Pleasant morning to the Chairman and members. In terms of our shelter, how it is run, we do accommodate boys and girls up to the age of 18. We also have accommodation for 24 people. And in terms of their support, we provide psychotherapeutic support and also case management services for the individuals. Under the psychotherapeutic support, we have individual, group and family counselling. We also have holistic wellness programmes, meditation, Zumba, arts and craft, poetry and other activities for children; life skills training, parenting classes, livelihood skills, which include cooking classes. We have also a grow box initiative.

Under the case management services, we provide medical support, which includes clinical and hospital visits, also connection with psychiatric support. We provide social services, which will provide grants and other document retrieval for our clients; legal services, as was mentioned earlier, protection orders and other legal aides and there is employment support, housing support, educational support, which was provided during the pandemic—well, we are still in an endemic—the virtual classes. Now that it has changed, we are trying to readdress how we are going to provide educational support. We also provide connection for applying to help support systems for when they have re-entry in society, for family reconciliation in terms not with the perpetrator, but other family members. We also provide

donation of clothing. As I said before, reintegration into society and we do a follow-up and aftercare support for all who have asked.

Ms. Mohit: Sure. And, finally, your submission indicated that some of the domestic violence shelters which operated between 2018 and 2020 are no longer in operation. Can you state for us what were the factors that contributed to these shelters not being operational?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Most of those shelters were privately owned and run. So, we do not have the information in terms of why they closed up their doors, but we would imagine it may have been some financial constraints.

Ms. Mohit: You previously stated that you all provide financial assistance.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Social Development, not Gender and Child.

Ms. Mohit: Sure.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Thank you, member Mohit. Just before we go to Member Nakhid and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, to the OPM, two questions; one, the question I posed earlier on to the TTPS: Does the OPM, Gender and Child Affairs Division have a position on the management of corporal punishment given what has happened, in some instances, in the public domain regarding people crossing the line, parents crossing the line, from what may be considered appropriate punishment and discipline to abuse?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: We are guided by the legislation as TTPS would have indicated and, of course, through our sensitization and education, we do let persons know what is the national policy with respect to corporal punishment, and we do partner with our Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago also in terms of sensitizing and educating the public with respect to this particular phenomenon.

Mr. Chairman: And two, given the recent report about the gaps in the care at some children's homes, has there been a discussion and recommendation process regarding remedying those gaps identified in those children homes and places of care?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Yes. There has been discussion. As the chair of the task force that has been set up to look at the recommendations and to come up with the work plan, we have been meeting with a number of agencies and representatives. And, of course, the task force is a multi-sectoral task force and, therefore, there are a number of persons from various agencies discussing, and we have also had, voluntarily, people who are from particular agencies such as the Judiciary have volunteered their resources to the task force and so, we are having intense discussion around the gaps.

Mr. Chairman: While the discussions are ongoing, have there been interventions in the homes identified as having problems and challenges in terms of breaches in standards of care? Because while the discussions as ongoing are commendable, there may be still children who are being abused and/or not being afforded adequate care in some of these homes that need to be remedied immediately. Has that sort of step been taken even in the interim while a more holistic approach is taken to remedying the gaps identified?

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: I know we have been having discussions with the Children's Authority, and I think that agency will be better able to speak to that. But what I could say is that we have been addressing with them some of the issues as regards to the licensing that has to do with the infrastructural and those types of issues. The issue of monitoring and what is happening in the children's homes, we have had discussions with them, but that is really their remit.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Well, we will get on to the Children's Authority and ask that question. Thank you so much, Madam PS. We move now—member Nakhid, the floor is yours, Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

Mr. Nakhid: Hello? Good morning.

Mr. Chairman: We are hearing you.

Mr. Nakhid: Yes. I would like to address the Ministry concerning the dominant age of the perpetrators, as their submission indicated that that age range was between 30 and 59 years of age. How does the Ministry intend to address the issues of domestic violence within this age group? And has the Ministry conducted a study to determine the factors that account for domestic violence to be the highest within this age range?

Ms. Johnson: Chairman, domestic violence is a learnt behaviour, and the Ministry of Social Development is treating with it in the context of family violence, which is part of our responsibility to build resilient families in the country. So, it is treated within the context of family and the development of families in Trinidad and Tobago. The age group that we are talking about where this is prevalent, it comes from the research that has been conducted in the past with relation to domestic violence, and those reports have been published. There are several of them coming out of the Office of the Prime Minister and coming out of the research undertaken by NGOs that we have leveraged on to make an assessment of what is happening with domestic violence.

A lot of the things that we understand have come out of the kinds of research done previously by the Office of the Prime Minister, and which were recently concluded under the Spotlight Initiative. So, that is our source of information along with that provided by the Domestic Violence Hotline, as well as the data supplied to us by the police. Those are the sources of information, in addition to the trends that we look at being reported internationally by the women's arm of the United Nations.

In terms of specifically addressing that group, as I said earlier, it is being managed within the context of building family and, in particular, family violence. So, we are treating with it in the form of our Parenting Programme. There is a gender element there, there is a family conflict and violence element there, through our partnership with the other agencies, the police, the OPM and the Ministry of Education on the Foundations Programme. Those are some of the things that we are focusing on. We have segmented our Parenting Programme to deal specifically with some groups that we feel would bring some relief to violence in the country, and we have a set strategy that we are pursuing to treat with family violence in collaboration with all the other key stakeholders.

Mr. Nakhid: I appreciate your answer, but since you mentioned the importance of family in your attempt to address the issue, and we know that when we bring it down to the ground level, we have

serious challenges with what we consider stable families, especially in some of the disadvantaged communities. How are you going to address that—single-mother homes, absentee fathers? Has that been addressed by the Ministry?

Ms. Johnson: Chair, the Ministry has a social protection system in place which addresses vulnerability—families and individuals with vulnerabilities—and we would agree that we have not been able to identify all of them, but there are some things that are happening at the Ministry now which would help the situation immensely, one of them being the establishment of the Vulnerability Register, a household register for the country. The Ministry's social—

Mr. Chairman: Could you—sorry to interrupt. What is the Vulnerability Registry? And is it based on doing a national scan to say what types of vulnerabilities exist where? Because if you look at the data provided by the TTPS—you may not have been privy to it—there are specific areas that are showing to be higher in reports of domestic violence: Northern, 1,423; central, 964; southern, 835 and Tobago, 848. So, on a cursory level, there was some data occurring, existing, that is telling us something is happening in these divisions in terms of the police data, but if we do not have a scan to say where the other factors that may be contributing to family dysfunction exists, I am trying to figure out how we are crafting the policy and the prioritization of resources to those areas that are showing to be vulnerable and deficient in some areas, in some departments and dimensions.

Ms. Johnson: And Chair, yes, we work with the police service. The areas which they have identified are indeed some of the vulnerable areas that we are currently strategizing on for an intervention, and those are the three or four areas that we have selected as priority. So, we are liaising with the police service, the Office of the Prime Minister, community development and education. The Ministry of Social Development understands that it is not only the—while it is a key social sector agency, in order to treat with family violence, we have to engage in strategizing and prioritizing the areas. There is a reason why we chose to pilot our Social Security Empowerment Services in Rio Claro and Tunapuna. Those were areas identified very early for priority treatment. So, we are using the data to establish our priority areas for intervention and the strategy. And just to quickly say that the Vulnerability Register, which the consultant is currently addressing, aims to identify all the households in Trinidad in terms of their vulnerability status or an individual may have one vulnerability and the others might have multiple vulnerabilities.

Mr. Chairman: Could you just give us a sense of what the categories of vulnerability or scanning involves, just as so we get a sense of what it entails?

Ms. Johnson: It is social vulnerabilities. It is your economic vulnerability and within that there are lots of segments. So, your social vulnerability may mean that there is dysfunctionality in the family in terms of the education, your ability to treat with your psychosocial condition in the family. The economic vulnerability may revolve around your ability to place food on your table. So, those are some of the vulnerabilities that we have to look at. It may mean your physical ability. That is one of the vulnerabilities that we have to look at. What we want to get is to identify those households which are vulnerable and need priority attention, while we identify those that are potentially vulnerable in the event that the economy suffers some kind of shock, for example, like COVID and how we could move and eliminate vulnerability, so we move people to a position where they can be selfsufficient. So, that is the purpose of the Vulnerability Register. Sen. Nakhid asked—

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead, please.

Ms. Johnson: Yes—a question relating to how we are dealing with that 30 age group. Is that the question Sen. Nakhid? I think I lost a bit the question, through you, Chair?

Mr. Nakhid: That was the first question, Madam. It was about the age range. You had here in your submission that the age range from 30 to 59 years of age has the highest number of victims and perpetrators of domestic violence, and I asked you how do you intend to address the issues of domestic violence within that age group.

Ms. Johnson: Yes. And more, specifically, the intention here is to treat with it while addressing our families strategy. One of the things is to treat with it at the level of the family, yes, but you have to treat with it at the level of the education system, and that is why we have been supporting the introduction of the Family Life Education at the Ministry of Education, the use of the Foundations Programme there as well within the schools. But, more specifically, we have targeted our Parenting Programme and more recently our discussions with the police and the other agencies will lead to a more focused strategy on this particular age group.

Mr. Nakhid: Well, then obviously the question becomes, since you said in your submission that you had serious human resource needs, that you were not well resourced in terms of the human resources then, how are you going to have the optimum level of efficiency that you seek to achieve if you are not well resourced that you can fill those vacant positions that you have, especially within the National Family Services Division and the Parenting Unit? How is that going to be achieved?

Ms. Johnson: Chair, we have been doing a lot in our Parenting Programme. We have gone virtual with that programme and we are due to come back face-to-face within communities on that programme. So, yes, I agree, we are resource constrained, but we have been asking the commission to support with filling the positions, and we have advertised the family services social worker. So we are in the process of filling those vacancies, because there is ample evidence that we need to get back into the communities to do the work to develop resilient families.

Mr. Nakhid: Okay. I understand you are in the process, but when do you envision that the Ministry will have these vacancies filled? What is the time? Give us a timeline.

Ms. Johnson: We hope by the end of the fiscal year. We are going out with—we have been out with our advertisements. Some of them are at the shortlisting stage. We are currently doing interviews, for example, for our Crisis Hotline. We have been out with our advertisements for our specialized family services social workers. So we hope to be up and ready by the end of this fiscal. As I said, we are trying to prioritize and use the resources we have available to deal with those strategic issues and those priority areas that we have seen based on the data.

Mr. Nakhid: Okay. Thank you for your answer. Given that the lockdown measures would have hindered a victim's ability to find a safe location to call or report to NFSD, how was the NFSD able to assist victims of domestic violence who needed that support during the pandemic?

11.45 a.m.

Ms. Johnson: Chair, the NFS operates usually on the 8.00 to 4.00 system, but our caseworkers are usually available outside of those periods when we have to treat with disaster situations. When an urgency arises it is not that the Division is on an 8.00 to 4.00, and we have seen it in many instances where we find ourselves by our clients on weekends and on public holidays, and beyond the normal work day. But I will let Ms. Sarkar, our Director, National Family Services, expand on that.

Mr. Nakhid: Please.

Ms. Sarkar: Good morning, Senator, and other members of the team and my coworkers present today. NFS has—in terms of how we would have addressed it during the COVID period, our staff were still on call. They would have worked from their homes. The telephone extensions were routed to their cell phones so that they were able to take calls during this period. This continues and we were able to do—we were also able to do interviews via WhatsApp, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Messenger, even the normal telephone; however these persons were able to reach out to us, we were available. We made ourselves available. As PS Johnson indicated, we do not function on an 8.00 to 4.00 basis, we are available 24/7 for anyone who needs the support.

Mr. Nakhid: That is very commendable; very, very commendable, but I am interested in the financial support that you receive. Have all the organizations under your remit received a quarterly financial support for 2022?

Ms. Johnson: Chairman, are you referring to the NGOs under our remit? Is it that you are asking?

Mr. Nakhid: Are the organizations in receipt of financial support from the Ministry?

Ms. Johnson: Subvention? Chair, I take it, it is subventions Sen. Nakhid is referring to?

Mr. Chairman: Sen. Nakhid.

Mr. Nakhid: Yes, they would be subventions. Were these organizations would have financial subventions from the Ministry? Have they received the quarterly financial support for 2022?

Ms. Johnson: Ms. Heeralal will provide an update.

Ms. Heeralal: Good morning, Committee and Senator. The answer to that is, yes, for the NGOs under the purview of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services; specifically, for those providing support for victims of domestic violence and abuse, they would be in receipt. Throughout the period of the pandemic, March, 2020 to 2022, they would have received their quarterly allocations once in compliance with the Ministry's monitoring and reporting process. And that basically entails financial oversight and monitoring to ensure compliance as well as service delivery.

Mr. Nakhid: Okay.

Mr. Chairman: Sen. Nakhid, one more question before we move to Children's Authority, please. Thank you.

Mr. Nakhid: Yes, one more. It falls in what the good lady just said; I would like to refer to the Rape Crisis Society of Trinidad and Tobago. With regard to recommendations from the assessment report on that particular organization and the Red Cross Society, how does the Ministry intend to assist the societies in the implementation of the recommendations of the assessment report?

Ms. Heeralal: Our support for NGOs looks at an organizational capacity and strengthening perspective, so we are working on a case by case. It is not an immediate process. There are some governance issues that need to be looked at in terms of strengthening governance of these organizations, as well as the reporting, strengthening the reporting process. So as you will well be aware, NGOs are primarily run on voluntary resources and as a result of that, you know, it is the constant cry that, you know, administrative requirements tend to be quite burdensome sometimes.

The NGO unit is available to provide the type of support and handling that is needed to address these recommendations. So having an identifiable work plan at the start of the fiscal period so we understand the level of activities being undertaken by these organizations. Also looking at compliance in terms of the Ministry's reporting process, such as timely submission of reports to account for state funds, such as income and expenditure statements, actual income and expenditure statements, as well as audited financials that forms part of the Ministry's process.

So we are working on a case by case with both of the organizations identified. Resourcing as well in terms of capacity tends to be a challenge for all these organizations, heavily dependent on voluntary resources, as I mentioned. So we are reviewing those recommendations towards implementation with regard to further strengthening to ensure efficient service delivery.

Mr. Nakhid: Maybe the Chairman can help me here, as you remembered in our last meeting, Chairman, that the Rape Crisis Society had some serious complaints about their subventions or whether any donations from the Government. Do you remember exactly, Chairman, what was the complaint?

Mr. Chairman: I think it was Lifeline, actually.

Mr. Nakhid: Lifeline? The hotline, the Rape Crisis hotline, correct, Chairman?

Mr. Chairman: My memory is pointing me to Lifeline as opposed to Rape Crisis hotline.

Mr. Nakhid: Okay, Chairman, thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Thank you, member Nakhid, and thank you to the officials of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. Children's Authority, you are up next. Thank you for your patience. I am looking at the breakdown of state funding provided by the Children's Authority for the period March 2018, to March 2022, where it states, March to September, 2018, received 28.1 million; 2019, 64.9 million; 2020, 68.9million; 2021, 88.7 million, and for March—for 2022 up to March, 23.4 million. So the question to start, to the acting Director is, is the Authority adequately resourced at this time, financially and otherwise?

Mrs. Morris-Cummings: Mr. Chairman, I think I can speak for a number of state agencies when I say that we would like to receive more funding than we currently receive, especially given the stringency of our economic times. We do receive funding at the mid-term review. We have consistently gained increases in our funding but in terms of overall funding we would like to see an increase going forward.

Mr. Chairman: Where would you say the priority areas lie in terms of where this increased funding would be focused on in terms of more effectively running the Authority?

Mrs. Morris-Cummings: Since the inception of the Authority we have seen an increase in the number of reports of abuse coming to the Authority. When the Authority was conceptualized it was envisaged that the number of cases of abuse may have been in the order of less than 2,000 per year, however we have seen an average of 4,000-plus cases of abuse per year coming to the Authority. So I would say that a lot of the increased funding would be allocated to engaging additional resources to deal with the number of cases of abuse, children who come to us with varying symptomatology based on domestic violence and other acts perpetrated against them in the context of the family. We also see that we would be partnering in a more intensive way with our domestic partners; for example, the Ministry of Social Development to help strengthen the family mechanism and make families more resilient.

Relative to our funding, we also recognize that there is a need for placements of children. Now we have been experiencing what is called “placement crisis”, we would like to see an increase in the number of foster parents and in the number of adoptions. So we can envisage an increased funding to treat with an increase in our foster care programme, so additional persons can open their hearts and homes to our vulnerable and needy children.

Mr. Chairman: How many care centre, residence centres are presently operated by the Authority?

Mrs. Morris-Cummings: Four, four centres, please.

Mr. Chairman: Four centres. Given what has happened in the past—I think it is just over a year where there were certainly gaps identified in security arrangements at—in particular one these, has an audit been done in terms of the security and monitoring protocols at these residences to ensure that recurrence of the past issues do not happen?

Mrs. Morris-Cummings: Yes, please, Mr. Chairman. And I would venture to say that the board has in fact recognized that there are systemic shortcomings and the board, in its wisdom, had ordered an audit of the system, and based on that, work has been ongoing at the Authority to address some of the systemic issues.

Mr. Chairman: Now, you would understand that someone listening to that and understanding the remit of the Authority in regulating and monitoring situations of child abuse and ensuring children are protected, having not been able to audit itself in that instance adequately, would raise red flags. So is it that you had a system in place that was not adequate or was there some sort of gap that developed through to some resource shortcoming? What actually happened?

Mrs. Morris-Cummings: Mr. Chair, relative to that specific issue, I would not go into the specifics of that, but what I can say relative to security, we have identified that a change in how we approach security is required. Therefore, security agents are not just there to secure plant as in a normal establishment, they are also there to help secure fragile, vulnerable children in need of care and protection. So at this moment we are fine-tuning our own proposal to increase the number of security agents, security personnel within our establishment. But we have now proceeded—we wish to proceed on the basis that these officers will be more akin to care officers, an extension of our care and protection mechanism in safeguarding the children who come to our care.

Mr. Chairman: Given the circumstances surrounding the—I do not want to use the word “escape”, but the escape—

Mrs. Morris-Cummings: Abscond.

Mr. Chairman:—of the young persons recently, and the suggestion that there may have been some sort of gang affiliation. Is part of the new protocol also working with the TTPS in identifying possible high-risk residents who may need protection themselves but through whatever exigent circumstance in their life may also be more vulnerable and because they are being housed and protected, need a different level of protection for that particular residence in conjunction with the TTPS? Is that part of the consideration given what has transpired?

Mrs. Morris-Cummings: At present, Mr. Chair, the TTPS is rendering assistance in the review of our security system. So what you have suggested will be part of the consideration, however, we also recognize that there is a greater need in the intake and assessment of our children to identify these red flags to help us to assist them in a better way. They have also reached out to the OPM and the OPM has in fact delegated a resource to help us in identifying children who are vulnerable because of drug use and drug abuse.

Mr. Chairman: Has there been also a focus on children who are victims of sexual abuse that would have come to the Authority's attention so the Authority would have moved them out into safer environments?

Mrs. Morris-Cummings: Could you repeat the question, please, Chair?

Mr. Chairman: Given what the TTPS data is on situations of child abuse and abandonment, in some cases sexual abuse, is there a focus on that aspect of the Authority's mandate in protecting children from those situations and providing the type of rehabilitation services for those children?

Mrs. Morris-Cummings: Yes, Chair. Whenever there is an allegation of abuse there is an investigation within the Authority. The matter is also referred to the TTPS.

Mr. Chairman: Given the number of reports that the Authority, as you indicated, receiving over 4,000 reports now, which is substantial—that must take a lot of resources to investigate all those, because I think is partly your mandate to investigate each report that reaches your desk. Is that correct?

Mrs. Morris-Cummings: Yes, it is

Mr. Chairman: So that to me is monumental. What are the indicators used to assess if a child is in imminent danger and needs to be removed?

Mrs. Morris-Cummings: In relation to that question, Chair, I will refer the question to Mrs. Gregoire-Roopchan, Deputy Director, Care.

Mrs. Gregoire-Roopchan: Good day, everyone. With respect to the steps that we use to determine if a child is in imminent danger that is tasked to the investigating or the emergency team in the second instance; in the first instance we task that to our registry team. They are the ones who take the call from members of the public and determine by the different factors of the case reported to us, whether that child is likely to be in imminent danger. Our next step is to determine how we will action that case and which team we will send. In imminent danger situations, as indicated in our submission, we aim to investigate and to mitigate risk to a child within 24 hours, and that is tasked to our emergency response team.

The factors we look for are whether there is bodily harm likely to be happening to the child, whether there is emotional harm likely to be happening to the child, and all of this is based primarily on the child's voice which is our main guide in terms of understanding the child's circumstances. A part of that process also is ensuring that we take information from collateral sources, other family members, persons in the community, other practitioners who may have been involved with the child, and we take the necessary steps to then mitigate risk to the child.

So what we are doing is substantiating the allegation that is before us which would tell us the level of risk to which the child is exposed to and then determining what next steps we must make to ensure that that child is safe. In some instances, as a last resort, it may mean receipt into care. So those are some of the processes that we go through to determine if a child is in fact in imminent danger.

Mr. Chairman: What happens from the Authority's perspective, because Ms. Johnson at the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services raised a very important point earlier on and she indicated—and she was correct—that abuse is a learnt behaviour, what happens in circumstances in households and in children's residences and homes when the alleged perpetrator is another child who may have learnt that behaviour from being abused, unfortunately, and now is carrying on the cycle of abuse with other children in that space or in some instances in homes? What is the protocol of the Authority in those cases?

Mrs. Gregoire-Roopchan: The Authority will treat a child who is a perpetrator as a child, because, as you said, we have some understanding being in the sector that we are in as to what may have brought that child to become a perpetrator in the first instance; possibly exposure to violence. Our next step would be to secure and put in a safety plan, if that is in the best interest of the child, to ensure that the victim is not harmed any further. Our case management officers are then tasked to provide the interventions for both children, both the victim and perpetrator, to, one, curtail the behaviour of perpetration going forward, and more importantly to understand the root cause of that behaviour. So that would be part of the case management goals of the team that would manage those children's cases going forward.

Now, in the situation of imminent danger, if we determine that that cannot be done while the children remain in their current environment, we will consider exploring a—[Technical difficulties] environment, possibly a family member and so on, so that we can put in place a safety plan to ensure that harm does not continue while the interventions happen.

Mr. Chairman: Has the Authority been involved in the dealing with children who may, in the homes that have been identified in the recent report of having been victims of abuse, in having been victims of neglect or a lack of standard of care in, one, removing those children and also working with the TTPS in terms of identifying persons who may pose a risk to children in those circumstances in those homes?

Mrs. Gregoire-Roopchan: Absolutely. And that is an excellent question; I thank you for it. With respect to our collaboration with the TTPS—and Ms. Claire Guy-Alleyne who is one of our main stakeholders and collaborators, the police often work with us to be able to go out and determine what are the allegations and substantiate them in relation to how they can move the criminal matter forward. The Authority does the psychosocial investigation that focuses on satisfying the needs of the child. So that collaboration helps us to take the steps to determine if a child needs to be moved out of a particular situation and that also helps us to feed into our investigation from the criminal aspect whether

there are other dangers in the community, in other family members, et cetera, that we must consider before placing the child. Now, part of the placement process—

Mr. Chairman: Just before you go, so are you comfortable, given the report that I am sure you have had access to, that all the dangers have been removed from those homes in terms of personnel who may not—who may be subject to investigation, one; or who may, in your opinion, given your identifying markers in your interviews with children, continue to pose a risk to other children if they are identified in that report as possible perpetrators? Has that process been done?

Mrs. Gregoire-Roopchan: Specific to your question in relation to community residences and—[Inaudible]

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Mrs. Gregoire-Roopchan: Well, the licensing and monitoring department of the Authority is tasked to go in and to explore every allegation that comes to our attention that a child is in fact likely to have been abused. That is their remit, and in collaboration with other units they go in to explore and conduct the same process I mentioned before, to understand or substantiate the allegation. And those are the steps that we are taking. To say that I am totally satisfied with the steps that all danger is completely removed from any of the children's home is not something we can safely say, simply because as time evolves, circumstances evolve and we need to continue, as we have been, to ensure that we explore and look at opportunities to even improve existing systems, as well as hear the voice of a child, should we have not explored anything in full at any—

Mr. Chairman: Let me just—I am going to member Nakhid and member Beckles in a short while, but the TTPS is still with us and I am sure the TTPS has had sight of that report that was recently presented. Has there been any move to ensure that alleged perpetrators have been removed from those situations?—and this is for the TTPS. Because while it is being investigated I would shudder to think that while an investigation is ongoing and a person is presumed innocent until otherwise proven guilty, that there are questions hanging over supervisors' heads, et cetera, that may continue to pose a danger to children. TTPS, are you still there?

Mr. Jacob: Yes. Thanks for the question. The investigative team, they are in the early stages of doing the investigation and in fact some persons ask—[Technical difficulties]—persons coming forward—[Technical difficulties]—but they have not—[Technical difficulties]—persons who are within these homes that they can recommend to remove immediately from the homes. That is ongoing. The investigation is ongoing and as we get the information and evidence we will in fact make the requisite recommendation, but at this time, no.

Mr. Chairman: Superintendent in charge of the Gender-Based Violence and Child Protection Unit, given the fact that these reports—according to what is in the public domain—had been done as much as six months ago, are you comfortable with the fact that some children may still be in danger if the report proves to be true in the long run? And while I am sure there is a process involved in investigating, I think the priority needs to be the child and the protection of the children in those homes, and given the damning nature of that report that I have sight of, I would shudder to think that some sort of temporary situation has not been initiated to ensure that even allegations are treated in a particular way to protect children at all costs.

Mrs. Guy-Alleyne: As Commissioner would have alluded to before, I would just like to add that with respect to the Justice Jones investigation, a few of those reports are actually engaging the attention of the Child Protection Unit at the moment. One of the things I would like the public to know is that when it comes to removing a child, we as the investigative unit at the Child Protection Unit, we would make a request for the alleged perpetrator to be removed from where the victim or the survivor is at the moment. However, when it comes to removal, the body that is fostered with that duty under the laws is the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago, but a lot of times we would make that demand, "Here is what, that is our victim and for the victim's safety we would like the perpetrator to be removed immediately".

Mr. Chairman: You made that demand in this case or in any of these instances of the Authority?

Mrs. Guy-Alleyne: All instances. In all instances.

Mr. Chairman: I am going back to the Children's Authority now; the ball is in your court. Has that been done given the gravity of the situation identified in that Jones report?

Mrs. Morris-Cummings: That a demand was made to us?

Mr. Chairman: If a request has been made to remove any supervisor who may be alleged to be involved in abusing children in these homes identified in the Jones report.

Mrs. Morris-Cummings: I am not aware that a request has been made to the Authority in that regard.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much. Member Nakhid, go ahead, please.

Mr. Nakhid: Yes. To the acting Director on the Children's Authority, just a simple question before I exit. I would just like to know since you spoke about the synergy with the Authority and the TTPS, and the TTPS stated that the normal protocol, if there was some incident within the Authority, you would immediately contact the TTPS, is that correct?

Mrs. Morris-Cummings: That is the usual and correct procedure, yes. **Mr. Nakhid:** Is it protocol to contact anybody outside of the TTPS to investigate a matter?

Mrs. Morris-Cummings: I am not clear on your question, please.

Mr. Nakhid: If, for example, the boys that absconded and it was stated that the TTPS was contacted, I am asking, is it normal protocol for anyone else other than the TTPS to investigate those boys absconding? Would somebody be contacted? Would a community leader or someone else be contacted?

Mrs. Morris-Cummings: I am not aware of a protocol that requires that from the Authority's standpoint.

Mr. Nakhid: Thank you very much. **Mr. Chairman:** Member Beckles.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you, Chair. I just wanted to go back to the issue of counselling and to enquire whether or not the Authority is satisfied that they have the resources based on all the discussions today to be able to address the issue of counselling for the persons who are at the facility.

Mrs. Morris-Cummings: I invite Mrs. Gregoire-Roopchan to respond to this, hon. Member.

Mrs. Gregoire-Roopchan: Good morning again. With respect to counselling the Authority does have a number of case managers whose responsibility it is to provide that level of counselling. We also have a number of psychologists. We currently have just four psychologists at the Authority at the moment who do some of the therapeutic interventions specific to children. So to speak to your question on resources and whether we feel that we are doing enough, there is certainly more that we can do. Our current caseload for those case managers is quickly approaching 100 per person which is not sustainable. So what we hope to do is, you know, as we redesign the organization and look at the structure and assess our resources, we hope to be able to do even more in terms of providing counselling for children, both in their family care, in the community residences, as well as in our child support centre.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. At this time we are going to have to wrap up—seek to wrap up because, as we said, there is a sitting of the Senate later on this afternoon. I would like to thank all the members of the Committee and also our stakeholders for being with us today. And at this time I would like invite the leads of each of the teams with us to present some brief closing remarks, starting with Mrs. Jacinta Bailey-Sobers, PS, OPM, Gender and Child Affairs.

Mrs. Bailey-Sobers: Thank you very much, Chair. And just to say that the Gender and Child Affairs Division, we recognize that addressing domestic violence is multifaceted and it is so many areas that have to be addressed. And we know that we cannot do this alone and that we need all our partners on board to meet and create the kind of mindset shifts that need to take place to eradicate this scourge. So we were happy to have been here to join forces with our colleagues who were part of this session, and in future to continue to work with them to eradicate, as Superintendent Guy-Alleyne said, this scourge in all its forms. And so we thank you; we take note of all the areas that were mentioned here that need to be strengthened and make the commitment to working with our partners to continue to address this issue. Thank you very much.

12. 15 p.m.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you, Mrs. Bailey-Sobers, and to your team for being here. Ms. Jacqueline Johnson, PS Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

Ms. Johnson: Thank you, Chair. I would be very short. I would want to support PS Bailey-Sobers in what she said. The work to collaborate and strategize and prioritize with regard to family violence has started among the agencies, and we need to work steadfastly to ensure that that is adequately sustained at all levels. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much. Next we go to Mrs. Sharon MorrisCummings, Acting Director of the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mrs. Morris-Cummings: Thank you, Chair. I would like to, in closing, indicate that a collaborative approach is required, and an all of Government approach would see us working together to build out the child protection ecosystem of which the Children's Authority, a relatively young entity, is a part. I look forward to continued collaboration with our partners, and to increase in that collaboration across society.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much, and to Mr. McDonald Jacob, Acting Commissioner of Police. Commissioner? Commissioner Jacob, we are not hearing you yet. Well, we are going to presume that there is some technical difficulties there. I thank you Commissioner and your team, including Mrs. Gomez-Cooper, Mrs. Claire Guy-Alleyne and Ms. Aisha Corbie and the Acting—

Mr. Jacob: Are you are hearing me now?

Mr. Chairman: Yes, we are hearing you now. Go ahead please.

Mr. Jacob: Again, on behalf of my entire team, I began to call the names, we really appreciate participating in this session this morning, and we are willing to work in partnership with all the various entities in order to deal with the whole aspect of domestic violence within Trinidad and Tobago.

We are, yes, the investigative arm, and we form teams in relation to the investigation, because it is very, very important that we get quick outcomes and results from these investigations. In talking with my colleagues here, yes we have, in fact, made some recommendations for the particular individual to be removed from particular homes, and I think that is being dealt with. Even previous to the Justice Jones report, there were, in fact, investigations being done with reports made to the Special Victims Department, and in some instances there were two individuals who were charged. So it is a continuation of that investigation that is taking place, because we already had the platform there doing the investigation.

So, again, we will continue, be more rigorous with our data, and in some instances the data that we provided to you all, it can be disaggregated even to communities and even to particular variables that persons will be interested in to assist them in making the correct decisions.

Our Crime and Problem Analysis Branch, who manages our database, we have a lot of information there that could help all the various departments and Government agencies, to propel them forward in doing their interventions in a scientific manner. So, again, thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, Commissioner, we appreciate that and, of course too the data that you provided, you and your team have provided, which has proved extremely useful. We appreciate that if you could send the further disaggregated data to the Secretariat, we would also appreciate that very much.

To all the entities that appeared before us today, you have the ability to send any further information and/or data or commentary to the Secretariat, which we will be able to factor into our final report. Thank you all so much for being with us today.

On behalf of the members who are with us of the Committee, including member David Nakhid, member Vandana Mohit, member Penelope Beckles, and the members who could not be with us due to conflicting engagements, I would like to thank the members of the Secretariat and Parliament for, of course, as usual, providing yeoman service.

Thanks to all stakeholders for their participation and also the staff and Office of the Parliament for your procedural and logistical support, as per usual, and of course to you the viewing and listening audience for being with us today. Thank you so much. This meeting is now adjourned. Have a good afternoon.

12.20 p.m.: *Meeting adjourned.*

Appendix V – Verbatim Notes of 13th Meeting

VERBATIM NOTES OF THE THIRTEENTH VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE HELD (IN PUBLIC) ON WEDNESDAY, JUNE 22, 2022, AT 10.15 A.M.

PRESENT

Mr. Paul Richards	Chairman
Mr. Esmond Forde	Vice Chairman
Mr. David Nakhid	Member
Ms. Penelope Beckles	Member
Mr. Avinash Singh	Member
Mr. David Nakhid	Member

Ms. Vandana Mohit	Member
Mr. Brian Lucio	Assistant Secretary
Ms. Katharina Gookool	Graduate Research Assistant

ABSENT

Mr. Rohan Sinanan	Member
Mr. Roger Monroe	Member

ALLIANCE FOR STATE ACTION TO END GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

(ASA)

Ms. Roberta Clarke	President, Coalition Against Domestic Violence
Ms. Gabrielle Hosein	Representative, Institute for Gender and Development Studies
Ms. Asiya Mohammed	Founder and Executive Director, Conflict Women Ltd
Ms. Safiyah Acosta	Outreach Coordinator, WOMANTRA

CENTER FOR NONVIOLENCE, RESEARCH, AND DEVELOPMENT

Mrs. Sherna Alexander-Benjamin	Anti-Violence, Social Protection and Human Economy Consultant
Ms. Asha Garib	Clinical Psychologist
Ms. Chimere Gibson Wadi	Attorney at Law

TRINIDAD SHELTER FOR BATTERED WOMEN AND CHILDREN (TSBWC)

Mr. Collin Mitchell	Chairman
Ms. Sherron Harford	Vice-Chairman
Dr. Maria Gomes	Executive Committee Member Resident Care Coordinator

Mr. Chairman: Good day, and welcome to the viewing and listening audience to this the Thirteenth Meeting of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration. This is the Committee's second hearing with stakeholders pursuant to its enquiry into the State's capacity to provide support for victims of domestic violence and family conflicts, with specific focus on the availability of support mechanisms during the COVID-19 pandemic. Members of the public are invited to submit their comments and/or questions via the Parliament's social media platforms, including YouTube, ParView, or via Facebook or Twitter.

Our representatives before us today are from the Alliance for State Action to End Gender-based Violence, the ASA; the Organization for Abused and Battered Individuals, OABI; and the Trinidad Shelter for Battered Women and Children, TSBWC. The enquiry's objectives are as follows:

1. To examine trends of domestic violence in Trinidad and Tobago for the period March 2020 to March 2022, compared with previous periods.
2. To examine the State's policies, projects and initiatives aimed at providing support for domestic violence victims.
3. To examine the capacity of state-funded organizations and institutions to provide adequate support to victims of domestic violence;
4. To evaluate the effectiveness of support provided to domestic violence victims by the State for the period March 2022 to present.

While the enquiry's objectives state certainly to March 2020, the nature of the issue before us certainly will lend itself to discussions on the prevailing and underlying issues that may—factors that can contribute and unfortunately, continue to see a situation where domestic violence remains prevalent in Trinidad and Tobago. So, the discussion sometimes wanders a bit wider than that.

I am the Committee's Chairman, Paul Richards. I would like to at this time invite members of the Committee to introduce themselves, starting with member Beckles. Member Beckles, good morning.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much, the other two members will join us in process and they are member Rohan Sinanan and member Roger Monroe. At this time, I would like to invite members of the group before us to please introduce themselves and their groups. I know the Alliance for State Action to End Genderbased Violence is an umbrella organization, so I do not know if Ms. Roberta Clarke will be introducing the group or would you like members of each—the other members with you and the Alliance to also issue opening short opening statements?

Ms. Clarke: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. My name is Roberta Clarke and I am associated with the Alliance through my membership of the Coalition Against Domestic Violence and I will be

making the introductory remarks on behalf of the Alliance but we do believe in self-identity and I would like to ask the members of the Alliance to introduce themselves.

Mr. Chairman: Not a problem. Go ahead, please.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: Roberta, would you like to deliver your opening remarks at this time? Thank you for the familiarity. I have known all these groups for a while so I may get overly familiar sometimes, I apologize.

Ms. Clarke: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. We have Caribbean people and we do not misunderstand familiarity other than being just that, friendly. I would like to start off by thanking the members of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration for its invitation to the Alliance to State Actions to End Gender-based Violence to appear before you and to give us this opportunity to share our perspectives on the State capacity needed to provide support to victims of domestic violence and in the context of family conflicts.

The Member of Parliament, Ms. Beckles, hon. Penny Beckles, has asked about the “who is” or “what is” the Alliance for State Action. Just to say the Alliance of State Action is a network of organizations working on ending genderbased violence and working to advance human rights and also to advance gender equality in Trinidad and Tobago. Our objective is to work in solidarity across the diversity of organizations, to monitor state action and to advocate for state accountability, to prevent and respond effectively to end gender-based violence. And we have been in—[Technical difficulties]—as this network since 2018 and we were very much part of the consultations with the then Attorney General and his team on the reforms to the Domestic Violence Act. And we have held together also commenting on various situations of amendments for the Sexual Offences Act. So, also very happy to be here with you today.

We consider that the State has, what we would say, a non-negotiable and even a sacred duty and obligation, pressing obligation, to respond to domestic violence, both its causes and its consequences. And this obligation, this non-negotiable obligation, is rooted in our Constitution of this country. Our Constitution guarantees including the right to life, the right to liberty, security of the person—very importantly, security of the person—equality before the law, protection of the law, and equality of treatment from public authorities, amongst other rights. But we think these are really very germane to this issue.

And we also want to remind the Joint Select Committee that Trinidad and Tobago has ratified the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment of all forms of violence against women, what we know of familiarly as Belém do Pará Convention. And under that Convention, states are obligated to take all appropriate measures to, and without delay—these are important words without delay—to prevent, punish and eradicate violence against women and to promote lives free of violence. So, it is an obligation of state conduct but it is also an obligation to transform social and cultural norms based on equality amongst our people.

And so, we recognize that the State has taken a number of measures over many years, starting with the first iteration of Domestic Violence Act going back to 1991 and more laterally over the last

two/three years, the establishment of a specialized police unit, there is a specialized unit within the Office of the Prime Minister, there is the central data registry. So, there are a number of initiatives ongoing and often these initiatives are undertaken in collaboration with non-governmental organizations. But we are saying here very clearly today, and we have been saying for quite a while, that the actions that are being taken by the State—and we use the State in the broadest, nonpartisan, non-political way—the actions taken by the State have to be sufficient to meet the scale of the challenge. So, there must be political will to meet the scale the challenge.

Domestic violence is the most perpetrated crime in this country, if you take account of the prevalence surveys undertaken by IDB, and the qualitative analysis undertaken under the leadership of Dr. Gabrielle Hosein, who is here today. Domestic violence is the number one crime committed in this country. And so, we say that we need political will to address that and I always like to define, when I say “political will” what I mean, and simply we mean that the State has to have the intention and the capacity or the capacity to realize an objective. And that objective has to be very clearly stated to respond to the causes and the consequences of domestic violence and for us, very important, to focus on the causes because we understand domestic violence is very much related to inequality, gender inequality in particular, and unequal power relations within the household.

So, we welcome to opportunity to be with you and we have responses to a number of your questions. We want to apologize for the late submission of our written draft, it is still a draft, and we hope that you will give us an opportunity to finalize it and to resubmit it after—[Technical difficulties]. Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much, Ms. Clarke, and we will appreciate the submission of the completed document thereafter. Let us go now to the officials of the Center for Nonviolence, Research and Development, Mrs. Sherna Alexander Benjamin, go ahead, please.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: And you have opening comments?

Mrs. Alexander-Benjamin: Yes I do.

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead, please.

Mrs. Alexander-Benjamin: We appreciate the opportunity to appear before the Committee today to—and we ask that the State consider their position as power holders but also to understand that they need to share this power; to create equitable access and provide access to resources for people experiencing violence; to create bridging social capital and sustainable resources; to prevent violence, protect people experiencing violence and hold perpetrators accountable. Failure to do so is an act of the highest form of violence against its people whom it claims to serve. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much. Would your other members like to identify themselves?

Mrs. Alexander-Benjamin: Yes, I will hand over to Ms. Asha Garib and then Chimere Wadi.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: I am sure you can. Thank you for being with us. And now on to the officials of the Trinidad Shelter for Battered Women and Children. And I also know Mr. Mitchell very well. Collin Mitchell, good morning.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Mitchell: Regarding opening comments, I will just give you a quick history of the shelter. Some of you may know already. We were established in 1987 by Mrs. Dianna Mahabir-Wyatt, that is about 35 years ago. We are more than just a hotel for victims of domestic violence—women and their children. We offer many more services including medical care, therapeutic counseling, school placement for the children, skill set training, legal support, assistance with housing. We do a lot of advocacy work for legal change and we desperately need more money to operate.

Mr. Chairman, 2020 was extremely challenging for us. We were unable to do any fundraising activities whatsoever and our subvention from the Government is only TT \$7,500 per month. Our operating costs are over 10 times that per month and I actually spend most of my time now fundraising, but I rather invest my time in really getting the help to the women and children, the help that they desperately need to get them ready for society. So that is really what I wanted to speak about today and that is the Shelter in a nutshell. Thank you for having us.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you and the other member is, of course, Ms. Sherron Harford who is the Vice-Chairman of the Trinidad Shelter for Battered Women and Children. Before I hand over to my colleague, member Beckles, let me start with Ms. Roberta Clarke and ask, you spoke earlier on in your opening comments about causes and consequences. Domestic violence and gender-based violence has been a significant issue for Trinidad and Tobago for decades. I have done some research myself and the numbers are startling. And there is a debate on as to whether there had been an increase during the pandemic period or not. What has your umbrella organization—have your organization members tell you—told you, sorry? And what is your sense of intervention mechanisms and support mechanisms provided during the core of the pandemic—and we kind of rolling out of the pandemic, thank God now—in terms of your organizations, I think it is 15 organizations under your umbrella, and whether or not they were able to access effective mechanisms for intervention and support?

Ms. Clarke: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Do you want me to respond now?

Mr. Chairman: Yes, thank you.

Ms. Clarke: Okay. Thank you and, of course, the other members of the Alliance will join in as they can. So, the question on whether or not reports increase, I think, we cannot say with any certainty what is the status of the reports, only because so many—so much of what we know to be domestic violence in this country goes unreported. And, of course, we have several forms of domestic violence, interpersonal and inter spousal violence, we have violence perpetrated against children, we have elderly violence, violence against people living with disabilities in the home. So, there is a broad spectrum of violence and what we know for sure, certainly on the interpersonal violence, and Dr. Hosein is here and she can speak a little bit more about the research, there is two things happening—three things happening in relation to the data.

One, that you have the majority of your cases go unrecorded. Most women do not report violence that they experience. That is the first thing. Secondly, we have—once reports have been made, you may have a lack of recording of the reports and we even still hear that within the context

of policing. Women go to the police and they say, “They never gave me a receipt.” Well, the receipt is supposed to be the way that we know that there is—the complaint has been recorded in the police records. And then the third factor here, because people who experience violence go to a number of sites for response and for services, these sites do not necessarily share their data. So, we do not start off with any firm foundation about what are the incidents of domestic violence though the research tells us something about the prevalence, that one in three women who have been involved in interpersonal relationships with men have experienced violence. But we do not know really—accurately about the incidents.

Now, in relation to the experience in the time of COVID, what we do have from the police is that there was a sense that at some stage in the pandemic, in relation to the mobility restrictions, and the closure of schools, and the closure of work and people being sort of kept in houses, at some stage there was some increase of reports to police but, of course, the reports of the police never matched the reports generally speaking. So, to give you an example what I am saying, the police sort of report, maybe hundreds, a few hundreds of cases a year and when you look at the applications made to the court, those applications on average are 9,000 applications a year. So, what people are actually doing when they do not report but they go to the court is quite different from when they report. So, it is difficult to know what has happened.

I think also in relation to the membership of this Alliance, some of these members—of course, our services were interrupted. Some of us had to go online, some of us had to close because of, you know, as Collin has just said, the shelters could not maintain the resource mobilization which they have to do, not to augment the subvention because the subvention is so inadequate, but actually to keep their shelter alive and there were other issues there. So, services were disrupted but, for example, within the Coalition Against Domestic Violence, we went online, we were doing our psychosocial services online and there definitely was an increase in the calls that we received. The other data source, Mr. Chairman, is the 800-SAVE, and I do not have the data from them now but that also states where you can perhaps get a sense of what were the increase in calls to 800-SAVE. So, I will stop there. I do not know if the others want to say anything?

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. You mentioned Dr. Hosein may have some of the data and the question before Dr. Hosein provides whatever data she may have, were—and this is to all—were persons who were involved in shelters and intervention and support, did they fall under the rubric of essential services during the pandemic? Because I am thinking that given the nature of the issue, they should have been. Was that—can anyone answer that?

Dr. Hosein: Chair, is that question directed to me? Because we—

Mr. Chairman: Well, if you can, you can also. You may have the experience.

Dr. Hosein: I think the hands are up of some of our service providers and we should hear from them first in the Alliance.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, Ms. Mohammed.

Ms. Mohammed: Yes. Thank you, Chair. Thank you Dr. Hosein. So, at Conflict Women we did have an increase in reports. What was really interesting is our service was focused on economic empowerment. So, we provide seed capital and grants for rape and domestic violence survivors who are starting

their businesses. Right? So, either launching a business or expanding, and we have a number of donors who support us in this regard.

What we saw pre-pandemic, we did not have very many requests, for example, for basic items like food hampers. Post-pandemic that changed. So, during the pandemic we actually had to do five different rounds of food hamper distribution, which is not something that we had to do before March 2020. Right? So that has sort of been ongoing for the past two years.

The other key thing that we saw that really was not such an issue before is survivors being unable to pay their rents. And we need to understand gender-based violence in the wider context of the economy and what has been happening during the pandemic. So, we did see a number of survivors, unfortunately, who were evicted with children during the COVID-19 pandemic. That is not something that we actually received reports on beforehand. So, the experiences are very different and some of the survivors would have actually approached the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to access the Rental Assistance Grants. However, that process can be quite delayed and it also requires a number of documents. So, we did have survivors who were evicted whilst awaiting that grant. So that is what I wanted to share for now. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Member Beckles, go ahead, please.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and thank you very much for the information to date. And I would just like to follow up on the—my initial question and ask this question, which is your submission that that is a submission received by the Committee indicates that:

One of the trends observed by the Alliance for State Action to End Gender-based Violence was that persons had to rapidly adapt to online support.

So, what kind of online support was provided to persons who contacted the ASA?

Ms. Mohammed: Roberta, I do not know if you want me to go first?

Ms. Clarke: No, you go ahead and then I would follow you.

Ms. Mohammed: Okay. All right. So, pre-pandemic, Conflict Women focuses on economic empowerment. So, we do workshops and business trainings for survivors and from 2014, when we were launched, until 2020, all these workshops took place in person with survivors in Trinidad and Tobago.

So what has happened is, in March 2020, we had to make a decision to put all of our services online. So, all of their business workshops, their training, et cetera, everything had to go online utilizing Zoom. We had to do TAC Assessments with survivors, half of them were joining via mobile telephones, half of them actually had laptops to facilitate their participation. We had a serious choice to make as a member of civil society. If we were unable to put our workshops online, we would not have been able to continue to reach survivors and provide the support. And I must thank organizations such as the Bankers Association of Trinidad and Tobago that would have partnered with us to provide business support, the British High Commission, et cetera, that funded our Survivor Entrepreneurship Pitch Competition, and seed capital and grants. So, we definitely had to put all our economic empowerment workshops, business training, and mentorship, everything had to happen online to reach our survivors. Thanks.

Ms. Clarke: I believe that WOMANTRA may want to say something before I speak to the services of the coalition.

Ms. Acosta: So, two points I actually wanted to share, one was that the TTIPS did actually report an increase in reports. Now, because of the increase in reports we cannot necessarily make a determination of whether there was an increase in domestic violence situations or simply because there was a TTIPS App and now it became easier to report that there was an increase. But between the two-year period of March 2020 and March 2022, they received more than 6,000 reports of domestic violence compared to March 2018 to March 2020, where there were only 2,710 reports of domestic violence. So that is one thing I wanted to share.

The other thing is that we would have started our Elma François Legal Clinic during the pandemic, so we started in 2021 and this took us into the 2020. So, we do not necessarily have information or data to compare to previous years outside of the pandemic. But some of the changes that we would have had to implement or some of the online options were things like making sure that clients could be able to sign documents and this was a challenge for a lot of people. Some of our clients were not tech savvy, they had difficulty using the forms and so we had to adapt. Some applicants were able to verbally consent to being clients of the organization. And so, I think that there is room to adapt, but it does take time.

Ms. Clarke: Thank you. And, Mr. Chair, in relation to the services that the Coalition Against Domestic Violence provided online after the pandemic—in the context of the pandemic, we provide psycho-social support; counselling, that in the most part is emergency counseling, so women and their families who are in harm's way, access psychologists through online virtual Zoom calls and telephone calls to help them get a pathway to safety. Also, this is a mechanism through which we can do referrals to other services for—to secure protection and non-recurrence.

The Coalition Against Domestic Violence also has a pro bono legal aid team of lawyers providing pro bono advisory services and we also noted that—well, we started those services in the context of the pandemic. So, like WOMANTRA, we do not have anything to compare before, but certainly there is a big demand for legal aid having regard to what I understand to be the current restrictions of access to legal aid, state legal aid for domestic violence cases.

So, women or people who are affected by domestic violence who need advice before they file applications, they know we are able to provide those kinds of advisory services to them. And the prevention programme continued amongst all of our organizations, doing community outreach, and education, particularly working with young people.

Mr. Chairman: Just before we go back to member Beckles, member Mohit, you have a question?

Ms. Mohit: Thank you Mr. Chairman. Mr. Chairman, a question to Ms. Mohammed, who would have indicated earlier that in terms of survivors, the challenges faced as it relates to accessibility, in terms of the rental assistance and domestic violence survivors. Ms. Mohammed, if you can just share with us, you know, in terms of your numbers, how many survivors were evicted? And in addition to that, how many of them were able to access the Rental Assistance Grants? And what has become of those who were evicted and could not access those rental grants? So we can have an idea as well, on this Committee. Thanks, Mr. Chair.

10.45 a.m.

Ms. Mohammed: Thank you, member Mohit, for that question. Unfortunately, we do not have all the data to share on this matter at Conflict Women, but what I can do is to answer your final question. Those who were evicted and were unable to access the Rental Assistance Grant, they had to resort to either family and friends and homes, shelters, et cetera, to find accommodation. It was an extremely difficult process. And we also had other survivors where they do not have, you know, very many support networks. This is often a challenge we know that survivors face. So, they would have had to quickly get funding, you know, whether it was a donation, whether it was temporary, et cetera, to relocate for themselves and their children.

And one case, in particular, is one that just kind of broke my heart. One of the survivors' who would have reached out to us for support, she had an autistic child and because—she was evicted during COVID and we would have helped her, you know, with funding and so forth so she could move her items. And she was awaiting the Rental Assistance Grant and she is not able to work because the child requires so much specific attention and support that she has to be there to support him all the time. So, that is just to give you a kind of an example of one of the cases.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Member Beckles, you could go ahead.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you very much, Chair. I would like to say that your submissions outlined several recommendations aimed at improving the State's current support for victims of domestic violence, including effective access to justice, safe housing, social protection and livelihood, and prevention. Can you indicate which of these, would you say, is most in need of additional resource allocation from the State?

Mr. Chairman: Ms. Clarke, is there someone in your group you could assign to that or would you like to take it? You are still muted. Roberta, you are still muted.

Ms. Clarke: Yes. I would like to share that with everyone. It is a difficult question because, you know, I do not think that we have the information about what the State allocates to these services in relation—targeted for domestic violence. One of the requests or the demands, I should say—because I think that we want to reach the language of demands. Our expectations of the organizations associated with the Alliance is that we need a national action plan to address all forms of gender-based violence and domestic violence. And that action plan will tell us—it would be time bound and would tell what are the resources allocated to the various sectors. So, I do not think right now we have any sense of that.

But I think in relation to the public sense, there has been quite a bit of attention paid to police and the establishment of the Gender-Based Violence Unit, but also the Child Protection Unit within the police. So, we understand that there may be special resources going into that but, certainly, there is a lot of attention on the administration of justice and policing. I think there is less attention on the social services part, and not only social services by way of access to counselling and social service intervention, but access to social protection and, in particular, cash transfers for many women who are stuck in situations and depend—and in the context of COVID—and Asiya can speak more about, well, everybody can—how many women lost their jobs because, in fact, women tend to be in the precarious economic sectors, in the informal economy. So, there was a lot of job

loss and women, for the most part, carry a disproportionate burden of care of children, sick and the elderly.

So, we can expect that their poverty levels or their income was affected in a negative way. But there is no eligibility or category for eligibility from what we can understand for access to social assistance because one is a low-income victim of domestic violence and so many women are, in fact, trapped with their perpetrators and they do not have access to alternative housing either. So, we feel like that is something to talk about and, of course, the whole prevention is wide open because we certainly do not think we have done enough to change social norms and address the causes of gender-based violence. But I believe everyone in the coalition would have maybe a different perspective on this or another perspective on what are the underserved areas of State response.

Ms. Beckles: Chair, just very quickly. Can I just quickly ask a follow up? So you are saying that you all are not aware as to what social services are offered? You are not aware of that?

Ms. Clarke: No, we are not aware of the money value of it. You asked: What are the resources that are available to the services? That is how I understood the question, hon. Beckles, but I do not know what those numbers are. I do not know what the resource allocations are in the various sectors.

Ms. Beckles: Okay.

Mr. Chairman: Ms. Acosta and then Dr. Hosein.

Ms. Acosta: So, actually I agree 100 per cent with everything that Roberta said in terms of like trying to choose one. But I think in terms of immediate need, I would lean towards housing. I do not know if Sherron had a question or a response, because I saw that she said that she cannot access the raise-hand option. So, I wanted to raise awareness of that.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Dr. Hosein and then Sherna.

Dr. Hosein: Thank you so much, Chair. Also to note that Sherron Harford has a hand up as well.

Mr. Chairman: Yeah, we are going to get to her right after. Thank you.

Dr. Hosein: I think the point needs to be made in responding to questions about where we would put the financial and administrative priorities. I think the point needs to be made that greater transparency from the State, as Roberta Clarke said, in terms of understanding the allocations and also in terms of tracking the impact of those allocations, not just say, you know, how many grants were handed out. So, 200,000 grants, for example, were distributed during COVID, but what is the gender data? How many to women? How many to men? Were we able to say what difference it made?

So, you are speaking in this context to civil society organizations who are extremely small and who are doing primary care work principally and therefore, cannot collect the kind of data, but rely on the State to collect the data. And so, one of the recommendations and this does not require—hon. Beckles, this does not necessarily require additional funds to get back to your question. What it does require is, I think, a better coordination in terms of reporting. That way, you know, moneys spent can actually indicate what was the impact of that and what was the gap.

And just to highlight that a study was conducted by Dr. Asha Kambon, looking, for example, at how women and men were financially affected across a range of sectors: agriculture, migrants working in the retail and service sector, selfemployed and so on. And that report has not yet been approved

to make public, but would be extremely valuable for it traces the economic impact in terms of COVID. And one of the things that it looked at was the receipt of grants, and the way that there was a vast disparity where two-thirds of men were able—where grants were accessed—two-thirds of the grants were accessed by men and one-third of the grants were accessed by women, for example. And coming to understand those inequalities is very important to ways we can shape our priorities that are cost effective, in addition to the kinds of social services and social protection of the funding—[Technical difficulties]—necessary. I want to handover to—

Mr. Chairman: Sherna Alexander-Benjamin and then we will go to Ms. Sherron Harford, please.

Mrs. Alexander-Benjamin: I just would like to speak to the one question that the Chair asked earlier, if the service providers were listed on the emergency providers list during the time of COVID. And from where I sit and from the work that our team has been doing on the ground during that time, the answer is no, which places persons experiencing violence at a greater risk in a holistic framework.

The other thing, we do have some numbers that we can share with the Committee, subsequently, related to how many persons reached out to us for support during that COVID period to show the increase from years previous. The other thing, one, in terms of allocation for organizations related to state agencies, specifically, the social welfare department, the State does not have a transparency mechanism that shows how much money is allocated, one, specifically to individuals that access the services.

So, we had individuals who we assisted with completing forms, going to social services and up to this point in time, many of them have never received a response. We called, we sent emails. There were persons who received emails showing that they were approved and then you will get another response saying, “Well, we made an error with your name, so that has to go through another process.” And up to this time, we are still waiting. So, we know where there is no transparency, there is room for corruption and a lot of that ensued during the time of COVID with social services.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Ms. Sherron Harford, thank you for your patience. Go ahead, please, and then member Forde. Ms. Harford?

Ms. Harford: Thank you very much, Chair—

Mr. Chairman: You are welcome.

Ms. Harford:—and thank you everyone for this opportunity. I would like to address a couple things very quickly. First of all, during the pandemic, a couple things that we found is—we were closed because our property became literally inhabitable and we were doing a tremendous amount of fund raising. We were able to start our renovation but we had to stop during COVID. We did, however, continue to offer virtual telephonic counselling, reach out to past residents and do the same thing as Asiya, the hampers, trying to see how we could help. What we did find is that some past residents who were able to take advantage of the telephonic counselling, they were no longer able to do that because they had actually gone back to their perpetrator and, of course, the perpetrator was at home. So, they were unable to continue the counselling. So, that was answering your question earlier, our experience during COVID.

Going to hon. Beckles' point asking about services. My comment, from the shelter standpoint, is very different. Services, we start with 800-SAVE. That is usually our first point of contact with a potential resident; 800-SAVE does not offer the same advice or the same support to individual callers. We have had callers being told—a caller from Tobago, “There is no shelter in Tobago.” But they do have gender-based violence police officers there. The Gender-Based Violence Unit is represented in Tobago. And the victim was told, “I think you should call advocate, Onika Mars, and see how she could help you.” There was no offer of to call the police for her. There was no: “Where are you? Are you safe? Can we get to you?”

But there has been another time when we have actually had a mother and her children escorted by the Gender-Based Violence Unit over on the ferry, brought to us, and I will admit publicly here now, we were closed and we hired temporary staff because this woman and her children had absolutely nowhere to go. It was street or death. So, we hired temporary staff, brought her up to the shelter, and those of us who were involved in running the shelter and dealing with the renovation, we had enough rooms where she was safe with her children and comfortable, and we have been looking after that.

Mr. Chairman: So, there is no shelter in Tobago that you or any one of you guests know about?

Ms. Harford: We have just heard that they have been awarded a property by the House of Assembly. But I can tell you—you know, the Trini saying, you said we could be relatively casual. I am selling you what I bought. I have not spoken to Onika to confirm that. I do not know if any members of the Alliance—and, by the way, the shelter is also a very proud member of the coalition and the Alliance.

Coming then now, continuing with services, we have to—I love the term *Asiya* came up with. We have to navigate through every Ministry basically, but having someone who can do the navigation, all that does is put the frustration on one person's head because you have to call social services, you have to deal with Attorney General's Office, you have to deal with the police, you have to deal with the Ministry of Health, you have to deal with labour and you have to deal with education and you do not know who you are getting on the phone. Is it the same person you spoke to the last time who was not able to get further than their desk to help you? There needs to be attention paid to the fact that women and children are being murdered, and the only way they can get help—this is a complicated issue that starts from a point of love. It starts from a love affair or it starts from a family love situation. It is complicated and it requires a holistic response.

Mr. Chairman: Just before I go to member Forde—and any member of the guest before us can answer this. So, there is so direct conduit to any division in the Office of the Prime Minister, Ministry of gender and child development, which I would presume would have some sort of coordinating division with NGOs, in particular, who are on the ground? Is that your experience?

Ms. Harford: They do not coordinate through the Ministries, you know. We can call the Office of the Prime Minister to speak to them, re: what they are doing. But there is no mechanism, no person or no office that helps domestic violence survivors or the shelters, those of us the NGOs, who are providing the grassroots service to get them to safety and sustainability. There is nowhere to call to say: “Okay. I have got a mom here, she has got three kids, these are their ages. We need to get these kids in school. She cannot work right now because where she is, the perpetrator knows about it, or she cannot work because she has no skills. We need to get job training.”

Mr. Chairman: Are there any of you who have been called to participate in—I have been given a document, a multisectoral task force form to discuss gaps and actions taken to remedy gaps identified in the report on children homes by the OPM or domestic violence or gender-based violence in general? Any of you are a part of that task force? Okay. Member Forde, you are next.

Mr. Forde: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Again, to clarify a statement made by Ms. Roberta Clarke and also made by Safiyyah Acosta, right. In Ms. Clarke's opening remark, she said that most domestic violence goes unreported. But in Ms. Acosta's brief, she mentioned that between 2020 and 2022, approximately 6,000 reports were made. Could we get a clarification as to those 6,000 reports? Those 6,000 reports are reported to whom? And then, with regard to Ms. Clarke's statement, goes unreported, again, to which organization, to which department? I would like to get some clarity there and I am sure the listening public would like to at this time also.

Ms. Acosta: So, just to clarify, the 6,000 reports were reports that the TTPS had documented. So, this is their data. And, Roberta, you can share a list as well, but I know that even though there were those 6,000 reports, that that is still a low number. Like under-reporting has been—gender-based violence has been under-reported for a long time. And even though there would be an increase, there would still be victims suffering in silence and not reporting. So, Roberta, if you want to add anything else to that as well.

Ms. Clarke: Sure. I would, but I also want to invite Dr. Hosein, because she was involved in the prevalence survey that gave us some indication on the under-reporting and then I can answer the question of where do people go when they report.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. What we will do is we will take Dr. Hosein and then we will go to member Beckles for the last question to the Alliance. And then we will move on to Member Singh for the Center for Nonviolence, Research and Development, because we are trying to manage the time equitably. Dr. Hosein, go ahead, please.

Dr. Hosein: Thanks so much, member Forde, for your question. Just to say that there are multiple sites that collect different and contradictory data. So, you can get data from the TTPS, you can get data from 800-SAVE, you can get data, for example, from the Child Protection Unit. There are multiple sites. So, what Ms. Acosta, for example, was speaking to or what you can get from the TTPS is, for example—and just to go back, Chair, to your opening remarks that there is a debate whether or not gender-based violence has increased, I do not think there is a debate if you look at the administrative data that was collected. So, for example, Ms. Jack-Martin, for example, who was the Director of Gender Affairs, reporting on the Trinidad and Tobago Central Registry and its data, highlighted that 4,500- plus calls were made from January to October 2020, as opposed to 2,096 calls for that corresponding period which she described as representing an increase of 119 per cent. Again, between January to August 2020, there were more than 1,000 reports received versus from January to August 2019, which represented a 55 per cent increase. So, I think the administrative data, and you all will be speaking to the state agencies, will be able to answer those questions about the increase in reports.

To get to the fact that the un-reporting, how do we know? The un-reporting or the under-reporting is very easy to know because in the Women's Health Survey, which was the first national prevalence survey conducted in Trinidad and Tobago, published in 2018, the data showed that one in three women report violence—physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. The data also suggested that in the 12-month period, prior to the study being published, the data being collected, that that

number was significantly higher, that you could have 100,000 women, for example, who were living in conditions of violence in this period. So, it is not simply one in three that represents a lifetime. It reflects very high numbers in a current moment.

Now, what does that mean? That means that the numbers of prevalence, which we know from that study, are much greater than the numbers of reporting, which we get from the administrative data. What was also shown in that study is that all women who experienced violence, only 7 per cent report to the police, 2 per cent or less report to state agencies. So, we know that even amongst those who report violence that those that actually go to state agencies are much lower, and so this Committee can turn to that Women's Health Survey in order to track that data.

One last point I want to make, Chair, with your indulgence is—

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead.

Dr. Hosein:—I am moving from the Alliance—not so much about the data per se, but gets back to hon. Beckles' question around priorities and responses and, again, the ones that are cost effective, as I close. And I want to make a very, very strong plug to this Committee for the Health and Family Life Education Programme, and that is on the side not of response but of prevention. It does not require a vast increase in funds, but what it does require, as Ms. Clarke said at the beginning, is extreme political will. And, currently, the Health and Family Life Education Programme, in which the GDS was involved in integrating the gender-based violence component, is facing a lot of resistance to being implemented in a way that can actually address these challenges around gender-based values and gender-based violence. And so, it is very necessary, at this point, for us to not only tackle interventions, which do require greater funds as our colleagues here are pointing out, but also to strengthen the prevention strategies that may already be in existence, that may not require a great increase in funds, but which require a lot of political will and a strong recommendation from this Committee.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Member Nakhid and then member Beckles, because we need to focus on the Center for Nonviolence, Research and Development. Member Nakhid, a quick question, please, and then member Beckles would have one more question for the Alliance.

Mr. Nakhid: Thank you, Chair. Well, I have heard a lot of political will, the phrase bandied around, and I have realized that the fundamental issue is not only a lack of resources strategically placed where it should be and so. So, my question, since you are looking for solutions, not only just to have you here and question you on what you already know: What kind of lobbying has been done by you all? Because political will is determined by the kind of pressure placed on politicians. I would like to know what kind of lobbying has been done by your organizations in order to get the kind of resources that you people need to have things done and get things done? I would like to know that.

Mr. Chairman: I think I am going to direct that one to Ms. Clarke.

Mr. Nakhid: Yes.

Ms. Clarke: Thank you. Well, I have a lot to say about that, but I think I would start of saying that all of us are aware of the prevalence of domestic violence in this country and so, therefore, we all share the obligation to respond in the context of wherever we have influence. So, just to start off by saying

that there is no secret about the epidemic that is domestic violence. The non-governmental organizations have done many things for the first—I could off with just—starting off with opening the safe houses. The first two safe houses were opened in the 1980s, were opened by non-governmental organization, by women actually, who just had to make a difference. The lobbying for the Domestic Violence Act, not just the lobbying, the intellectual content was provided by non-governmental organizations and non-governmental have been tracking the effectiveness of the implementation of the Domestic Violence Act over the last 30 years and, in fact, this Act has been improved three times. And that is really in part, in large part, because of the vigilance and attention of non-governmental organizations.

We routinely seek to meet with the police, we routinely seek to meet with the members of the Judiciary, we routinely seek to meet with the Executive branch to articulate what we think needs to be done to improve. And in this submission that we have made and we have made available to the select committee and we would finalize it, we will also see inside of this, reference to meetings we have had with shelters, meetings we have had with the police, case management reports that speak to the need for coordination and all of that. So, we do our advocacy, first of all, through evidence and we do evidence-based advocacy and we do research and, of course, we do our campaigns every year. I am sure you know about those. But what we do want is more people to be involved in that. All of us who know about domestic violence have an obligation to speak up and act, and we think it is a common and shared responsibility and we are really, really, happy that the select committee—we are encouraged that this Joint Select Committee has taken this issue on and you have joined us in our advocacy to build political will and community will.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. I am glad that you have said that, because what came to me—and we are going to go to member Beckles now—is that the mindset in some sectors that it is a woman’s issue or that an NGO’s issue is part of the problem. And it is a labour issue, it is a state issue, it is private sector issue, it is an education issue, it is a national issue, it is a global issue. And if we do not understand that we are all supposed to be lobbying, then we have missed the boat. Member Beckles, your final question before we go to Member Singh, please.

Ms. Beckles: Yes. Thank you very much, Chair. So, again, going back to your submission that:

Survivors reported not being able to access legal aid services from the Legal Aid and Advisory Authority during the pandemic.

So, can you indicate how did this affect the lives and livelihood of the survivors of domestic violence? And just like member Nakhid, if there are any suggestions that you would like to give to the Committee.

Mr. Chairman: And if you could just clarify also, because part of the document that you submitted also in more detail states that, and I quote,

Survivors reported not being able to access legal aid from the Legal Aid Authority. Their office was closed to the public and calls to emails went unanswered. This caused distress, hopelessness and loss of trust in services to assist survivors of domestic violence.

So, is it that legal aid offices were closed during the pandemic? Can you clarify that, please?

Ms. Acosta: I can clarify, because I believe that was my contribution. Yes, so as part of the Elma François Legal Clinic, we had several people reach out to us and not everyone had been survivors of domestic violence, and so we had referrals to different organizations, CADV was one, the legal aid authority was one and sometimes we literally just did not have enough attorneys on hand to be able to assist all the potential—

Mr. Chairman: But not having enough is not the same as being closed.

Ms. Acosta: No, no, I am saying—

Mr. Chairman: So, was it opened and limited—or your legal clinic.

Ms. Acosta: Our legal clinic would refer onward, and so the Legal Aid Authority was one of the State's agencies that we refer to and people would call back and say there is nobody answering. I would call, my colleague would call, we would send emails and it did not go anywhere. So, at one point, I asked my friend to just drop me off in front of the office because I literally just had to go to see what was going on and they had a sign on the front door, and there was someone inside. She said she could not let me in. The security guard said they could not let me in because of the pandemic, and that I should send an email and it was the same email that we had used previously to try to get in contact with someone. And so, it basically was a dead end and so, some people did express —

11.15 a.m.

Mr. Chairman: To my knowledge, Legal Aid was deemed an essential service. That is very surprising to hear that that service was not available during the pandemic. Anyway, thank you, member Beckles. Member Singh, go ahead, please. We are going now to the submissions by the Center for Nonviolence, Research, and Development. Member Singh, go ahead, please.

Mr. Singh: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and I will go quickly into some of the concerns that I have in relation to the report submitted by the organization. So, quickly, I see that the organization identified an increase in reports from persons experiencing intimate partner and family violence, especially during the pandemic period. But I also see that there was a convergence of multiple factors that contributed to these increases. It is now—*[Technical difficulties]*—I would like to know—*[Technical difficulties]*—and I have heard a lot from a lot— *[Technical difficulties]*—here today, especially—*[Technical difficulties]*

Mr. Chairman: Member Singh, you may want to turn off your camera. You seem to have a bandwidth issue so you are buffering a lot.

Mr. Singh: *[Technical difficulties]*—that we use or that have been, you know— *[Technical difficulties]*

Mr. Chairman: Member Singh—

Mr. Singh: *[Technical difficulties]*—hearing in recent times as a result of some people not reporting certain types of violence. You all—

Mr. Chairman: I think you need to repose the question, member Singh, because we missed quite a bit of it during your technical issue there. Could you repose the question, please? Member Singh—is he still on? Okay. I think he may be having some technical issues there. One of the—I think the question he was posing relates to—submissions indicate that:

One of the trends observed by the organization was the number of innovative ways clients used to connect with your organization. Could you give us a sense of those mechanisms, please, while member Singh reconnects?

Mrs. Alexander-Benjamin: For one, because of the presence of the pandemic, the digital—the use of digital tools was heightened. So, persons used multiple digital ways that they would not have used initially to connect with the organization, be it WhatsApp, be it Zoom, other forms of visual software and so forth, text messages.

But I remember one woman who was seeking help and she was unable to have access to any digital tools, and she used the postcard and asked her neighbour to drop it off to one of our community officials, Ms. Leonora LeSaldo, because she was in critical need of, not only food supplies but other types of hygienic supplies for herself and her children. So, we saw this emergence of people experiencing violence using creative ways to connect with persons to seek help.

Mr. Chairman: Member Singh, you can go ahead now, please. I think we got you back.

Mr. Singh: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Right. So, as I was indicating, we have heard from another—a member indicate that sometimes the reports of domestic violence are under-reported or sometimes they are not reported at all, and I was wondering if this is as a result of persons not understanding what can be posed or what—the terminologies we use. And in the report, in your submission, I saw intimate partner and family violence, I saw situational violence, violence of opportunity, domestic and family violence, so I was wondering if you can elaborate for us in terms of some of these terminologies that we use. Because I will tell you in some rural communities, violence is taking place but sometimes the victims do not even know, you know, how to report it or the terms being used in modern day society might not, you know, might not be aware—they might not be aware of some of these things. So, in some of the terms, if you can just elaborate briefly on situational family violence. I also see food apartheid, ACEs, and especially intimate partner and family violence, if you could give us some examples perhaps. Thank you.

Mrs. Alexander-Benjamin: First let me say that each individual understands violence differently and that understanding of violence can be compounded based on their risk or protective factors; the risk factors which may be a lack of illiteracy, formal education. Another risk factor may be a lack of food which leads to food scarcity, so there is this lack of nutrition to provide effective cognitive functioning to understand certain elements and certain things that may be occurring within their social space. The need for a national communication plan, an effective, adequate and contextualized national communication plan related to domestic violence is critical because many times we have information being shared about domestic violence that is above the head of certain classes of individuals within our population.

When we speak about intimate partner violence, we speak about any type of violence, not just one violence being isolated but any type of violence and elements of that violence being manifested between individuals, whether they are cohabiting, whether they are working in an environment, whether they are strangers on the street; intimate violence. Many times we isolate intimate partner violence to relationship violence in the context of sexual relationships and we leave out the other aspects of violence of intimate partner violence or the elements that occurs within the working environment on the streets, within communities, within schools, within religious organizations.

When we speak about situational violence, we speak about, during the time of COVID, individuals who did not manifest any type of aggression or physical violence. We saw rates of that occurring within family units and within relationships because of the external pressures of losing a job, having to navigate this space of understanding when the rent is due, “How we are going to pay the rent, we are being evicted?” So, those external factors enhanced an emotional response where persons were not educated in terms of emotional regulation in how to deal with those situations in a healthy manner. They acted out. That was not a form of generational violence which is a cycle of violence that continues through the generations of individuals from different households.

Violence based on opportunity: we saw where landlords used the opportunity of women who lost their jobs and not having the financial or resource capacity to pay their rents were coerced into sexual situations or they were forced out on the streets. So, when we speak about violence based on opportunity that is what we are speaking about. We are also speaking about the increase of the domestic trafficking where mothers who lost their jobs, someone came in and offered to take care of the home, they have their daughter or they have their son, and we saw violence occurring based on that situation of domestic trafficking. So, I do not know if I answered your question but you can let me know.

Mr. Singh: You certainly have shed some more light in terms of your understanding of some of these instances. I want to jump into—one of your recommendations indicated:

Increased public awareness campaigns to break the stigma against male victims of domestic violence.

I would like to know what are some of the specific strategies that can be used to accomplish this goal?

Mrs. Alexander-Benjamin: While our organization continues to champion for the prevention of violence in all its form, we understand that the statistic shows that women and girls are in the greater population and are labelled “statistics” for experiencing violence. At the same time, we cannot negate that men and boys are also victims of violence and the State has a responsibility to provide services and programmes to support men in their process of addressing their pain, similar to what they will do for women.

Now, at the same time—and I have to say this because I am a woman, I am also a woman who is a thriving survivor of violence. When there is an emergence of a situation, you have to address the emergence of that situation and the consequences related to it, but you also have to address the other factors and the other emergencies that are arising. Added to some of the solutions, I will hand over to Asha Garib who may answer this question.

Ms. Garib: Sure. So, fighting domestic violence, it has to be a two-fold approach because if you just focus on, you know, dealing with the victims, what about the perpetrators? Are they just left there to continue this cycle? And exactly that, what about the male victims of domestic violence which is a very real under-reported issue?

Now, this is where gender sensitivity, it has to come into play from as early as preschool, primary schools, where there has to be some type of gender sensitivity programme, training, that boys and girls are emotional beings, boys and girls can be strong, boys and girls can be weak. And it has to start from small, this gender sensitivity in terms of, “Yes, men can be abused, men do cry, men do hurt and they need to be able to feel safe to express that.” And this is where, if we tackle this issue in

terms of gender sensitivity from small, from preschools, primary schools, it will have a long-term effect. Because think of it, a child who goes to school and he learns, “Okay. Well, I am a full human being, I am allowed to cry, I am allowed to hurt, I am allowed to report these instances,” this child will have greater confidence in speaking to his family members because he knows they are not going to make fun of him. He knows when he becomes an adult, if he goes to the police service and he reports being victimized by a female perpetrator, he has to have confidence.

So, the fight against domestic violence, it has to be a two-fold approach because—and we see it all the time, how many times are there re-offences? So, somebody abuses their spouse once, twice, five times, and it just goes on and on and on, and there has to be some type of programme to treat perpetrators of abuse because we have to tackle, “Well, why are they doing this? What is driving them to abuse? What is driving them to deal with their problems like this?” And until we really get into the minds of perpetrators, that will make a significant difference in terms of the fight against domestic violence.

Mr. Chairman: I have a question before member Singh continues, and it was sparked by Mrs. Benjamin’s diverse delineation of the different aspects of domestic violence. And the question will go to Mrs. Benjamin first and then Collin Mitchell, who has been very patiently standing by there—I appreciate it, Collin and Ms. Harford and then, Roberta Clarke. And are we underestimating in Trinidad and Tobago the linkages between the general violence we are seeing, the general crime we are seeing? Because to me, if someone picks up a gun and shoots somebody to rob them or assaults somebody on the street for whatever reason, that person will have the type of mindset to think nothing of abusing somebody at home. And are we underestimating the general pervasiveness of violence in the society with the kind of exponential reporting or non-reporting of the existence of domestic violence and intimate partner violence that we are seeing in the society as a whole?

And I will start with Mrs. Benjamin on that and then go to Roberta—Collin and then Roberta because, to me, there is obviously some sort of linkage with it if people are seeing runaway crime in a society that is not being arrested or persons not being brought to justice in a timely manner, it kind of leads into people feeling a level of impunity where domestic violence situations are concerned. Mrs. Benjamin first, please.

Mrs. Alexander-Benjamin: Thank you very much, Chairman. Violence is a broad umbrella term for different elements and types of violence that occur within our society. No one type of violence acts or stands alone. It has other vile types and elements of violence interconnected to it.

Now, no person gets up one morning and says, “I am going to be a perpetrator. I am going to pick up a gun and go rob and kill and steal.” Something happened in that individual’s life, whether they were exposed to violence, they witnessed violence, they experienced violence. The risk factors within their social environment was lacking—I mean, were heightened. The protective factors were lacking and what happens when persons grow in different environments, they develop mental models. Those mental models and the hidden rules of their class carries over into every relationship and every exchange within society.

So, we have underestimated the level of violence in every area of society because many of the forms and the elements of violence have been so interwoven within what is called “culture”, that we see it as a familiar part of our living process. When we begin to unpack violence and the impact of it

and the detriment to our human resource, our systems, then I think there may be a serious move and an enhanced move to address violence.

Before I end, I would like to address something that I think it was committee member Nakhid who asked about the lack of resources. And too often we link resources to finances, and I would be the first one to say, “Yes, we need money for everything.” All of us represented here and our NGOs, we need finances but we also leave out resources in terms of intellect, emotions, planning. So that you have a lot of people who are ill-equipped, placed in positions that they cannot function in and thereby creating tyranny of the moments that create concrete thinking and reactive thinking for incidents and social problems like domestic violence, intimate partner violence and other forms of violence that exist within our society. I hope I answered your question.

Mr. Chairman: Yes, you did. Mr. Mitchell.

Mr. Mitchell: Chairman, just to touch on something you mentioned just now regarding education, and some of my colleagues were speaking about: how do you deal with the perpetrators and how do we stop it from the beginning. And I believe it was Asha who spoke about childhood education from as early as pre-teen. I want to share a quick story that I think would connect with everyone.

Recently, we had a MovieTowne fundraiser which was quite weird because coming out of the pandemic no one was going to the movies and we had this fundraiser and before you know it, the support was overwhelming. At that time, you would realize every front page, almost every day, four days in a row, we had murders regarding domestic violence. It was actually four days in a row. And the tickets really started to sell to the point where Mr. Chin had to give me a second theatre because it was selling so much.

The support was so overwhelming at that time and, of course, it comes in waves like that, right?—media coverage and everyone supporting. And I decided, you know what?—let me create a short movie and an introduction before we show this movie premiere to talk a bit about gender-based violence and the Shelter and a survivor, what she has been through, what we did for her and where I see the Shelter going. I just shared the link on our chat. So, when everybody has a chance after, you could watch. It is not very long. It is like a 10-minute movie. And I asked our founder, previous Independent Senator, Diana Mahabir-Wyatt, if I could come and film her for a bit and ask her a few questions. And we went to her home and I asked around, “Who were the best videographers that I could get?”, and I found out about these two young guys and I contacted them separately. These young boys showed up and they were all organized with their cameras and they set up and I started to ask Mrs. Mahabir-Wyatt some questions. And that little quick session turned into almost three hours of very, very intense, emotional conversation. And when it ended—I would not talk a lot about what she said. But when it ended she said, basically she started this fight over 40 years ago and she believes that the violence in Trinidad now is worse than it was then and gender-based violence is much worse now than it is then. And she felt to herself as if she was a failure because she devoted her whole life towards fighting this cause and she really felt like a failure.

And one of the young guys took off his headset and he hung it on the camera and he walked across to her and he hugged her. And she was like, “Why are you hugging me?” And he said, “Only when you started to speak, I realized who you were. I am a victim of domestic violence and I left my home very young and I came to Servol, and you and Father Pantin were the founders and the people who run Servol. And there, during my classes, I was educated about gender-based violence and what

is right and what is wrong and how to break the cycle that I was involved in generationally from my family, seeing it from generation to generation. And I am about to propose to my girlfriend and I am here working today to save money to buy the ring for her, and so on, and you changed by life. And Servol taught me about graphics, and so on, and it led me to start videography where you all taught me about how to do video work and so on, and I have a career today because of you. And you are sitting here trying to tell me now that you are a failure when you changed my life and there are many other people's lives who you have changed."

So, education about gender-based violence to him, as a young boy coming out of a home with gender-based violence, has taught him how to break the cycle—

Mr. Chairman: *[Inaudible]*

Mr. Mitchell: And certainly in our education system, we do not expose the children to a class on gender-based violence. So, it is coming to what we were saying earlier, Chairman, when we were talking about education, it does have to start very early. So, I agree with Asha on that.

Mr. Chairman: Before I go to Roberta on the question of the general violence situation, it just occurred to me that you are the only guy here and I know that there are other men working behind the scenes in advocacy against domestic violence. Why are more men not involved?

Mr. Mitchell: I try to get more men involved. Even we—the Shelter is run by nine executive members, all volunteers of which I am one, and I am the chairman, and I only have one other male with me. And I did ask many other males to join me and the struggle is real to get men involved. It is a very taboo subject.

Mr. Chairman: Is that not sad though? Because the issue is related to primarily men.

Mr. Mitchell: Correct. And that is why—

Mr. Chairman: *[Inaudible]*—so it—

Mr. Mitchell: Correct, and that is why I shared that short story with you just now to say, education and educating men, that we have to get involved because we are a main part of the problem. Most of the domestic violence cases are perpetrated against females. So, yes, there are a few males but really, the dominant part is females and we have to get involved. We have to speak to each other and we need to educate each other on what is right and what is wrong.

And they spoke earlier about the generational problem where you have seen your father do it, and you are seeing your grandfather doing it, and it is okay. And in certain places I have been to believe that, "Once you do not mark the woman, you are okay." So, "Yes, she needs some licks on a Friday but make sure you doh hit her in areas that you could see. So, stay away from her face and her arms and I think everywhere else is fair game." This is a belief that a lot of them actually have. And the only way to overcome this and to tell them that it is wrong—it is not just saying it is a crime. Yes, we need to educate them that it is actually a crime but really, "This is not okay and it is not acceptable. Times have changed, society has changed and what may have happened in the past is no longer okay in the present."

Mr. Chairman: I see it all the time, in terms of the advocacy in the other groups. And I know there are men who are working behind the scenes in some of the groups, but 90-plus per cent are female

and the message is targeted at men primarily. Roberta, and then we would go to member Singh's final question and then member Forde with the Shelter. Go head, Roberta, please.

Ms. Clarke: Thank you, Mr. Chair. It is a really big question you have asked and I think both Sherna and Collin have answered parts of it. Violence is connected to inequalities in our country and it can be gender inequalities or social economic inequalities. We know it is about, you know, people who is sort of feeling not committed to their country in the way in which we think about as peaceful and empathetic and kind.

And, yes, children who observe—and the data is quite clear—children who observe violence in the home have a higher likelihood—it not a certain thing because, of course, we all have agency and we can make decisions in our life, but there is a greater likelihood that those children would grow up to be adults who perpetrate or to be victims of domestic violence. So, we just have to think about what is the environment in the home where our children are witnessing their mothers being beaten and abused, and they themselves, because there is also a lot of child abuse in this country, are experiencing that: the anger, the rage, the way in which that distorts the psychological development.

There was a study done of a number of countries in the Eastern Caribbean, in Trinidad and Tobago, on attitudes to corporal punishment against children as a form of discipline and, very sadly, Trinidad and Tobago had the highest level of acceptance, cultural acceptance, for the use of corporal punishment against children. And we seem to not understand the link between beating children and the outcomes, you know, the outcomes for society. So, I think we have to think about that. You have to think about also too the socio-inequalities that are driving crime and violence in this country. It is not a complete answer but there is an aspect there. And what do we do when we have young people in doing harm and in harm's way? Can we have a more rehabilitative approach to them and a less punitive approach? Yes, we have to hold people accountable but can we do that in a way that their lives can be transformed? I mean, we have been hearing, for example, of the number of young men on remand yard awaiting trial, 10 years, five years, eight years, 10 years, just awaiting trial. It amounts of a university, a university of crime and violence. So, we do have to think in holistic ways and to come back to our first demand that we need a national strategy, and that strategy will help us connect the dots between domestic violence and societal violence. Thank you for giving us the opportunity.

Mr. Chairman: Member Singh, your final question to the Center and then we will go to member Forde and member Nakhid to the Shelter.

Mr. Singh: Mr. Chairman, I think I am okay. So, we could go straight to the Shelter.

Mr. Chairman: Go to member Forde and we welcome member Forde's questions to the Trinidad Shelter for Battered Women and Children, and Mr. Mitchell and Ms. Harford.

Mr. Forde: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And, again, as we just mentioned with regard to the sentiments from Mr. Collin Mitchell as one of the males, you know, championing this cause, hats off to you, Sir.

In your opening remarks, Mr. Mitchell, you spoke about the operating cost as being 10 times the 750—now that is not a typo, that is correct?

Mr. Mitchell: TT \$7,500 a month, we get the subvention, correct.

Mr. Forde: Which works out to be \$75,000 for the year?

Mr. Mitchell: Well, 7,500 by 12.

Mr. Forde: By 12. “Oh”, okay. Right.

Mr. Mitchell: It should be 90,000 a year.

Mr. Forde: Ninety thousand, yeah. Okay, 90,000. How was this budget derived?

Mr. Mitchell: It was just a—we give them a full bank statement with all our operational expenses and our fundraising and so on, and we submit it regularly every year as requested. And every year we request an increase and every year we get no response. I met with the hon. Ayanna Webster-Roy about this before. I mentioned it to two other Ministers directly, so we have submissions in writing and we have not gotten a response on—or even a response or a positive response. We have not even gotten a negative response. We get no response.

Mr. Forde: Okay. And in terms of the budgetary allocation, your biggest allocation expenditure would be around what aspect?

Mr. Mitchell: I would say salaries, counselling are our major costs in the Shelter. For example, we have a fully qualified matron that oversees the operations at the Shelter to ensure we deliver quality and excellence, and her salary is more than the one subvention we get for the whole month.

Mr. Forde: And this is separate and apart from the voluntary service that we spoke about earlier?

Mr. Mitchell: Yes, correct. So, for us to be about to achieve what we want to achieve, we had to spend time approaching, for example, the UN Women Spotlight Initiative, and they are currently funding our programme for counselling and some oversight and training for our staff and so on in the Shelter currently. Because from the Government we get absolutely no support regarding the training of our staff at the Shelter.

Mr. Forde: And in terms of NGOs and other financial institutions, you all have anybody on board that offers financial obligations, whether monthly or quarterly or yearly as the case may be?

Mr. Mitchell: We offer deeds of covenants and we have a few people who have signed up for it. But regarding regular donations, no. I found that donations in Trinidad have normally been one-off and they normally want to put it towards a project which—for example, we did a renovation over the last two years that my Vice-Chair would have spoken about before and Republic Bank would have made a sizeable donation towards that one project. But regarding the ongoing, we do not have anyone that really is ongoing.

We have partnered with some other NGOs like FEEL, for example, we have signed up and we get—twice a month they share food stuff and cleaning supplies and so on with us. And we have a few other organizations like Heroes Foundation that have full-time IT staff and they would come in and help us set up the five computers that we get donated from Republic Bank and other organizations. But other than that, corporate and private donations, I spend most of my day, I would say, two to three hours a day soliciting different people that we know and just trying to get money to get us going. For example, I told you just now about the movie fundraiser that we did. We planned for that for two months. The President attended. It was the biggest thing; nice, big success but we only raised enough to run one month.

Mr. Forde: Okay.

Mr. Mitchell: All of that effort from all of our nine executives. Everybody buying tickets, President coming, everybody was there. We had the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts everybody there but you only raised enough money to run one month.

11.45 a.m.

Mr. Forde: I got you. Now, you used the term “safe house” for these domestic violence—and it is predominantly for women.

Mr. Mitchell: And children. It is women and their children by us. Yes.

Mr. Forde: And again, now “safe house” gives the connotation that it is not public knowledge but this particular spot is known by the public?

Mr. Mitchell: No. It is not. We are a safe house. So, under the Ministry of National Security, we are a secret location. So, for example, when we have new residents coming to us, the police transports them to us from the station. And it creates even more of a challenge from a fund raising because there is nothing tangible that people could see. So, sometimes, for example, they will say, “Well, Digicel, we want to set up a learning room or we want to do different things.” And they would like, “Okay, well we will bring up our team and we will go and meet.” And I will have to say, “Well, no. It actually does not work like that.” With a safe house we have to keep the location as secret as possible because there are perpetrators out there that want desperately to do violent acts against our women and children. That is why we have to hide them.

Mr. Forde: And that is the reason why I asked the question in terms of to identify that particular of, you know, repercussions coming from individuals and so on. One question again and then I will pass you back over to the Chairman. In terms of being admitted to the safe house, what is the criteria? What is the procedure, you know, that—just give us a little gist of how or the procedure to be admitted into this particular home?

Mr. Mitchell: My Vice-Chair, Mrs. Sherron Harford, actually oversees that area of it. So, because it is her area of expertise—it is a simple answer but because it is her area of expertise I will invite here now to get—

Mr. Chairman: No problem. Ms. Harford. Ms. Harford: Mr. Forde, you are stuck with another woman now. [Laughter] All right. We will let her speak just for little while. Mr. Forde: We are getting knowledge. We are getting information.

Ms. Harford: We have, first—our first contact is usually 800-SAVE or the Gender-Based Violence Unit and the proposed victim is interviewed by them and it is determined then whether or not we can take them. We recently—I will give an example. We recently got a call of a mother who is 34 weeks pregnant. She has a four-year-old and six-year-old, if I remember. She is pregnant with twins and all the other shelters have refused to take her because they see her as a risk because they do not have nursing staff. Well, I have had a few children and because you are pregnant it does not mean that you are constantly a health risk. She is considering coming to the Shelter but she is reluctant at this point because at this stage we are still following Ministry of Health regulations and our residents coming in have to go into quarantine. But our first point of contact is 800-SAVE and the Gender-Based Violence Unit.

There are occasions where we will get a call maybe from a religious institution because the victim has not had the comfort level in going to the authorities and they have gone to who they see as being safe. And we will then ask one of our senior—one of our executive committee members who is—who has her doctorate and she lectures in social work and she advises our matron who is also a qualified social worker, and they will interview or they will advise the person— [Inaudible]—because we need to determine certain things. If someone has a mental issue, we are not able to take in someone who has a very serious—[Inaudible].

If someone has a physical issue where they are not mobile, we do have a chair lift but we do not have on staff someone who is qualified and capable of bathing someone who is a quadriplegic. So, what I did do is that we did get a call once about a quadriplegic and I told her family to take her to the Port of Spain General Hospital emergency and for her to fake a headache. I reckoned it would have taken her—taken them maybe them about two days to determine there was nothing wrong with her head. If they had not been able to contact the family, the safe house they were looking for her for, family out in the country, then go to a stomach ache. So, she faked for, I think, around seven days—and I am sorry, I am admitting all my bad behaviour here but it gave them time to go and find the family in the country who was willing to take her because she was a quadriplegic in a wheel chair and she was being physically and sexually abused, and financially abused, because her disability grant was being taken from her.

Mr. Chairman: Ms. Harford, put a pause. Let me save you legally from any further possible action.

Ms. Harford: [Laughter] Just—

Mr. Mitchell: Now you see why I limit her conversation.

Mr. Chairman: Because this is being broadcast live and you are advising a member of the public to fabricate—[Inaudible]—I understand your intention.

Just before we move on, I just got some information regarding a comment that was made earlier on in terms a correction. And this is from Mr. Richard Ragoobarsingh Secretary Legal Aid and Advisory Authority regarding the comment about legal aid accessibility during the pandemic. And I quote:

We adjusted our systems during the pandemic. We had and continue to have a team that monitors emails and responds accordingly. In addition to, as an essential service, we did not close. Staff would have been rostered but our data shows that our services continued digitally, in person and via telephone access. I would like the affected person to reach out so we can ascertain if there were any gaps in our systems during 2019 to 2020, and 2020 to 2021. Over 9,000 people in each period accessed us through the means previously stated.

So, in terms transparency, that is from the Legal Aid and Advisory Authority responding to questions, I think from Ms. Acosta, that they could not access the services of legal Aid. Member Nakhid, go ahead, please. Thank you for your patience.

Mr. Nakhid: Okay. Since most of my colleagues spoke with you all with more targeted questions, this question is more overarching and it relates to what I have heard from Mrs. Benjamin and some of the other stakeholders that we have a lack of public awareness because the culture is so intertwined

in what—how we view domestic violence. Because we know, you know, people before there used to be violence between spouses and it would be termed “Tobago love”, for example. I am just giving you an example of what we have in the culture. Our Carnival and the dancing and all of that, I will be quite frank, has descended into something almost violent. You know, we have the advertisements “Stink and Dutty”, “Jam Naked”. You know, I am just giving you an example of what we have in the culture that we see as our culture. I do not but that is how it is.

I am asking: What kind of public awareness programmes have been implemented by all of these organizations, all of these NGOs, to really counteract this is what I call “counterculture” that people see as culture? Counterculture. I will give you an example. In Belgium in the late 80s/early 90s, there was a prevalence of domestic violence. There was no social media but there was a lot television programmes in connection with the local creatives in Belgium, for example. We have so many unused creatives in Trinidad and Tobago. Has there been any synergy between the organization and local creatives to create serious social media platforms and television platforms? And I know you have budget constraints, but what has been done in synergy with local creatives to create a wider public awareness programme about violence at all levels?

Mr. Chairman: That is an excellent question. We could start with Ms. Clarke on that.

Ms. Clarke: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I think we can say there has been quite a lot but definitely not enough. So, typically speaking, non-governmental organizations would do campaigns, maybe do a 16 days of activism during November 25th and December 10th, and all through the year we do different kinds of campaigns and different types of outreach to faith-based organizations with popular artistes. I myself have been involved with working with calypsonians, soca artistes to produce materials for television and for radio. So, it is all of that being done. But I think what you are asking, Member of Parliament Nakhid, is: What are we doing that will shift, as you say, counterculture? In fact, probably the culture is more tolerant of violence, then what we are trying to do is countercultural because we are trying to sift away from that. What are we doing to change the social norms of everyone in society?

And we have been saying more and more, and more and more insistently, that the response to domestic violence, apart from the services component, we have to now work on prevention and embed prevention within the school system starting with early childhood education and always going to have very clear messages. And not just messages that teach in the pedagogy. The teaching approaches, the curriculum has to also reinforce those messages that they want to send. We need some consistency in that cultural change. And it is more than campaign. It is more than public service announcements. But Asiya had something to say, I think, on this, so I will like to pass over to her. And, Member of Parliament Nakhid, we could also send you links to a lot of what we have been doing across many organizations.

Ms. Mohammed: Thank you—

Mr. Nakhid: Well, that would be appreciated, Ms. Clarke, because to be honest, I have seen some advertisements, some public announcements. But, as you said, it is not nearly enough if we have to change the culture and how we view it. I am sorry. Ms. Mohammed, go ahead.

Ms. Mohammed: Yes. Thank you, hon. Nakhid, I really liked that question and I think it is an excellent question to pose to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago because we all share a responsibility

to eliminate and end gender-based violence and in fact, the Alliance is the Alliance for State Action to End GBV. And I want to make that point on communications because I think it is really important point that you have raised today.

The draft strategic action plan to end gender-based and sexual violence that would provide a holistic response to preventing gender-based violence in Trinidad and Tobago. Now, that key document has been before our Cabinet since 2016 and it has not yet been approved. Now, that has really key factors of which communications is one, justice is another one, policing, reform, economics, et cetera. It is all there. It is in a draft strategic action plan. And unfortunately, it has not been yet approved by our Cabinet.

Now, six years have passed and in six years, I think we can all agree that the rates of gender-based violence have increased drastically. Those of us who are in civil society, we have been saying over and over again for years the same thing. Please approve the draft strategy. Please prioritize this issue. Right? The cost for us as a people, as a government, as individuals, of not having strategies such as this one approved is that people pay with their lives. We have seen a rise in femicides in this country. As my colleague Collin has just said, in four days' time we had four women murdered and one young boy. Let us not forget he was 12 years old. His life has completely—*[Technical Difficulties]*—he—*[Technical Difficulties]* And had we had these strategies, we can move forward in terms of actually implementing and creating the change both at the cultural and societal level.

And I want to acknowledge here that Government has started to implement parts of that strategy but we cannot, all of us together in 2022, be meeting to talk about gender-based violence without having a strategy, a holistic comprehensive strategy to address GBV in the year 2022. So, coming out from today, I am really I am hoping and I would like to plead with all of the members of the JSC, the Chairman, Senators, Members of Parliament, et cetera, that you call upon Government to approve urgently this strategy to end gender-based violence in Trinidad and Tobago of which communications is a key component.

Mr. Chairman: Well, I am glad that you mentioned communications because we are running out of time, but I want to pose a question to the group before us before we ask for your closing comments. We are talking—member Nakhid raised the issue of communication and messaging. In an age of social media where you could get 7,000 people in a fete for \$600, or where you can move large amounts of people and influence them without putting an ad on radio or TV, just by social media messaging, but there is—and the discussion has centred around counterculture. But we are in an age where quite frankly many of the people who we need to target are the people who are in their teens, even younger, in their 20s, have accepted a particular narrative of themselves that is driven by international pop stars. So, there is a clash of cultures and a generational clash and they are not necessarily listening to us on a JSC because we are not their cohort.

And I ask myself, if we have had and there are four murders of females and a child in four days, we have 48 hours social media outreach and we go back to whatever we have been doing before and move on. So, what is it about our culture and what can we do to start sending a different kind of message that will elicit the behaviour change? Because if the behaviours do not change, the message has not resonated, or the message is not as consistent as it should be or sustained, or the message is not in the format it should be to reach the target audience or the different levels of target audience because the message certainly is not getting through. And I will start with Ms. Acosta on this because

she seems to be the youngest amongst us. And no shade to anyone else. And that is where the message needs to go because we are the ones who have been preaching for decades and we need to reach that generation to elicit the kind of behavioural changes we want in five, 10, 15, years. We do not want to be talking about this in the same format in 10 years.

So, Ms. Acota, how do we get past Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj and get a different kind of—and I am not “dissing” Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj before they come for “meh”, eh. They have wonderful music but you know what I am talking about. There are different messages being sent through social media and mass media which are having different levels of impact on different levels of society.

Ms. Acosta: Thank you for your question, Mr. Chairman, because as you were talking, in my mind, I was saying, we need to actually involve the youth. Because this is a forum and, you know, it is a government kind of thing, it might not attract young people.

Mr. Chairman: Well, correction. It is a Parliament kind of thing involving Government, Opposition and Independents. Right? But I understand your point.

Ms. Acosta: Yeah. I am oversimplifying. But what I am trying to express is that if young people are not involved, then they do not feel a sense of ownership or belonging. And we can message all we want but if we are talking to them or talking down to them, then it is not going to be received. It has to be a two-way street. It has to be us receiving some communication, maybe opening a TikTok, you know, meeting them where they are. And I am saying, “they”—because I am almost 30, so I feel I am not in that group anymore. I do not speak the language.

Mr. Chairman: You have a long way to go. You are in the group.

Ms. Acosta: I am doing my best in my grouping. But, yeah, involving youth is, to me, the key to getting them to be receptive to these messages.

Mr. Chairman: Collin or Ms. Harford?

Mr. Mitchell: I think today is a fantastic start. I saw a great contribution that the Prime Minister of Barbados made recently. I do not know if you all saw it. She made a speech about two or three days ago and she was talking about the climate change issue. But I was thinking to myself about how gender-based violence is similar the way they were distributing information on it previously where we will speak to and the information would be sent to, and no one is really speaking with. It is not a two-way street and there was not really a conversation on it. Being a taboo subject, a lot of people will see a message like, “Domestic violence is a crime, it is everyone’s business, see it, report it, stop it.” That is one of the Government’s campaigns recently and they feel like they are being spoken to and they really do not have the forum to have a conversation with. And we need to somehow engage on that level because being a taboo subject, people have a lot more questions and they have a lot of things they need to speak about. And just having Bunji Garlin go out in a concert and say, “Treat yuh woman like a queen. Yuh must not beat a woman,” I really do not think that that will connect.

And I think, Chair, you touched on that a bit just now. So, we have to find a way of how we are going to connect. How the Shelter has been doing it is—Mr. Nakhid was asking about, why we do not do mass communications and mass media. Well, none of us could have the budget to do that. We

are trying to find the money just to feed and house and clothe the, you know, the victims or what we like to call them “survivors” in our shelter. That is what we are consumed with every day. So, when I do get the opportunity, you would find that we did a golf tournament in January. We would use our connections to get the Prime Minister to attend and then we will make every newspaper for a one day or a two days. And in that message we try to control the narrative to an extent where, “Yes, the Prime Minister supported the Shelter’s golf tournament”—

Mr. Chairman: But with the greatest of respect, and the Prime Minister is important to get involved and the Her Excellency the President, but is 22-year old—and they should be influenced by the Prime Minister’s statement—but is a 22 year old really connected to the Prime Minister’s statement, you know, in the wider scheme of things, to the amount of noise coming at them?

Mr. Mitchell: No. It does not. But what it does is, it keeps in the media. And from the time that it keeps us in the media and the limelight, we get to send messages. Each time we get that opportunity and we are asked for a quote or we make a contribution, we try to control our own media releases. We do not let just go how it wants. We always steer our media releases very carefully and in there we try to talk about gender-based violence being a crime, how you can get help, who you should talk to and what you should do. So, every time we get that opportunity that is what we do. So, we try to invite guests who would get us into the media and that is like a smart way of getting into communications and media without paying for it.

Mr. Chairman: Sherna, your hand has been up for a while. Go ahead, please.

Mrs. Alexander-Benjamin: Chair, I am speaking open here as we, as people. The fact remains that corporate Trinidad and Tobago, the media within Trinidad and Tobago, many philanthropists within Trinidad and Tobago and many Government officials within Trinidad and Tobago want to stay as far away from the issue of violence, be it domestic violence, intimate partner violence, child abuse, as possible. The stories of victims—

Mr. Chairman: Why do you say that?

Mrs. Alexander-Benjamin: Because it goes back again to the lack of education. It also goes to the hidden rules of the class to which people belong. People operate with the hidden rules of their class even in the halls of Parliament, even on social issues that are undermining and pulling out the bottom from our societies and our individuals. I have had companies say to me that, “That area does not fall and align well with our marketing approach. There is nothing to receive from aligning with such a cause.” So you have companies, corporate companies, many, not all, operating from a transactional approach; I give something to get something.

With the issue of domestic violence and working for the sustenance and sustainability of people experiencing violence, what you get is a certain amount of intangible profits that increases your social and human capital for your country to be developed and sustainable. A country is identified in the way it treats its citizens. And the way how Trinidad and Tobago has been treating its population, especially those vulnerable populations, has not been good. So, we have an issue where persons want to remain as far away as possible from the issue while hoping that the issue is solved without their intervention, without their ability to open the door, without the ability to ask for transparency. And I believe the time has come for us to remove that conversation of talking over people’s head and talking with people.

You know, I grew up in Laventille. A part of my life I grew in Laventille. I grew up in other areas. Many people may not know that. I sit on—I go to Point Fortin. I sit in Valencia and I go into homes where people do not have some of the basic amenities. And you know what I do? I sit on the ground with them. I drink from a cup that they washed just with barrel water because you are now looking to develop a relationship that they can identify and build trust with the people. Many of the elected officials and persons in positions, these people see them just once every five years. That is not service. That is an act of violence. So, when we talk about violence, we also talk about it on a broad spectrum.

So, how do we connect with our younger population? It is being real with them; being real with them and connecting with them on the levels that we have to research and understand how to do that to break those kind of hidden rules that carry over into our relationships based on our mental models. Because a lot us, even our NGOs, are operating in a tyranny of the moment. The lack of resources create a tyranny of the moment. We need to just get this problem solved here and now. How do we work together to provide solutions so we no longer operate in that tyranny of the moment? I see my colleague Chimere's hand is up.

Mr. Chairman: I am going to have put a pause because we are certainly out of time. I am going to go down the list and apologize to you and ask for closing comments. And I am going to start with Ms. Harford. You are still muted, Ms. Harford. Thank you.

Ms. Harford: “Oh”, yeah. My family would be so happy if that was a permeant state. First, again, to thank everyone for today. But I would like to go back to something that Roberta said earlier. I am talking about the relationship that young people see to any level of violence. I do not think they see there is a consequence to violence and I think violence is also, to a certain level, considered popular and making you important in some areas. Where there is a lack of parenting, gang leaders become parents. They offer a family environment to children who do not have parents at home. And if we—I remember, I think it was last year at a rotary virtual meeting and the TTPS' head of the Gender-Based Violence Unit said that there was, I am using the term very loosely, a gentleman in San Fernando who had broken his protection order seven times. He is yet to appear before a member of the Judiciary. He is yet to have a fine or any form of consequence put on him. And I would like to quote my father who was, in my mind, the wisest person I have ever met. Human behaviour is based on one of two things, seeking a reward or avoiding consequence. The reward could be your own feeling in your heart when you do something well or it could be the house. Consequence is what you are avoiding. And if there is no consequence and there is no reward attached to living an honest life and following what we are saying here is normal behaviour that we would like every Trinidadian to promote, then what is the encouragement for them? You know, what is the encouragement for the 18-year-old, for the 15-year-old who has a gun?

We have had a child stand up at a meeting many years ago at NAPA and— sorry, his counsellor stood up at the meeting and said that, one of the teachers at the school was having a really hard time of getting this boy to study. And he said, “But how money you earn a month?” He said, “I make more money than you make in a week selling guns and ganja?”

Mr. Chairman: Well, that is a value system issue. But that is a different conversation. Thank you very much.

Ms. Harford: But the violence, there must be a consequence and a reward to life.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you, Mr. Mitchell.

Mr. Mitchell: I think we are at closing comments now, Chair?

Mr. Chairman: Yes. Thank you.

Mr. Mitchell: This was an excellent conversation today. I was very happy to speak with all of you and to meet Members of the Parliament from both sides and, of course, to see you again, Independent Senator. Thank you again for the good work that you do. I know it must be tireless work sometimes. And it was nice to actually get to see my colleagues and chat today. The Shelter is doing the best that we can. Our goal is to become gold standard of shelters in this country. We have some of corporate Trinidad on board with us supporting us because one of my colleagues a little while ago spoke of a bit about the challenges with companies not coming on board. But what is happening is the problem is widespread now that it has actually infiltrating into the companies, into the day, during their daily work. One of the companies that came to support us most recently came because they are aware of it now because the perpetrator came to their business place and they had to lock the doors to keep him out because he wanted to kill one of their employees and everybody was exposed to it. So, the violence was widespread throughout the whole company and they had to call police and they lost a whole day of productivity and, of course, the trauma involved with the many people associated with it. So, the Shelter is here to support where we can and we will continue to advocate for things that need to be done. And thank you to everyone for having us today.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Mrs. Alexander-Benjamin on behalf of the Center for Nonviolence, Research, and Development.

Mrs. Alexander-Benjamin: I will hand over my closing remarks to Chimere Wadi attorney-at-law.

Mr. Chairman: Not a problem. Thank you.

Ms. Gibson-Wadi: Good day. Thank you for the opportunity. Chair, I would want to use this opportunity to just address a few in a very, very short way some of the things that came up during this conversation. Firstly, Chair's question with regard to the youth. One thing that I think that we underestimate is, as my friend was saying, the position of trust. In terms of being an attorney, one thing that we have seen is that persons come to us and essentially bare their hearts, bare their situations, where they would refuse to go the police. I have personally handled divorces and protection orders where they do not want to report. So, in terms of the reporting, that is another issue that came up. We will never get accurate reporting.

12.15 p.m.

So, in terms of that, what I would also suggest is that, in terms of collecting this data, we go to more sources in terms of, for example, attorneys at law. Yes, we are bound by confidentiality but we can provide members, ministers of religion, those kinds of things.

And also, in terms of the youth, in terms of that position of trust, something that we can also look at is peer counselling. That has been something that has been especially efficient in terms of the studies that I have read with regard to addressing those situations. Persons are more likely to open up and to understand and to seek attention and help from persons who are on their level. So, even something as simple as thriving people who have survived this abuse can be counsellors, peer counsellors,

layman counsellors. So persons who are also experiencing, help them through the process and all these things. So, thank you, Chair. I will hand over the Chair again.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much. Ms. Acosta on behalf of WOMANTRA.

Ms. Acosta: Thank you so much. So, in my closing remarks, I just want to reiterate the importance of the national strategic plan. I want to raise the attention to the discrimination that still exists within the DV Act against members of the LBGTQ community, as well as just sharing as well in terms of service provision that there does need to be some kind of standardized procedure so that we can do proper risk assessment, proper intake and all these different things that have so far been lacking. Thank you all for your time and thank you for the opportunity to share.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much. Ms. Mohammed on behalf of Conflict Women Ltd.

Ms. Mohammed: Thank you, Chair. It was definitely an honour to be here today and I tried my best to do justice to our survivors who are not present in today's hearing. So, I will close by sharing a story from someone, a young man, who went to court to fight for his daughter. He had been fighting for custody for years and years and years. The courts denied him custody and instead granted that custody to his grandmother. Until finally he gave up. He said to me, "I cannot do this anymore, I cannot deal with the court system, I do not have money to continue. You know, they have given my daughter to the grandmother, I will just have to accept it." And one day he got a call from the guidance counsellor of her school and that call said to him, "We need you to come right now for your daughter because she was raped by the boyfriend of the grandmother to whom the courts had granted custody as opposed to the father.

We have a responsibility as a country to that young girl whose father fought for her for years and years and years within the court system to get custody and whose rape we could have prevented, our judicial system could have prevented, our magistrates could have prevented. So, each of us here today, we have a responsibility. All I want for us is to give justice and give voice to our survivors who are suffering when we do not have right policies and the right strategies in place.

So, I will close today by thanking everyone and by urging those present in the JSC, all the members, to lobby, as we have been lobbying as the alliance, for the National Strategic Action Plan to end gender-based violence. Thanks.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much. I think Dr. Hosein had to leave us, so Ms. Clarke.

Ms. Clarke: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thanks to all of the members of the Joint Select Committee for this thoughtful interaction. I want to say if we were building a multistorey complex, large building on sifting ground—you know, there are some parts of Trinidad and Tobago where the ground is not settled—you amass around you architects and engineers, all kinds of engineers, because you put your best minds to constructing a safe building. And what we have here is a very complex problem with specific kinds of causes and multiple consequences, and we need our best minds to be thinking analytically and prescriptively about what needs to be done. And in that regard, we need the evidence.

So, social scientists have to be at the heart of this response and especially social psychologists. We keep talking about changing social norms but changing behaviours is a complex thing, changing the hearts and minds is a complicated thing and we need professionals to help us, who understand neuropathways, who understand social behaviour, we need them to help us figure out what is the best

way to shift norms. But already we know it has to start in the school system. We have to deal with parenting programmes. Dr. Hosein spoke about HFNE, and with all of that we also have the enforcement to which Sherron referred. We need to have regulation, which we have. We have the lovely, wonderful Domestic Violence Act. Trinidad and Tobago has a shining, wonderful Act. But it has to be implemented, it has to be monitored in its implementation and it has to be enforced.

And so, I think we need the accountability. We come back to the title of this Alliance, Alliance of State Action and we are all about holding the State accountable and it has to be held accountable through close collaboration with this sector of NGOs who have the expertise and also will collaborate to build on that multistakeholder engagement and platform and be on the ground giving the feedback on how things are working. We need the strategy and we need the democratic involvement and we need, according to Mr. Senhouse, “We need the money.” I think Collin has said that over and over. The NGO sector needs the money to provide the services which the State is not able to provide. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and everyone else.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much—

Ms. Clarke: And just to say our submission has many, many recommendations across all sectors.

Mr. Chairman: Well, I think you lost everyone under 35 with the Max Senhouse quote, but that is all right, I got it. [Laughter] Thank you. Thank you, Roberta. And you closed on a point I was going to make where it seems, and I stress, “seems”, that there is not the kind of consistent collaboration with NGOs and none for profit organizations that are on the ground doing the work, interfacing with the cohort that you are trying to intervene on behalf of. And very often, policy designed and implemented in the absence of that type of consistent collaboration—not one-off collaboration—consistent, because the ground is shifting all the time and the best people who know what is happening on the ground as it shifts, improvements, included in the shifts, are the people on the ground, the NGOs. And that kind of collaboration is not as consistent or, in some cases, is absent as it should be, or is absent, I should say.

So, I want to thank you on behalf of the Committee for being with us, we appreciate your time and your contributions. Please know that you can submit additional thoughts, comments and questions and recommendations to the Secretariat who will be happy to include them in our final report. And we thank you for your continued good work in this regard in terms of dealing with this issue in Trinidad and Tobago. On behalf of the Committee members, I am Paul Richards, thank you for being with us and the session is now adjourned. Have a great day and be safe.

Members: Thank you.

12.22 p.m.: *Meeting adjourned*

