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

THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES
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INSTITUTE FOR GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

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EDUCATION

Young people in Trinidad and Tobago are negotiating an increasingly complex and confusing social, technological, sexual and gendered space where a globalized media presents powerful hypersexual visual and musical messaging. This occurs in a context where education about gender, sexuality and sexual rights is limited; and messages about sex and sexuality are received, understood and addressed in challenging ways. The response of the education system in the country to issues that negatively impact individuals' fundamental social and sexual experiences such as rape, child sexual abuse (CSA) and incest is generally inadequate and specifically fails to address the relationship between sexual violence and HIV risk.¹ Appropriate education is a powerful primary prevention tool, which can reduce the risk of a range of psychological and physiological impacts, stigma, discrimination, disempowered sexual decision-making all of which may impair the ability of young persons to reach their full academic potential.

Formal education of students about sex and sexuality is important to provide young people with an understanding of their bodies and sexualities, and empower them to make informed decisions about their social and sexual lives. They should be informed as to how to deal with sexual abuse and incest. Teachers also need be educated. Many young persons obtain their sex education from similarly uninformed peers, and the mass media including television, cinema and the

Internet.² Teachers should be equipped to fill the gap when children are unable to speak to parents about sex and sexuality. They should be skilled in the early intervention for child sexual abuse and incest, since they are often the ones to whom child victims of sexual violence turn.

Teachers and principals in Trinidad and Tobago, however, acknowledge that despite the normality of early sexual activity among youth in schools and the prevalence of youth disclosing CSA and incest in the school setting, there is no specific or standardized training available on how to conduct sexuality education for children and young people, or how to treat with disclosures of CSA and incest. Many teachers and principals report a lack of knowledge and awareness of the signs and symptoms of CSA and incest, and the legal statutes surrounding related issues. Specifically, teachers are either unaware of an official school policy or protocol on what they should do if children disclose child sexual abuse or incest, or if they are aware, they were never trained to use it or find the policy and/or protocol grossly limited.

Children have the ability to access school guidance counsellors to report incidents of CSA or incest without an accompanying adult, however, many schools do not have guidance counsellors on staff and/or they are only available for limited times and days during a week or month. Most teachers report that if a child discloses to them, they must

¹ 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. A sub-study explored the protocols, policies and practices of service provision related to child sexual abuse in Trinidad and Tobago by gathering information on (1) schools (2) teachers, principals and guidance officers involved in Frontline service delivery. Information in this policy brief are 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*.

² Reddock, Rhoda (2006). *Bling, Brands and Hypersexuality: Globalisation and Cultural Constructions of Caribbean Masculinities and Femininities*, The St. Vincent Independence Lecture, Kingstown, October 25 (hosted by the UWI School of Continuing Studies); Roberts Dorothy, Reddock, Rhoda, Douglas, Dianne and Reid, Sandra (Eds.) (2009). *Sex, Power & Taboo: Gender & HIV in the Caribbean and Beyond*. Ian Randle Publishers, Kingston, Jamaica

report the incident immediately to the principal, who in turn is required to call the child's parents, and the police. This protocol deters many children from making official reports, as they do not want their parents or caregivers to know they are reporting them, and they do not have trust in the police. Further, the very persons the child originally trusted to disclose the information to (teachers) are not allowed to accompany the child when they are reporting to the police. Another deterrent in children making official reports in schools is that most institutions do not require teachers or principals to sign confidentiality agreements, and anonymity is generally not assured. Teachers themselves report that they fail to report many situations where they suspect CSA or incest in fear of their own safety and security from the perpetrator.

Recommendations

- Sexuality education and ways of teaching about gender and sexualities, including the recognition and management of CSA and incest, and the underlying legal framework, must be compulsory components of all teacher education programmes at the University of the West Indies and the University of Trinidad and Tobago. For teachers, principals and guidance officers who have already been trained, compulsory follow-up workshops are proposed.
- Introduce gender-sensitive sexuality education into schools, possibly through the Health and Family Life Education (HFLE) or Life Skills curriculum for primary and secondary school children, to inform on children's sexual rights; empower children and youth to challenge gender stereotypes, promote sexual efficacy and HIV testing, and educate on HIV risk factors including child sexual abuse/incest, and alcohol/drug use. Part of this initiative should include consideration and adoption of curricula that was used during education workshops implemented in select primary and secondary schools in Trinidad and Tobago for the action research project entitled, *Breaking the Silence: A Multi-Sectoral Approach to Preventing and Addressing Child Sexual Abuse in Trinidad and Tobago*.³

³ 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.

⁴ This was produced in December 2010 at two national workshops (1 in Trinidad and 1 in Tobago) where a summary of findings from the Study of Service Provision d was presented. Approximately 30 service providers of CSA/incest and HIV services in Trinidad and 55 service providers of CSA/incest and HIV services in Tobago participated in this process. Along with providing feedback, workshop participants created protocols for " key areas related to CSA/incest service delivery, including reporting, Interviewing, investigation, referrals, training and service provider self care. The purpose of this exercise was to develop uniform, high quality, children-friendly seamless service for victims of CSA/incest in Trinidad and Tobago. The protocols were distributed to all workshop participants in order for them to adopt and integrate them into their agencies, as well as relevant policymakers throughout the country. They are also available upon request at the Institute for Gender and Development Studies, UWI, St. Augustine campus.

- Teachers should be formally trained to include media literacy in the curriculum for students at all educational levels. Students highly influenced by media messaging and imagery need to learn to critically evaluate the sexual messages and stereotypes with which they are bombarded.

- The Ministry of Education should revisit the national school policy on CSA and incest with an aim to revising and adopting more detailed, uniform, gender-sensitive and child-friendly protocols for reporting and interviewing. Part of this initiative should include consideration and adoption of protocols created by key Trinidad and Tobago stakeholders at a 2009 workshop at UWI, St. Augustine and the Division of Education, Youth and Sport in Tobago related to CSA and incest⁴, as well as recommendations included in the 2010 Study of Service Provision spearheaded by IGDS, UWI, St. Augustine. Teacher training and monitoring sessions are recommended during and after implementation of new policies/protocols.

Key Partners

- Ministry of Education
- Ministry of Science, Technology and Tertiary Education
- Division of Education, Youth Affairs and Sport, Tobago House of Assembly
- Ministry of Gender, Youth and Child Development
- Division of Health and Social Services, Tobago House of Assembly
- Institute for Gender and Development Studies, UWI
- Social Work Programme, The Department of Behavioural Sciences, UWI
- Communications Studies Programme, Department of Liberal Arts, UWI
- National HIV Programme, Office of the Prime Minister
- Tobago AIDS Coordinating Committee, Tobago House of Assembly
- Ministry of Tobago Development
- National Parent Teacher Association (NPTA)
- Trinidad and Tobago Rape Crisis Society