



## **Response of the Office of the Prime Minister (Gender and Child Affairs)**

### **Fifth 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)**

The following is the response of the Office of the Prime Minister – Gender and Child Affairs (OPM-GCA) to the relevant recommendations/comments from the Fifth 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). The responsibility for each recommendation is identified and the appropriate response given.

➤ ***Objective 1: To examine trends in Domestic Violence in Trinidad and Tobago for the period March 2020- March 2022 compared with previous periods.***

The Division noted the findings under Objective 1 and expand on the following:

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 Domestic Violence (CRDV), 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 Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Central Registry System by stakeholders.

#### **Comments**

The Division noted the above findings and the Gender Affairs Division continues to collaborate with the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS) and the Judiciary to tackle data deficiencies in the management and distribution of vital information regarding victims and perpetrators. A sub-committee of the Cabinet Appointed Inter-Ministerial Committee to Coordinate Strategies to Reduce Domestic Violence is actively pursuing this matter.

Additionally, a new service provider is soon to be engaged by UNFPA to update the CRDV platform. It is expected that the new system will have enhanced functionality to include case management services. Preliminary discussions were held with key stakeholders and it is anticipated that all data sources will be further integrated in the requirements analysis of the new system. All first responders to GBV as well as administrative sources will be included in the design of the platform. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) will be refined and tested

to ensure that data are extensively integrated but access will be limited to survivor specific service providers to ensure that confidentiality is maintained through a survivor-centred approach. The updated platform is will be piloted by the first quarter of 2024.

### **Recommendations**

The Division supports the recommendations of the Committee. Feedback, for consideration, is provided hereunder for the following recommendations:

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 Domestic Violence (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.

### **Feedback**

The Division is actively engaged in several initiatives which are intended to enhance the data collection practices and processes. These interventions also aim at expanding the coverage and quality of data available which will strengthen our understanding of the socio-economic and cultural context surrounding GBV. For example, in October 2022, the National Children’s Registry (NCR) was officially launched. This system seeks to collate data on children from critical sectors (e.g. education, health, social services, and national security) and gather other pertinent information to monitor and track children’s developmental milestones. Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) will be developed to guide the type and

format of information to be stored in the Registry. Additionally, the MOUs are specific to the data requirements of the Registry and those that are captured by partner Ministry/Agency. Extensive training was done with key stakeholders to ensure standardisation of data collection and retrieval.

Additionally, UNFPA is supporting the Division with the development of the GBV Registry. Data drives that are culturally specific in addressing GBV speaks to prevention and what measures would be taken to address cultural norms and behaviours that foster GBV. The Division will engage in discussions to explore the inclusion of additional fields on the Registry to accommodate qualitative data in keeping with this recommendation. Population specific data will also be explored. Adequate training will also be pursued to ensure GBV sensitive engagement of victims and survivors when conducting surveys and interviews.

The Division will engage the CSO to determine how the Central Registry and the Gender Based Violence Consolidated Database proposed for the CSO can complement each other.

### **Recommendation**

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.

### **Feedback**

The Division agrees that there is need to improve the human resource capacity of first responders and to reduce the response burden of victims. In light of this, the Division is collaborating with the UNFPA to develop and implement a Referral Pathway System, which is designed to improve responsiveness and lower the response burden of victims. Training in the use of this new system will, in turn, build the human resource capacity of first responders. Follow-up training sessions will be determined by the needs of first responders.

### **Recommendation**

H. The Committee acknowledges and endorses the plan of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services (MSDFS) 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 Ministry of Education (MoE), state agencies and other Non-Governmental Organizations (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.

### **Feedback**

The Division supports the creation of the Vulnerability Registry by the MSDFS. The Division also supports interagency data sharing and interoperability in managing GBV. Partner agencies will have access to the CRDV through its advanced capabilities for improved and proactive service delivery. Survivors will not be required to relate their experiences repeatedly as they engage service providers. Interoperability will facilitate integrated service delivery.

The GCA has made similar improvements through data upgrades involving a National Child Poverty Analysis with support from UNICEF (i.e., proposed to begin September 2023) and the MSDFS. Meetings were held with the MSDFS to determine data-sharing protocols. These efforts will enable the MSDFS to incorporate sensitive data into its Ministry-run Vulnerability Register based on the findings of the Child Poverty Analysis and information from the National Child Registry (NCR. This initiative is ongoing as the relevant systems are in the initial stages of operation.

➤ ***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 Division noted the findings under this Objective 2 and comments are provided hereunder for the following:

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.

**Comments**

During the COVID-19 pandemic the Division took the opportunity to enhance its social media platform to improve efficiency in delivering sensitisation and GBV-responsive programmes and services. It also embarked on a series of initiatives utilising hybrid measures such as virtual town-hall meetings, social media campaigns and national consultations.

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.

**Comments**

The Division recognises the urgent need to undertake gender-responsive budgeting in disbursing funds to primary GBV service providers. This measure is paramount given limited resources and increasing costs of GBV-responsive programming. The Division remains committed in supporting GBV survivors and agencies that work for and with victims and survivors.

vii. An influx of persons needing shelter during the COVID-19 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.

**Comments**

Under the GCA the National Domestic Violence Hotline (800-SAVE) remained operational. The Hotline provided support to members of the public, including connecting them to other

public and social services such as access to shelter accommodation (at the NDV Shelter), counselling and other support services.

The OPM-GCA is seeking to address the need for additional safe housing for victims and survivors in need of alternative accommodation. In this regard, plans are underway to establish three (3) additional safe homes by the end of fiscal 2024. Moreover, the Division has earmarked one of these as a shelter for men. A committee has been appointed to review and develop a NGO-Operated Management Strategy for state-owned shelters.

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.

### **Comments**

The OPM-GCA through its grant funding committee continues to provide technical and financial assistance to civil society and faith-based organizations to assist them in their service delivery. During the pandemic, the OPM provided financial support to non-governmental organizations to allow them to provide food hampers to vulnerable persons in their communities.

### **Recommendations**

The Division supports all recommendations of the Committee that are in keeping with the relevant laws of the country. Feedback is provided hereunder with the following recommendations:

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 inter-vention 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.

### **Feedback**

An Inter-Ministerial Committee was appointed by Cabinet to review the National Strategic Action Plan (NSAP) to End Gender-Based and Sexual Violence. The NSAP Executive Summary and Report were submitted to Cabinet for consideration.

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.

### **Feedback**

Based on an internal assessment of the National Domestic Violence Shelter (NDVS), 800-SAVE Hotline and Ministry-led GBV programmes, the Division will move towards developing safety-plan protocols and procedures. These aim to enable improved efficiency in executing crucial safety measure efforts for relevant personnel and clients.

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.

**Feedback**

The OPM-GCA is cognisant of the need for a National Communication Strategy and is committed to working with key stakeholders to develop such a strategy. Notwithstanding this, the Division is involved in extensive awareness and sensitisation during the implementation of on-going interventions.

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.

**Feedback**

Plans are underway to develop a Referral Pathway System to foster efficiency in inter-agency collaboration. The system will fast-track responsiveness to clients' needs through time delay reductions in access to critical support services. Discussions are ongoing between the Division and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to ensure the appropriate utilisation of this system in better supporting vulnerable persons. The Division will efficiently provide pertinent, time-sensitive information regarding critical GBV services across diverse social media platforms.

G. Within the next six (6) 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.

**Feedback**

The Division has been working in schools, in close collaboration with the MoE in the implementation of initiatives aimed at prevention targeted specifically to male students. The Division also implements, on an annual basis, interventions targeting men and boys during International Men's Day. NGOs are also supported in similar programme activities. These gender-oriented programmes and policies will continue in the new fiscal and expand to include more gender-responsive education, advocacy training and empowerment initiatives.

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.

## **Feedback**

The OPM-GCA is committed to working with its stakeholders to develop and implement more targeted interventions through the use of insights derived from the implementation of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) plans and processes. To this end, the OPM-GCA is pursuing a proposals to increase the size of the compliment of staff responsible for M&E as the main pathway towards improving monitoring and evaluation of existing interventions. The OPM-GCA is also committed to supporting counter-parts in other Ministries, Departments and Agencies to improve the quality and coverage of GBV statistics.

- ***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***

The Division noted the findings under Objective 3 and comments are provided hereunder for the following:

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 exist.

### **Comments**

The GCA is in preparing a proposal for establishing a formal support system for additional technical and financial support to civil society organisations engaged in work around gender and development issues inclusive of those NGOs who operate DV Shelters and related accommodations and service delivery. NGOs/CBOs can, and have been, accessing funding from time to time via grant funding available from the Division.

B. There is an overall shortage of safe houses and shelters especially for minority groups (LGBTQI<sup>23+</sup> and migrants) as well as male victims of DV. Specifically for the minority groups, the pandemic and its associated restrictions have highlighted the need for safe houses in addition to financial and food assistance.

### **Comments**

OPM-GCA utilises an inclusive approach to client care and access to the NDVS. Efforts are underway to establish a facility for male victims of DV.

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.

### **Comments**

The NDVS, which falls under the purview of the Division does not prevent admission based on sex and age restrictions for minor children, elderly and disabled dependents of survivors seeking safe housing for up to three (3) months. Extended durations are allowed based on needs using predetermined criteria measured on a case-by-case basis. The NDVS permits

longer stays for residents requiring more urgent reintegration skills and resources. Collaboration with the MSDFS also facilitate services for persons who require longer term support services.

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

#### **Comments**

The Inter-Agency Task Force completed the Work Plan for Implementation of the recommendations contained in the Judith Jones Report 'Safeguarding Children in Community Residences and Child Support Centres in Trinidad and Tobago' and same was approved by the Cabinet in October 2022. The Work Plan addresses the gaps identified in the Report. The High-level, Cabinet-appointed Standing Committee on Child Protection has also been established with the Minister responsible for Gender and Child Affairs as Chair. This Committee has the responsibility of overseeing the implementation of the Work Plan and commenced meetings in January 2023. Several actions contained in the Work Plan has already been completed as the Committee continues to work.

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 Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (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.

#### **Comments**

In September 2022, Government provided an allocation of \$2.5M for a One-Off Grant for unlicensed Homes for infrastructural works recommended by Trinidad and Tobago Fire Services and Public Health. The Division established an Inter-Agency Committee to review applications for the Grant. As at May 15, 2023, nine (9) Homes have been approved for the Grant. The works at many of the Homes are either completed or near completion and the Authority is expected to make further inspection to determine their readiness for licensure in the months of May and June 2023.

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 stability.



**Comments**

Though some efforts are made at the National Domestic Violence Shelter to provide transition services, the OPM-GCA concurs with the comments. The Division will work with key stakeholders to address this gap in service delivery.

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.

**Comments**

As referred to on Page 28, Recommendation G, OPM-GCA in partnership with UNFPA established a Referral Pathway System to improve responsiveness of multiple public agencies to effectively redress domestic violence and provide support to survivors.

**Recommendations**

The Division supports all recommendations of the Committee. Feedback is provided hereunder with the following recommendations:

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-minis-terial approach, in collaboration with private sector stakeholders and NGOs. This should be spearheaded by the OPM-GCA in collaboration with the MSDFS.

**Feedback**

The Division is in the process of establishing additional shelters including a shelter for men and their dependents. The Division utilizes an inclusive approach to client care and access to the NDVS. Additionally, the Division is preparing a proposal for the consideration of Cabinet for establishing a formal support system for additional technical and financial support to civil society organizations engaged in work around gender-based violence issues. A Home for Migrants was established in 2022.

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, Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (MHUD) as well as collaboration among private sector stakeholders and NGOs.

**Feedback**

The OPM-GCA is committed to working with all stakeholders to provide transitioning support services inclusive of accommodation.

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.

#### **Feedback**

Recruitment at the CATT has commenced effective April, 2023. The Authority will actively recruit additional positions during this fiscal period (2022-2023) and will continue in fiscal 2023-2024. This recruitment exercise will assist the Authority in reducing average case load and enhance service delivery. In March 2023, the Gender Division filled the positions of Director and Assistant Director. Additional recruitment is anticipated in fiscal 2023 and 2024.

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 (6) months after the presentation of this report.

#### **Feedback**

The Division supports this recommendation. Calls to the existing Hotline (800-SAVE) can be immediately referred to the TTPS or to the MSDFS.

- *Objective 4: To evaluate the effectiveness of support provided to Domestic victims by the State for the period March 2020 – March 2022.*

The Division noted the findings under Objective 4 and include comments 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.

#### **Comments**

The Division noted the findings in this area and adds the following comments:

The Division agrees with this findings. Notwithstanding, all agencies are responsible for monitoring and evaluating their own programmes on a regular basis. However, there are two (2) agencies with responsibility for strategic M&E, OPM and the MSDFS.

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.

**Comments**

One-off grants were provided to shelters to ensure that they continue to function and increase support to domestic violence victims/survivors in light of the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic and ‘Stay at Home Orders’.

DV victims/survivors also benefited from the distribution of food hampers during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Under the “Food Support Measure” the OPM-GCA partnered with a total of 128 religious’ organizations across all denominations to distribute a total of 170,422 food hampers valued at a total of \$39,996,428.00 TT dollars.

**Recommendations**

The Division supports the recommendations outlined under this section.

**Concluding Statement:**

A number of activities to treat with the issue of gender-based violence are contained in the newly revised National Strategic Action Plan 2023-2027. The Plan has been reviewed and revised to reflect current and emerging gender issues of Trinidad and Tobago. The National Strategic Action Plan on Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Sexual Violence (NSAP-GBV&SV 2023-2027) was developed with the support of the UN Women Multi-Country Office for the Caribbean under the Spotlight Initiative. The proposed Action Plan offers a framework for multi-sectoral collaboration and coordination to end gender-based violence. The coordinated, complementary strategies contained within the Action Plan are critical to addressing gender-based violence and its detrimental effects on families, communities and the society as a whole. A number of the matters outlined above are expected to be addressed with the implementation of the NSAP (2023-2027).

