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## BREAKING THE SILENCE: A MULTI-SECTORAL APPROACH TO PREVENTING AND ADDRESSING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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## GENDER

**Gender is important because it shapes constructions of masculinity and femininity and the ways in which human beings understand and express their sexuality. Gender ideologies are characterized by unequal power relations which have implications for vulnerability to violence, including child sexual abuse (CSA) and childhood incest; economic dependency; silencing; bodily harm; public shame; fear, and lack of access to help and support. Despite the link between gender and CSA, few services, systems or direct service providers in Trinidad and Tobago consider gender in their policies and practices that aim to prevent and/or respond to CSA and incest.**

In Trinidad and Tobago<sup>1</sup> as elsewhere, characteristics stereotypically associated with masculinity and exercised by men, include power. Men are seen as naturally "dominant" and expected to be sexual predators. The onus is on women and girls to make themselves unavailable to men and not for men to refuse them. In homes, mothers are made unequally responsible for sexual morality; and for young girls, managing their sexuality becomes a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is shameful for girls to be seen as sexually active while on the other there is a strong social imperative to be highly sexualized in appearance and behaviour.

Society also teaches girls to more easily accept domination and discipline by authority figures, parents and school teachers. In this context, women and girls become more vulnerable, more easily subordinated and silenced, and less likely to feel they have the right to resist. Thus many do not speak up about abuse, incest, rape or sexual assault. In fact, girls are often blamed for having been raped or exploited, are stigmatized as promiscuous and are ostracized if they become infected with HIV.

In some instances, marriage is used as one response to CSA due to the young age marriageable allowed in the four Marriage Acts of Trinidad and Tobago.<sup>2</sup> Reports from social workers in the country state that police often encourage CSA victims to marry their perpetrators.

Further gendered expectations of females to manage a household even when men are physically and emotionally absent lead to increased risk of CSA and childhood incest as children of working or migrated mothers remain unsupervised, and step-parents, partners and relatives claim rights to sexual relations with children. Mothers dependent on their partners are disempowered from speaking out about sexual abuse and

<sup>1</sup>From 2008 - 2011, the Institute for Gender and Development Studies (IGDS) at the University of West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine embarked on a study exploring the attitudes and perceptions of community members and service providers in Trinidad and Tobago surrounding gender and sexuality, including information on child sexual abuse and incest. Information in this policy brief is based on findings from that study. The study was conducted in partnership with the Trinidad and Tobago Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CADV), UNICEF, Trinidad and Tobago, and UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women as part of a three-year action research project entitled, *Breaking the Silence: A Multi-Sectoral Approach to Preventing and Addressing Child Sexual Abuse in Trinidad and Tobago*.

<sup>2</sup> 1. **The Marriage Act Chap.45:01:** Under this Act, males can contract a marriage at age 14 while females can enter into marriage at age 12 (which are the minimum ages for marriage at common law). This applies to Christian and to civil marriages.

2. **The Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act, Chap. 45:02:** The age at which a person, being of the Muslim faith, is capable of contracting a marriage under this Act is 16 years in the case of males and 12 in the case of females.

3. **The Hindu Marriage Act, Chap.:45:03:** The age at which a person, being of the Hindu faith, is capable of contracting a marriage under this Act is 18 years in the case of males and 14 years in the case of females.

4. **The Orisha Marriage Act Chap.45:04:** The age at which a person, being of the Orisha faith, is capable of contracting a marriage is 18 years in the case of males and 16 years in the case of females.

incest. They also lack the power for negotiation of condom use and are themselves at increased HIV risk, as unprotected sex is often demanded by the male as an expression of fidelity within a relationship.

Similar risks occur when sexual relationships with older men are accepted by school-aged females who see these relationships as a symbol of maturity and an opportunity for sexual-economic exchange without fear of being exposed.

Boys on the other hand, socialized to perceive sexual relations with older women as a symbol of their manhood, are constrained to report sexual abuse or incest for fear of losing their masculine status and sense of belonging, particularly in the eyes of other males. Even worse is the societal pressure that silences reports of sexual abuse of young males by adult men, an experience that is not only inconsistent with the gendered societal norm of male sexual dominance, but creates unjustified fears of homosexuality in a homophobic society. Help seeking is further deterred by the gendered belief that strong males remain silent.

Homophobia also leads to hyper-heterosexuality as a way of proving manhood. Young men may feel pressured into the societal expectation of hyper-heterosexuality, which may lead to forced sexual relationships with female friends and alcohol/drug use to facilitate performance. These in turn increases the vulnerability to HIV infection.

Despite all these gender ideologies that make youth in Trinidad and Tobago more vulnerable to CSA, incest and HIV only 28% of agencies that participated in a 2009 study of CSA and incest service provision in Trinidad and Tobago<sup>3</sup> offer any kind of gender awareness training for their staff.

## Recommendations

- Mainstream gender-informed policy and programming at all levels of the education system – early childhood, primary, secondary and university- in age-appropriate ways. To facilitate this gender and education must be part of the curriculum of teacher education programmes at the University of the West Indies and The University of Trinidad and Tobago. Curricula should include information on children's sexual rights and HIV testing and prevention, and should empower children and

youth to challenge gender stereotypes and not to be afraid to do so. Additional recommendations for inclusion in the curriculum include education on the constructions of masculinity and femininity and the concept of 'gender'; the ways in which gender ideologies and cultural understandings and underpinnings surrounding sex and sexuality shape social and sexual behavior; the role of alcohol and other drugs in predisposing to risky sexual behavior; the recognition and reporting of CSA and childhood incest; and the role of CSA as a risk factor for HIV.

- The Division of Gender Affairs of the Ministry of Gender, Youth and Social Development and the Division of Health and Social Services of the Tobago House of Assembly must be more visible and proactive in working with other ministries and divisions in addressing issues of CSA and HIV and the establishment of gender –sensitive education programmes at all levels of society.
- Gender analysis must be part of the training of all social workers, psychologists, medical and nursing students and other caring professions.
- Government should expand parenting and life skills programmes in the country to focus on greater gender sensitization and education and how related psychological and physiological factors shape their child's development. Part of this initiative should include consideration and adoption of curricula that was used during parenting workshops implemented for the action research project entitled, *Breaking the Silence: A Multi-Sectoral Approach to Preventing and Addressing Child Sexual Abuse in Trinidad and Tobago*.<sup>4</sup>

## Key Partners

- Gender Affairs Division, Ministry of Gender, Youth and Child Development
- Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago
- Division of Health and Social Services, Tobago House of Assembly
- Ministry of Education
- Division of Education, Youth Affairs and Sport, Tobago House of Assembly
- Institute for Gender and Development Studies, UWI
- Social Work Programme, The Department of Behavioural Sciences, UWI
- National HIV Programme, Office of the Prime Minister
- Tobago AIDS Coordinating Committee, Tobago House of Assembly
- Ministry of Tobago Development
- SERVOL

<sup>3</sup> In 2008, the Institute for Gender and Development Studies (IGDS) at the University of West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine embarked on a study exploring the protocols, policies and practices of service provision related to child sexual abuse in Trinidad and Tobago by gathering information on (1) agencies and (2) individuals involved in Frontline service delivery – referred to as Direct Service Providers. The study was conducted in partnership with the Trinidad and Tobago Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CADV), UNICEF, Trinidad and Tobago, and UN Women as part of a three-year action research project entitled, *Breaking the Silence: A Multi-Sectoral Approach to Preventing and Addressing Child Sexual Abuse in Trinidad and Tobago*.

<sup>4</sup> A total of 50 education and skills building workshops were implemented across three communities in Trinidad and Tobago for this action-research project aimed at empowering women, men, girls and boys to understand and address CSA/incest and its implications for HIV. The workshops was designed based on data collected about CSA/incest and HIV during the project, and were aimed specifically at empowering youth, teachers, parents, community service providers, and social and cultural group members in three communities in Trinidad and Tobago to respond to CSA/incest and implications for HIV.