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ABSTRACT

By distributing questionnaires and utilizing secondary sources, this study examined the role of Trinidad and Tobago's cultural norms as risk factors in the perpetuation of sexual violence. The main cultural aspects considered were familial and community perspectives and practices, religious teachings, festivals like Carnival, local genres of music, politics and political leaders and law enforcement. The questionnaires facilitated the opinions and experiences of adults throughout the country on the matter whilst the previously published literature provided statistics and supporting data. It was found that each of these aspects plays a significant part in the continuation of this phenomenon through instilling harmful values, excusing perpetrators' actions, encouraging male dominance and female submission, sexualising events and women, downplaying the severity of the issue, normalizing or trivializing sexual violence, encouraging others to turn a blind eye, creating condescending or unsupportive environments and shaming and discriminating against victims.

Key words: Sexual violence, cultural norms, misogyny, male dominance, female submission, risk factors, abuse

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A. Sample Questionnaire

INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence is a prevalent issue throughout the world. It is defined by the World Health Organization as ‘any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic or otherwise directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work’ (World Health Organization, 2012). Perpetrators consistently target young boys and girls as well as vulnerable men and women to abuse and manipulate. According to the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN), every sixty-eight seconds, an American is sexually assaulted and every nine minutes, another child becomes a victim. Moreover, this phenomenon has shown no discrimination within the Caribbean region. In fact, a study conducted within the Caribbean in 2021 determined that “in a survey of 15,695 students aged 10–18 years from nine countries, 47.6% of girls and 31.9% of boys reported having been subjected to sexual abuse” (Halcón et al., 2003). In Trinidad and Tobago, the years 2020 and 2021 reported a total of eighteen hundred child sexual abuse reports to the Child Protection Unit. Additionally, the Guardian Newspaper highlighted that in 2021, “T&T ranked 26th globally for rape with 18.48 per 100,000 inhabitants” (John-Lall, 2022). Throughout the years, various organisations of solidarity have emerged, such as the global “Me Too” movement which began in 2006 but gained popularity in 2017. According to their website, they are “dedicated to creating pathways for healing, justice, action and leadership” (Me Too Movement. United States, 2017. Web Archive.)

In Trinidad, there exist the Rape Crisis Society and Childline, both non-profit organizations dedicated to educating the public and fighting for the protection of women and children against perpetrators. Similarly, the Organisation for Abused and Battered Individuals

“exists to address the needs of all women and girls, men and boys, vulnerable persons and persons with disabilities within Trinidad and Tobago, the Caribbean and Latin America” (The NGO Caribbean Development Fund, 2009). Additionally, other organisations associated with the law like the Victims and Witness Support and the Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago focus on advocating for children’s rights and utilising progressive solutions to rehabilitate them and harness their full potential. Finally, there are action research projects like the Break the Silence Movement, originally launched by the Institute for Gender Development studies at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine. This initiative is dedicated to protecting children from sexual abuse and the risk of contracting the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). They encourage the testimonies of victims and their families in an attempt to break the stigma surrounding this topic as explained by the Office of the Prime Minister. However, the problem still persists even with these initiatives.

Thesis Topic

Confronting Sexual Violence in Trinidad and Tobago – an interrogation of cultural norms and which norms perpetuate this.

Rationale

Sexual violence is a prevalent issue throughout Trinidad and Tobago. It affects many people, regardless of sex, age or race. Despite the existing social movements that aim to protect and support victims as well as curb the issue, this phenomenon persists. An article published by the Trinidad and Tobago Guardian Newspaper confirmed that “the Caribbean has one of the highest incidences per capita of rape and violence against women globally” (John-Lall, 2022), proving that perpetrators continue to offend despite the attempts at deterring their crimes. Much of the literature on this topic addresses a wide variety of risk factors. However, there is not

nearly as much attention placed on the relevance of culture and furthermore, which cultural practices contribute to the continuation of these crimes. Therefore, the researcher would like to enhance the previously conducted research in an attempt to create a more holistic understanding and ultimately curb the issue.

Parameters

There were few parameters identified during this research. Firstly, the research was limited to Trinidad and Tobago. This study was not extended to the rest of the Caribbean since each country would possess unique cultural beliefs and practices which would be too numerous to identify and analyse individually. Furthermore, due to the high numbers of sexual violence cases in this country compared to the rest of the world, the research conducted and results obtained would be pertinent in creating a more detailed understanding of the reasoning behind these statistics. Moreover, the age range allowed for the completion of the questionnaire only included adults due to the fact that minors are not legally able to consent. Additionally, the questionnaire only allowed for thirty responses due to the time limit for completing this research paper. Finally, time constraint was also the reason for which the researcher did not include other aspects of culture such as art. However, the most pertinent factors were adequately included and investigated.

Research Questions

1. Which cultural beliefs and practices contribute to the continuation of sexual violence in Trinidad and Tobago?
2. How are the identified cultural beliefs and practices specifically related to the perpetuation of sexual violence in Trinidad and Tobago?

Objectives

The researcher aims to identify the cultural beliefs and practices in Trinidad and Tobago that contribute to the perpetuation of sexual violence.

Method and Structure

The methodology for data collection and analysis would incorporate a questionnaire as well as secondary sources. The secondary sources will include but not be limited to journals, articles and official reports. The distribution of questionnaires to persons throughout the country will provide a measure of how people view the connections explored. Although the target audience involves people ages eighteen to twenty-five, the questionnaire will allow those above that range to participate as well to ensure a more inclusive result. Trinidad is a culturally diverse nation and perspectives on topics like sexual abuse may vary depending on familial backgrounds, personal experiences etc. These questionnaires will provide insight into the minds of these adults and determine whether they view traditions or moral beliefs and practices within their social and familial circle as contributing to the continuation of this phenomenon. The results will be interpreted by the researcher using previous studies conducted about sexual violence.

Chapter Outline

This research paper will consist of three chapters. Chapter one will serve as a literature review and will include a definition of sexual violence, some of the most popularly studied risk factors associated with this phenomenon as well as some of the existing information on culture as a significant risk factor in the perpetuation of sexual violence. Chapter two will be a presentation of the questionnaire results. Finally, chapter three will attempt to link the existing literature to the opinions obtained and presented in chapter two.

CHAPTER ONE –THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Sexual violence is an issue that is rampant throughout the world and especially in Trinidad. The National Women’s Health Survey for Trinidad and Tobago conducted in 2017 concluded that “about one in ten of ever-partnered women living in Trinidad and Tobago have experienced sexual partner violence in their lifetime” (Pemberton, Cecile, and Joel Joseph, 2017). The study also declared that “over 30 percent of ever-partnered women in Trinidad and Tobago have experienced either physical or sexual partner violence or both, at least once in their lifetimes” (Pemberton, Cecile, and Joel Joseph, 2017). Furthermore, a non-profit organisation entitled, “Darkness to Light” published a document containing statistics related to the magnitude of this issue, as well as risk factors and ramifications on victims. The organisation mentioned that one in seven girls and one in twenty-five boys will experiences sexual abuse before their eighteenth birthday. Furthermore, the Primero Child Protection Information Management System (CPIMS) confirmed that child sexual abuse is especially prevalent in Trinidad and Tobago and is largely influenced by the upsurge of poverty and socioeconomic disruption.

They added that these events have been triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic. Research has alluded to the risk of the escalation of child sexual abuse since this. Doctor George Nikolaidis elucidated this concern, indicating that a large portion of sexual predation occurs within the home. The Darkness to Light Organization indicated that almost one third of children who experience child sexual abuse are victims of members of their own families. Due to the global lockdowns which began in 2020, many children were inevitably left in the unsupervised care of their perpetrators. Moreover, Dr. Nikolaidis elaborated that other vulnerable groups of children, including the sickly and disabled as well as child migrants,

refugees and asylum seekers may be experiencing abuse but may not be able to report the crimes due to the lack of pathways of assistance and mechanisms of response. However, the prevalence of sexual violence was not only limited to children. The Pan American Health Organization confirmed in 2021 that during the Covid-19 pandemic, “there was a 140% increase in cases of abuse of women and girls reported to the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS) in 2020” (Pan American Health Organization, 2021). Additionally, a study about intimate partner violence since the pandemic suggested that “COVID-19 created a milieu conducive for a domestic violence surge with the background of an existing high prevalence rate compounded by confinement and possibly increased consumption of alcohol and drugs at home” (Khan, Raveed and Syriah David, 2021).

Moreover, numerous categories of risk factors contributing to the continuation of this phenomenon have been identified. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention highlighted individual, relationship, community and societal factors. Individual factors include alcohol and drug abuse, coercive sexual fantasies and exposure to sexually explicit content. Relationship factors encompass family histories of abuse and violence, poor parent-child relationships, association with sexually aggressive, hyper masculine, and delinquent peers etc. Community factors comprise conditions previously mentioned like poverty, in addition to complacency regarding sanctions against sexual violence perpetrators, the lack of institutional support from police and judicial system and others. Finally, societal factors such as high crime levels, norms that encourage male superiority, women’s sexual submissiveness and inferiority all play significant parts in this issue. Some of these factors were also identified in Khan and David’s study. They included: economic stress due to events like unemployment, increased consumption of drugs and alcohol, isolation, lack of platonic relationships and a desire for

control and power in relationships. Extended periods of quarantine and telecommuting measures created physical restraints that ensured that victims could neither access physical support resources nor seek solace from their family, friends etc. One study deciphered that risk factors with three component parts emerged during the pandemic. They were “the risk of victimisation, the risk of new aggressions and the risk of lethality” (Acosta, 2020). Furthermore, the study identified the main risk factor as being the “perception of loss of control over the woman who is the victim of the aggressor’s violence” (Sheehan et al., 2014).

Culture can be defined as “a set of shared and enduring meaning, values, and beliefs that characterise national, ethnic, or other groups and orient their behaviour” (Mulholland 1991). There are various aspects of culture, including music, religion, government, etc. “Apart from sexual gratification itself, sexual violence against women is often a result of unequal power equations both real and perceived between men and women and is also strongly influenced by cultural factors and values” (Kalra, Gurvinder and Dinesh Bhugra, 2013). Culture is acknowledged as a potential risk factor for the perpetuation of sexual violence. However, when compared to the results published online through journals or case studies, it is often not listed with the seemingly more popular factors, indicating a significant gap in research.

Each country of the Caribbean region is strongly impacted by their unique socio-cultural experiences and historical influences. Events like slavery and East Indian immigration have paved the way for current generations to embrace traditional beliefs and practices, including but not limited to religion, language, literature, etc. However, besides these positive influences, there also exists a shared history of physical, mental and sexual abuse at the hands of the ancestors’ oppressors. The Brown University library conducted an exhibit about the

representations of sex and slavery in the Caribbean basin. The information published included the acknowledgment of the tendencies of white men or slave masters to use African female sexuality as justification to initiate coerced relationships. These relationships mostly involved the sexualisation and objectification of these women to consequently invoke animalistic desires of men. The slave masters also considered this as justification for rape and abuse. It can be concluded that Caribbean culture has been tainted by the beliefs and treatments forced upon the ancestors by slave masters and privileged white men. Therefore, the impact of various Caribbean cultures on the continuation of violence and sexual abuse should be considered and investigated as much as other contributing factors.

A Caribbean based study conducted in 2022 mentioned patrnormative culture within the region. Some defining characteristics of males included: toughness, aggression and controlling behaviour. Furthermore, the study acknowledged that men were discouraged from being emotional and had learned from childhood that they were supposed to suppress their feelings. They were also taught that equality between men and women did not exist since they were expected to display dominance and strength over emotional intelligence. Hence, the respondents of this study found themselves struggling to regulate emotions later on in life, especially anger. Some participants recounted experiences involving peers who encouraged this behaviour because domestic violence and aggression was associated with being a real man. Another study stated that “cultural mandates, and often also legal ones, regarding the rights and privileges of the husband's role have historically legitimized his power and domination over the woman, promoting her economic dependence on him and guaranteeing him the use of violence and coercion. threats to control it” (Acosta et al.,2000).

Male dominance within families has created the idea that men are entitled to sex and

when they are denied by their partners, they have the right to seek it elsewhere or use force. A qualitative study on gender based violence in Trinidad and Tobago presented various perceptions of this phenomenon within relationships. Some survivors recounted their experiences of rape by previous partners and indicated that they felt as though they were property. One man elaborated his thoughts on sex, saying that it was a need, not a want in a relationship. He added that it was something a man “had to get” and that a lack of it could lead to violence. Another study confirmed this belief, indicating that “if a woman resists sexual intercourse, it may be perceived as a direct threat by men to their masculinity, triggering a crisis of male identity and contributing to sexual control and violence as it is seen as a way of resolving this crisis” (Kalra, Gurvinder and Dinesh Bhugra, 2013). One survivor indicated that “we were taught to be submissive, and that Indian wives must be submissive, and you know she must be at home cooking and cleaning, looking after the children. You know because we are taught that, in church, you are taught as a woman to be submissive, and then you would wonder how could you be more submissive when your husband is beating you” (Hosein et al. 2018). Religion has proved to be an integral part of culture and ultimately, a significant risk factor. Other participants in the study added their experiences, stating that divorce was considered a sin in their religion so they stayed in abusive situations where violence escalated etc.

The sexual offences act of Trinidad and Tobago recognizes grievous sexual assault against female victims. It mentions penetration of the vagina or anus by an object, the penis or body parts. The law claims to be gender neutral but the phrasing of these conditions indicate that perpetrators are solely men. Further bias is identified in section 25. It is mentioned that in proceedings that require proof of sexual intercourse, it does not need to be

determined by the emission of seed but proof of penetration only. Finally, section 4 explains that the offence of rape is when the accused has sexual intercourse with the complainant under various conditions. Hence, it can be concluded that women cannot be convicted of rape since they do not possess the body parts identified within the laws. Whether this is due to the difference in statistics regarding female versus male victims or because of preconceived cultural bias, it plays a significant role in the marginalisation of male victims, as well as the continuation of the phenomenon.

Furthermore, a survey about societal attitudes towards members of the LBGTQIA+ community deciphered that “75 percent of respondents believe that violence against gays or sexual minorities constitutes discrimination” (CADRES May 2013). One local online newspaper poll asked citizens whether they thought the government should grant equal rights to members of the gay community, to which fifty percent of respondents indicated no. Religion constitutes an integral part of culture and society and inevitably affects the attitudes and reactions of the public, including but not limited to law enforcement officers. Moreover, many religious environments do not affirm, nor tolerate homosexuality of any kind, which is a possible explanation for the hateful attitudes shown towards homosexuals. This was confirmed in an article published by the Trinidad Guardian Newspaper which elaborated on the experiences of gay citizens in society. The article mentioned instances of bullying and harassment by the police and strangers, in addition to physical violence. One individual expressed his concerns which were published in the article as well. With a family heavily involved in the church community and homophobic acquaintances, he fears stigmatisation and alienation if he reveals his sexual orientation publicly. These are only a few of the confessions published. More persons have been coming forward with their experiences of discrimination,

bullying and abuse, to the point that “head of the Victims and Witness Support Unit of the Police Service Margaret Sampson-Browne is calling on the police to be more compassionate towards LGBT citizens and to take their reports seriously” (Kowlessar, 2014).

Although Trinidad and Tobago is a singular nation, there exist a variety of races, ethnicities and ultimately, cultures. It is also important to consider that culture may not be limited to the above mentioned subsets. Cultural beliefs, traditions and practices are often subject to individual interpretations and alterations. Therefore, to conduct more thorough research, the researcher has decided upon the use of questionnaires which will be distributed to adults of varying racial backgrounds throughout the country. Rothschild’s introduction to sociology perpetuates the idea that the family is the first agent of socialisation, hence, it is inevitable for youths to adopt some traditional mind-sets of their family members through association, although this is subject to change with time. This method will be used to obtain a more holistic understanding of the impact of culture on the mind-sets of generations concerning the taboo topic of sexual violence. Finally, secondary sources will be incorporated throughout this project to support and provide context and insight regarding any claims made or results obtained.

All things considered, it is the researcher’s overall objective to provide a new perspective into the role of culture in the continuation of sexual violence against individuals in Trinidad. It is also anticipated that other researchers will be able to build upon the deciphered results of this project and educate the public so they can be more vigilant and active in the prevention of this phenomenon in society and the protection one another.

CHAPTER TWO – PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

A questionnaire consisting of twenty-one questions, nine closed ended and twelve open ended, was constructed via google forms and distributed online to adults online throughout the country. It entailed questions regarding how Trinidadians view the topic of sexual violence and some popular cultural beliefs or traditions that they think further perpetuates this phenomenon. This chapter will serve as a presentation of these responses.

Twenty-one (21) respondents were women whilst nine (9) were men. Thirteen (13) participants were between the ages of 18 to 22, seven (7) were between 23 and 27, three (3) were between 28 and 32 and seven (7) were 33 and above. Sixteen (16) persons were Indo-Trinidadian, seven (7) were Afro-Trinidadian, six (6) were mixed and one (1) was Syrian.

Regarding their thoughts on the prevalence of sexual violence in Trinidad, twenty-six (26) participants believed that it was very prevalent whilst four (4) thought it was somewhat prevalent. Respondents were then presented with a list of risk factors for sexual violence and asked to rank them based on frequency. Eleven (11) persons selected sexual indoctrination through the media as the least common risk factor. Two (2) persons indicated the lack of institutional support, six (6) people chose blended family dynamics, one (1) person stated poor parent/child relationships, two (2) said poverty and eight (8) persons ranked cultural practices as the least frequent. Most participants (9) thought that the presence of other forms of abuse was the most frequent risk factor. Cultural factors, societal norms encouraging male superiority and female submissiveness/ inferiority and sexual indoctrination through the media amounted to twelve (12) participants, four (4) per aspect whilst poverty and poor parent/ child relationships accounted for six (6) participants, three (3) per aspect. Two (2) persons selected

the lack of institutional support and one (1) selected blended family dynamics.

Participants were then asked their views on the role that culture played in the perpetuation of sexual violence. One said, “the religious institutions of Trinidad in general perpetuate false piety in women where policing behaviour is seen as culturally righteous. Therefore, it becomes easy to create a system of blaming women especially for enticing men into committing sexual violence - even extending to young girls who are new to the concept of sexuality are warned to avoid beguiling men which reinforces a lax culture when policing perpetrators while hyper-policing young girls. Also boys experience sexual violence especially at younger ages which in general is covered up by family and religious institutions because of the belief of ‘emasculating’. There’s also that whole thing about staining a woman’s virginity which we blame women for also”. Besides religion, others highlighted traditional beliefs like child marriage and the idea that if one partner is dependent on the other who is a breadwinner, the provider can do as they please with their partner as “payback”. Furthermore, some expressed that Trinidad has a culture of misogyny which is often trivialised and subconsciously encouraged as women are taught to be submissive to their spouses. Respondents also shed light on the importance of social image. This was said to be the cause of victim-shaming and silencing, to avoid tarnishing the abuser’s character. One person mentioned the normalisation of large age differences in relationships and the possibility that perpetrators may be employed in institutions of support. Moreover, someone acknowledged that with the development of technology and educational resources, people can now decipher how certain traditional cultural practices may be harmful. However, those against technological development may attempt to downplay the impact of their cultural beliefs on the perpetuation of sexual violence by stating that others have experienced this and “turned out fine”. Finally, someone communicated

that there will always be people who think that their culture is superior and try to enforce this onto others. Resistance may result in violence in any form.

When asked about the family's or community's reaction to a victim sharing their experience of sexual abuse within said family or community, nineteen (19) persons indicated that they would be labelled a liar. Four (4) people said that they would receive conditional support like encouragement or assistance with therapy in exchange for their silence. Besides the given responses, some participants included their own. One (1) person indicated that support would only be provided if the victim was a woman. Another said that the response would depend on the family dynamic and if the perpetrator was also the breadwinner. The following question encouraged participants to reflect on how families protected perpetrators from facing repercussions. Most respondents revealed that families would label the victim a liar or torment them, ignore allegations or try to minimise its severity in order to avoid actively confronting it. Others expressed that the perpetrator would be condemned privately on the condition that the issue would not be revealed to the public.

There was another question regarding the familial rule "obey without question" and how it facilitates the abuse of power. Some stated that this would instil fear in children or discourage them from trusting their intuition. One (1) person suggested that when children undergo traumatic experiences, they become confused and choose to remain quiet since said situation would seem to be no different than receiving regular instructions. Another participant highlighted the long term effects, being that victims would develop a submissive mentality which may perpetuate abuse in adult relationships. A similar response suggested that upon internalisation of abuse, children may develop the belief that they would have done something to deserve this treatment and in turn, they may accept further abuse silently.

Furthermore, participants were asked to identify other possible rules that may have this effect on children. Some indicated that girls are forced to change into modest clothing when men enter the home. Others said that children were conditioned into believing that they owed respect to elders, authoritative figures and those who they may be dependent on. Other popular rules mentioned included not speaking of “family issues” to anyone on the “outside” and “my house, my rules.” One person suggested that any form of corporal violence was discipline. When asked about attitudes or beliefs used to diminish the experiences of victims, similar responses were obtained. One person mentioned that “children, especially little girls should be seen, not heard.” Other respondents indicated that if someone dresses provocatively or wears a particular kind of makeup, they are asking to be violated. Others expressed that in toxic relationships, victims or parents may refuse to leave because they think that they will struggle without the relationship with the assailant. Another common response was that figures with established social images would not commit such acts. Finally, some stated that if a woman didn’t actively fight back, it equated to consent.

Moreover, participants were asked to identify the ways in which religious teachings may influence one’s perception of sexual violence. The majority of responses were centred around teachings that encouraged women to be submissive and obedient to their husbands and to endure marital problems without complaints. Some mentioned purity or modesty culture that encourages women to remain chaste and untouched before marriage. If they did not adhere to this, they did not deserve to be respected. Whereas the majority of responses were negative, few identified a positive aspect. One person elaborated, saying that “religious teachings may also have a positive impact as far as condemning sexual violence goes. Individuals who are in touch with their spiritual side and who have a clear understanding of religious texts MAY feel

very passionately about how wrong sexual violence is as hurting another human is not permissible in any of the religions in Trinidad”. When asked about other religious teachings that may perpetuate sexual violence, reactions were the same. Some indicated child marriages, purity culture and the idea that God does not give an individual more than they can bear. One participant stated that “they make it seem like sexual violence is a supernatural force that has somehow taken over the perpetrator.”

The next question asked respondents about the prevalence of sexual violence during the carnival period. The majority agreed that the occurrence of sexual violence would increase during this time. Some potential reasons included: alcohol coupled with the feeling of superiority and entitlement in men, crowded parties where the risk of drugging is higher, immodest clothing which, to some, “cancels out consent” etc. One respondent also mentioned that during this period, adults may leave their children with family members, friends or babysitters to go to parties which creates an avenue for sexual violence to occur. The following question facilitated elaboration on how the hyper sexualisation of some aspects of carnival contributes to the prevalence of sexual violence. Some participants mentioned that the type of dress during these events excites men sexually and acts as an “open invitation” for harassment. Others focused on the effects of song lyrics that objectify and sexualize women, indicating that phrases like “ah thieving a wine” and “kick in she back door” imply that consent is not needed to touch someone. Moreover, one person highlighted that youths are encouraged to venture out and violate others in an attempt to represent their idols. One person explained that the problem is not the hyper sexualisation of carnival but the outdated beliefs that are perpetuated about the festival, particularly by religious persons. This person alluded to a domino effect where perpetrators take the narrative that immodest clothing equates to a lack of self-respect and that

ultimately, the victim does not deserve the respect of others since they were “asking for it.”

The next question focused on how popular music in Trinidad may normalise sexual violence. One response summarised a common perception, saying that “the constant reinforcement and bombarding of violent lyrics may constitute to the shaping of growing minds to make them believe it’s ok to commit such acts (eg. trinibad) as well as promotes and glorifies the need to be in control or better than someone else or retaliate when things don’t go according to their way”. However, some participants disagreed that music normalizes sexual violence. Instead, they said that no amount of music alone can make individuals commit such acts. Others conveyed that sexuality does not equate sexual violence. Following these explanations, participants were asked to select the local genres that they thought normalized sexual violence the most in Trinidad. The most popular response was “Trinibad dancehall”, selected by twenty-seven (27) persons. This was followed closely by chutney, chosen by thirteen (13) persons.

Next, the researcher highlighted the influence of political leaders’ attitudes on gender inequality and violence. One person indicated that the country’s justice system was “trash” and that leaders show no interest in the wellbeing of the citizens. This perception was indirectly supported by others who communicated that there are leaders who preach equality and respect towards women but are exposed for infidelity, domestic violence or their involvement in sex-trafficking schemes soon after. The majority thought that local leaders trivialise important matters and only exude nonchalance which further perpetuates this phenomenon. Additionally, participants were asked to select some attitudes that they thought police officers demonstrated in response to gender inequality and sexual violence. Each of the given options gathered more than twenty (20) selections. These included: sexual bias against male and female victims,

discrimination against LGBTQIA+ members, lack of acceptance of different gender expressions and insensitivity to reports of sexual violence and abuse.

Finally, persons were asked to provide one suggestion of how we as a society should proceed to help reduce the occurrence of sexual violence. Many suggested creating open and accepting environments for children to speak up against abuse, providing sexual education in schools, enforcing stricter punishments for perpetrators, self-defence classes as well as support groups for victims.

CHAPTER 3 – ESTABLISHING THE LINK

Chapter one of this research paper established the foundation of understanding of the major risk factors associated with sexual violence. The questionnaire distributed to the thirty adult participants throughout Trinidad and Tobago comprised questions related to the role of various cultural elements, beliefs and practices in the continuation of sexual violence in Trinidad. This chapter will further connect the results with published literature to demonstrate their specific roles in the perpetuation of this issue.

The first cultural aspect was family traditions, inclusive of beliefs, practices and behaviour influenced by social norms. The Caribbean News Global website states that “rape as a very specific physical form of violence against women and girls is rooted in a complex set of patriarchal beliefs, power, and control that continue to create a social environment in which sexual violence is pervasive and normalized. Such “culture” is perpetuated with the use of misogynistic language, objectification of bodies, and glamorization of violence” (Boodram, 2020). Regarding the mentality of family members, results indicated beliefs centred on male dominance and female submissiveness within the home, female dependence, the concept of female dress equating consent, automatic respect to elders and those in positions of power etc. It was determined that such beliefs often encourage children to accept abuse because the adults were older, wiser and therefore superior. This also discouraged them from trusting their intuition and ultimately contributed to the confusion they’d face regarding why they were treated this way. Furthermore, these lack of developments would translate into accepting similar treatment in adult relationships. Women were also intimidated into silence because of guilt and fear for themselves, their children and their future if they left their partner, especially if he was a breadwinner. Moreover, respondents stated that some think that it is impossible for

a woman to rape a man and that when they are “raped” it is seen as a victory rather than a traumatic event. Results also highlighted that girls were taught to dress modestly among men to avoid harassment and that these situations facilitated male sexual entitlement and honour. This domino effect would result in a society where women are often blamed for their abuse and men are put on a pedestal and given the benefit of the doubt.

The second aspect was religion. “The inferiority of women conveyed by religious discourse is a form of symbolic violence, enforced through social representations” (Tomita, 2004, p. 175). One study explained that religious teachings that women should be obedient and passive only contributes to the perpetuation of violence in all forms and that “religious discourse, sacred texts and their interpretations, practices of exclusion and sexist discrimination from church towards women, collaborate to maintain this violence” (Ströher, 2009, p. 101). Moreover, “the patriarchal religions tend to legitimize the subservience of women by linking them to evil, the deviant, to disorder and moral weakness, leaving them at the mercy of punishments touted as natural” (Citeli & Nunes, 2010, p. 6). Respondents to the questionnaire expressed that certain religious beliefs enforce the idea that after marriage, the woman becomes her husband’s property, meaning that he can do as he pleases with her. Others elaborated on variations of this belief, inclusive of modesty culture. Others mentioned the beliefs that these events are punishments for sin and that supernatural forces overtake men to commit these crimes, thereby excusing their behaviour and shifting blame onto victims. Overall, most respondents agreed that religion encourages passiveness and submissiveness of women, obedience of children to their parents or elders and tolerance of marital issues. They are often blamed for their misfortune and encouraged to forgive their abusers as it is what God would do. Hence, this allows perpetrators to violate others without repercussions.

Moreover, one of the most popular cultural festivals was discussed. Carnival is a celebration that involves costumes, music and parties. In 2017, a Japanese pianist, Asami Nagakiya was strangled and murdered in Trinidad during the Carnival period. In response to this horrific crime, the former mayor of Port-of-Spain commented that “women have a responsibility to ensure they are not abused during the Carnival season. It’s a matter of, if she was still in her costume — I think that’s what I heard — let your imagination roll”. The suggestion that Asami caused her own death due to her Carnival costume caused an uproar. In one article, the author expressed her disgust with the responses to Asami’s death, including tweets like, “dress how you want to be addressed”. The questionnaire yielded similar results, including the idea that immodesty cancels consent coupled with the high levels of intoxication and promiscuous dancing during these events. “11 out of the 16 studies that included intoxication level found that intoxicated victims are blamed more often than sober victims for an acquaintance rape and there is a linear increase in victim blame with the level of victim intoxication” (Gravelin et al., 2019). Additionally, the more drunk the perpetrator, the more participants excused their behaviour. Some admitted that each year, religious folks increasingly perpetuate these harmful perceptions and thereby excuse perpetrators’ actions. The victim blaming and minimization of experiences would make victims feel at fault for their assault, they may feel ashamed and afraid to share their stories due to the condescending and disgusted reactions they may face. This subconscious protection of perpetrators will then encourage them to use these events as a weapon to assault victims.

Additionally, this aspect introduced the role of music. “Misogynistic lyrics act as a stimulus that has the potential to evoke aggressive behavior and arousal that provides the conditions for female victimization by men” (Hyatt, Breke, Miller and Zeichner, 2017). Many

participants acknowledged that the lyrics of local songs may normalize and promote violence and the further objectification of women. Some indicated that sex is seen as a means of exercising power and ownership of a woman, which is a common theme in some genres like dancehall. The idolization of these artists and the internalization of derogatory lyrics encourages misogyny and ultimately, sexual violence. In fact, a study conducted by Barongan and Nagayama Hall (1995) concluded that thirty-seven percent of participants who were exposed to misogynistic rap made the decision to commit acts of sexual violence. Furthermore, one study addressed the relationship between Calypso, Soca and sex, stating that the performance of certain songs is similar to catcalling as it leaves “nothing to the imagination in their verbal assault of each woman’s anatomy and sexual attributes” (Hernandez-Ramdwar, 2008). It is evident that this music and the enthusiasm surrounding it minimizes women’s struggles and perpetuates the idea that they are objects of pleasure and are subsequently undeserving of respect. Sexual violence is further pushed since the artists who create these types of music are not held accountable.

Another factor for consideration was politics and political leaders. It is known that political leaders are responsible for making decisions for the well-being of a country and its’ citizens. However, regarding sexual violence in Trinidad and Tobago, respondents indicated that instead of addressing the prevalence of this issue or actively attempting to curb its’ occurrence, they choose to degrade one another on national television which shows how they also resort to violence. One person highlighted the Prime Minister’s response to domestic abuse cases in 2017. The Prime Minister stated, “you called on the Prime Minister to do something about crime. I am not in your bedroom; I am not in your choice of men”. Comments like these contribute to the trivialization of sexual violence abuse. They minimize the severity of related

issues like sex trafficking and foster an environment of condemnation and shame for victims. This may further perpetuate sexual violence as impressionable citizens may adopt this mentality and turn a blind eye to the issue.

The last factor was the attitude of authorities. Participants felt strongly about officers being biased against male and female victims respectively, discriminating against LGBTQIA+ members, being unaccepting of different gender expressions and sexual orientations and being insensitive to reports of sexual violence and abuse. It was expressed that Trinidad and Tobago's laws do not acknowledge women raping men. Furthermore, same sex marriage is unrecognized in the country. Also, there are no protective laws regarding LGBTQIA+ discrimination. This may facilitate and lack of respect in the eyes of authorities and may instil fear of being ridiculed, shamed, jailed or beaten and killed. The lack of representation and solidarity may intimidate victims into silence which further perpetuates sexual violence against them.

Overall, it can be established that a variety of cultural factors including familial and religious beliefs, stigmatisation of festivals, derogatory musical genres and lyrics, lack of political representation and attitudes of officers of the law significantly contribute to the perpetuation of sexual violence in Trinidad and Tobago in numerous ways.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that sexual violence is a prevalent issue, especially in Trinidad and Tobago. It continues to be perpetuated for a variety of reasons. Cultural norms, although not significantly recognized in literature as a leading risk factor, has been proven to contribute to the continuation of this phenomenon. Some of the most pertinent cultural aspects identified were familial and community beliefs, religious teachings, the stigmatization of cultural festivals, particularly Carnival, local music, political representation and law enforcement. The first facet instills beliefs of male dominance/superiority and female submission whilst actively protecting perpetrators from facing consequences by diminishing the experiences of victims. Religion encourages obedience, patience and forgiveness which triggers emotions of guilt and shame in victims who then choose not to report the crime. Victim blaming through the sexualisation of festivals and women's dress, dancing and intoxication levels further enforces this unsafe and unsupportive environment. Local music pushes derogatory lyrics which are internalized and perpetuated against the nation's women in the form of sexual violence. Political leaders' lack of example and acknowledgment of the severity of the issue trivializes the matter and influences others to turn a blind eye. Finally, law enforcement officers lack of sensitivity, non-acceptance of non-traditional gender expressions and sexualities, discrimination against LGBTQIA+ members as well as men and women respectively intimidate victims into remaining quiet out of fear and shame. Trinidadian cultural norms play a definitive role in the perpetuation of sexual violence throughout the country.

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APPENDIX A – SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRE

Culture and Sexual Violence

Letter of Introduction

Dear Participant,

My name is Kristn Mohammed and I am currently in my third and final year of study at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine. I am enrolled in the HUMN 3099 course which involves producing a research project about a pertinent social issue within the Caribbean region. My chosen topic is entitled, “Confronting sexual violence in Trinidad and Tobago - an interrogation of cultural norms and which norms perpetuate this.” A recent article published by the Trinidad and Tobago Guardian Newspaper revealed that the Caribbean has one of the highest incidences per capita of rape and violence against women worldwide. Despite the diligent efforts of citizens to create awareness of this phenomenon, provide support to survivors and evoke change, sexual violence and abuse within the nation unfortunately remains steady. This questionnaire is designed to determine how you view the relevance of cultural beliefs and practices within varying social and familial circles with regard to sexual violence and abuse. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this questionnaire.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this questionnaire is entirely voluntary. If you are willing to engage in this study, please attempt to be completely transparent and thorough with your responses to ensure that the researcher can effectively process and understand your perspective.

Additionally, please note that you can deny and withdraw consent at any point without repercussions.

Informed Consent

By selecting "Yes" to the question below, the participant acknowledges that they have read and understood the information presented thus far and give their consent to participate in this anonymous and voluntary questionnaire.

Confidentiality

All information provided by the participant will remain confidential and anonymous. Responses will only be viewed by the researcher and her research supervisor.

Contact

Should you have any queries or concerns regarding the study, you may contact any of the following persons:

Kristn Mohammed (Researcher)- kristn.mohammed@my.uwi.edu

Dr. Sue-Ann Barratt (Research Supervisor)- sue-ann.barratt@sta.uwi.edu

1. Are you willing to participate in this questionnaire? If no, thank you for your time. If yes, please proceed to the following questions.
 - Yes, I am willing
 - No, I am not willing

2. What is your gender?
 - Man
 - Woman
 - Non-binary
 - Transgender
 - Other

3. To what age group do you belong?
 - 13-17
 - 18-22
 - 23-27
 - 28-32
 - 33+

4. What is your ethnicity?
 - Indo-Trinidadian
 - Afro-Trinidadian
 - Mixed
 - European
 - Chinese
 - Syrian
 - Other _____

5. How prevalent do you think sexual abuse is in Trinidad and Tobago?
 - Very prevalent
 - Somewhat prevalent
 - Not prevalent
 - Other _____

6. Please rank the following risk factors for sexual violence perpetration, with 8 being the most common and 1 being the least common.
 - Sexual indoctrination through the media
 - Other forms of abuse in the home (substance/drug, physical, verbal, psychological)
 - Lack of institutional support
 - Blended family dynamics
 - Poor parent/child relationships

- Poverty
 - Societal norms encouraging male superiority and female submissiveness or inferiority
 - Cultural practices
7. What role do you think Trinidad's varying cultural beliefs and practices play in the continuation of sexual violence?
-
8. How do you think family/community members may respond to a victim if said victim reports sexual abuse within the family or community?
- They would be labelled a liar
 - They would be disowned immediately
 - They would receive conditional support (eg. encouragement and assistance with therapy or counselling in exchange for their silence)
 - They would receive full support in whatever course of action they choose, including but not limited to reporting the crime, publicly speaking on their experience etc.
 - They would be ignored completely
 - Other _____
-
9. How do you think families within the country actively protect predators within their circle from facing repercussions?
-
10. How do you think the rule, "obey without question", given by some parents to children, may allow for an abuse of power over those children?
-
11. What other rules in the family do you think may contribute to abuse of power in general or sexual abuse in particular?
-
12. What do you think are some popular attitudes and beliefs used to diminish the experiences of victims?
-
13. How do you think religious teachings or practices may influence an individual's beliefs about sexual violence?
-

14. What religious teachings or practices do you think may be most influential? Please specify whether these perceived effects are positive or negative.

15. What do you think is the prevalence of sexual violence during the Carnival period?

16. How do you think the hyper sexualisation of some aspects of Carnival, such as dress, dance and song lyrics, contributes to the prevalence of sexual violence?

17. How do you think popular music in Trinidad and Tobago may normalise sexual violence in the society?

18. Which popular local musical genres do you think normalise sexual violence within the society? Tick all that apply.

- Chutney
- Soca
- “Trinibad” Dancehall
- Calypso
- Rock
- Steelband and Parang

19. How do you think political leaders' attitudes and behaviour influence citizens' responses to gender inequality and sexual violence?

20. What do you think are the attitudes of police officers in response to gender inequality and sexual violence? Please tick all that apply.

- Lack of acceptance of different gender expressions and sexual orientations
- Discrimination against members of the LGBTQIA+ communities
- Sexist bias against female victims of sexual violence
- Sexist bias against male victims of sexual violence
- Insensitive response to reports of sexual violence

21. Please provide one suggestion of how we as a society should proceed to help reduce the occurrence of sexual violence.
