



OFFICE OF THE PERMANENT SECRETARY

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May 25, 2023

Ms. Jacqui Sampson-Meiguel
Clerk of the House
Office of the Parliament
Parliamentary Complex
Cabildo Building
St. Vincent Street
PORT OF SPAIN

Dear Ms. Sampson-Meiguel,

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)

Reference is made to your letter of ref: Parl: 14/3/69 Vol. VI dated April 24, 2023 on the subject at caption. In this regard, please find enclosed the Ministry's response as requested.

Kindly note an electronic copy will also be forwarded to coth@tpparliament.org.

The delay in submission is regretted.

Sincerely,

Permanent Secretary (Ag.)

PERMANENT SECRETARY
MINISTRY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
AND FAMILY SERVICES

Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration 5th Report: 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)

MINISTRY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY SERVICES' Response

Joint Select Committee on Social Services And Public Administration

May 2023

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Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration 5th Report: 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)

1.1 OVERVIEW

The Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration (Including Education, Health, Gender, Tourism, Public Administration, Labour, Culture, Community Development and other Social Services) undertook *an inquiry into the State's capacity to provide support for victims of Domestic Violence and Family Conflicts (with a specific focus on the availability of support mechanisms during the COVID-19 pandemic)*. The Fifth Report was presented in the House of Representatives on March 24th 2023 and in the Senate on March 28th, 2023.

In preparation for the hearing, the Joint Select Committee requests from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services (MSDFS), written responses to the recommendations/comments contained in the 5th Report of the JSC under four (4) main objectives:

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

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

Objective III: 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

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

In this regard, the MSDFS formally submits the following responses to the list of questions under the aforementioned objectives.

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

1.2 FINDINGS

4.1.10 The Committee commends the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS) for the establishment of the Special Victims Department (SVD) as a separate Unit in January 2021. It was learnt that the Unit comprises the Child Protection Unit (CPU), the Gender Based Violence Unit (GBVU) and the Sexual Offences Unit (SOU).

4.1.11 Increased avenues for reporting Domestic Violence, amendments to the Gender Based Violence Act and increased awareness drives, resulted in an increase in cases reported for the period under investigation. While there has been a recorded increase of reports for this period, the Committee also noted that there is still an instance of underreporting which may ultimately misrepresent the actual level of Domestic Violence in the country.

4.1.12 Additionally, in terms of under-reporting, the Committee learnt that the Pandemic impacted DV investigations due to the restriction of movement of persons. Investigations were also disrupted by persons placed in quarantine and the inability to access persons to complete the investigations.

4.1.13 The Committee noted some data gaps for specific criteria namely, additional demographic information, recidivism, total number of protection orders issued, number of persons who requested verbal warnings instead of pressing charges and follow up data showcasing their present positions. The data gaps also included the impact of intervention strategies on victims and survivors.

1.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

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

MSDFS' Comment:

The MSDFS considers the establishment of the National Register of Vulnerable Persons (NRVP) an essential measure in preventing and reducing poverty and vulnerability. The

NRVP is intended to be a cutting-edge computerised database that will be used to collect, store, and process vital information on vulnerable people on a single platform. It would improve the coordination of activities within the social sector, enhance the overall efficiency of the country’s social protection system, and facilitate the rapid response to emergencies/shocks and adverse situations of vulnerable groups. This project commenced in May 2022 and is being undertaken through a collaborative arrangement with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which hired a Consultant – The University of the West Indies HEU, Centre for Health Economics (UWI-HEU) – to pursue the same. In this regard, the Ministry’s Social Investigation’s Division (SID) continues to coordinate the work of the MSDFS’ team to provide technical feedback to the consultant – UWI-HEU – on this project. A brief summary of major works carried out as at April 2023 is provided:

Deliverable/Activity	Date completed/expected
Inception Report	May 24 th , 2022
Review and Gap Analysis	July 18 th , 2022
Review/Recommendations on Vulnerability Measurement/Process	August 24 th , 2022
Develop Draft Design	September 20 th , 2022
Present report	February 20 th , 2023
Final Design of Register	May 31 st , 2023
Demo of the Implementation of Register	June 05 th , 2023
Development of Standing Operating Procedures	June 30 th , 2023
Knowledge Transfer	July – August, 2023
Validation of Register (Test Register in real time)	July 31 st , 2023
Close-off Report	July 31 st , 2023
Meeting of Steering committee to oversee the establishment and operationalization of the NRVP	Monthly/Ongoing
Meeting of High-level Technical Committee	Monthly/Ongoing

Subsequent to the establishment of the NRVP, several components of the project will need to be effected to fully operationalise the NRVP, which include:

- *Populating the NRVP* - the NRVP will be populated utilising both new and existing data on the vulnerable population of Trinidad and Tobago. As a result, data will be migrated from several existing databases maintained by government Ministries/Agencies/Bodies and other key stakeholders engaged in social protection initiatives. Additionally, a data collection tool has been developed to capture primary data on vulnerable persons not already included in the aforementioned databases, which will be done via a census-styled data collection exercise.

- *Procurement of Information Technology Infrastructure* – there is a need for robust information technology to drive the implementation of the NRVP.
- *Knowledge Transfer/Capacity Building* – this is a critical component for ensuring the smooth and effective implementation of the NRVP.
- *Implementation of Communication Strategy* – there is a need for the implementation of a comprehensive education and public awareness strategy to support the NRVP's roll-out. The strategy will make provisions for stakeholders' sensitization sessions at multiple levels.
- *Finalisation of Institutional Framework/Governance Structure* – additional personnel will be hired to handle the NRVP's day-to-day operations as well as to assist with the data collection, cleaning, and merging exercises required to fully implement the NRVP. This will be consistent with the approved structure of the Division/Sub-Division tasked with the NRVP's operations.

It should be noted that several aspects of the above-mentioned components are currently in progress, while others are projected to commence once ownership of the NRVP is transferred from the UNDP to the MSDFS by September 2023.

II. Objective II: To examine the State's policies, projects and initiatives aimed at providing support for Domestic Violence victims during the period March 2020 – March 2022

1.4 FINDINGS

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

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

- i. Despite the restrictions implemented, most support services continued during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ii. COVID-19 regulations had an impact on the delivery of programmes and support services during the identified period. One of the positive impacts discussed was the opportunity to leverage virtual platforms to engage persons especially for education and awareness drives. Traditional modes of communication, such as telephone, television and radio were also utilized during this time.
- iii. While work continued in most cases, restrictions negatively impacted the extent of which organizations could fully support victims and survivors. Lockdown

regulations affected the manner in which victims and survivors could reach out for support to and report incidences of Domestic Violence they were experiencing.

- iv. Virtual Court proceedings had a positive impact on victims and survivors as they felt safer and experienced an overall sense of comfort as they were no longer in a physical court room with the offender.
- v. While the use of digital tools was heightened – access to technology was difficult for some. For example, victims and survivors had no access to devices or internet to attend court. Others who lived with their abusers may not have been able to reach out for support due to being monitored. Some victims/survivors attempted to find alternative and creative ways to access the help they needed.

1.5 RECOMMENDATION

- G. Within the next six months, there should be an increase of prevention and Intervention strategies (through training programmes, psycho-social support, education and empowerment) targeted specifically for men. Additionally, the development of more widespread mentorship programmes for boys and men is important. These programmes can be developed and facilitated by both Public and Private Sector agencies.

MSDFS' Comment:

The NFSD will continue to provide psychosocial support through outreach activities and workshops aimed at men and boys. This includes partnerships with the Ministry of Sport and Community Development on the MPOWER Series, as well as, collaboration with the Trinidad and Tobago Prison Service under its Inmates Development Programme (IDP), and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) Youth Programme inclusive of one-on-one counselling for young men. Additionally, the NFSD will host its Parenting Programme for Men, and for 2023 will introduce a Podcast series specifically aimed at men's /young men's issues such as financial management and the lure of the gang culture.

- 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.

MSDFS' Comment:

The M&E Division has assessed all programmes in receipt of NGO Subventions and also provided recommendations to improve their efficiency and effectiveness. This is to ensure that the intended impact will be achieved by the various target groups. During fiscal 2023, the Ministry's M&E Division is continuing to embark on follow up actions on these recommendations presented and a timeframe is to be developed in the short, medium and long term to mitigate those gaps. Furthermore, the MSDFS will be

conducting a Process Evaluation of all social programmes in the Public Sector. The findings of this report will provide recommendations on the duplicity of social programmes, as well as, the mechanisms to be put in place to improve programme implementation and effectiveness.

Additionally, the M&E Division has developed an online M&E Platform that monitors the performance of the MSDFS at all results levels (impact, outcome and output). This tool was presented to the Inter-American Development Bank, the Ministry of Planning and Development, and the Ministry of Digital Transformation. The feedback given was that the MSDFS is on the right track with respect to measuring performance and it is proposed that similar methods should be adopted by other Ministries with the assistance of the MSDFS' M&E Division based on this tool.

New programmes or projects developed under the Ministry are now created with the Ministry's M&E Framework embedded in them. This seeks to assist project implementers in the respective Divisions/Units of the Ministry to measure the efficiency and effectiveness of the programmes and the collation of the relevant data needed for decision-making at the requisite time. The Ministry notes that data sharing efforts can be explored with the agency that manages the *Gender-Based Violence Consolidated Database* for more data-driven programmes/ interventions design.

- I. Regular, mandatory follow up and contact with persons affected by protection orders (victims and perpetrators) by social workers and the TTPS to monitor compliance and for assessing the need for further support and intervention.

MSDFS' Comment:

The National Family Services Division (NFSD) of the Ministry maintains telephone and face-to-face communication with clients when referred by the Court, some of whom may have Protection Orders. The direct monitoring and other responsibilities, however, fall under the remit of the TTPS. NFSD works closely with the TTPS in ensuring that its clients receives support.

- J. Increased electronic monitoring for repeat offenders of domestic violence is needed. This electronic monitoring system can be expected by the end of the next fiscal year (2023-2024) and should be a collaborative effort among the Judiciary, Ministry of National Security and the TTPS.

III. OBJECTIVE III: 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

1.6 FINDINGS

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

- A. Despite allocations provided by the State, many shelters state that the funds received are insufficient to efficiently manage daily operations. Shelters are closing primarily due to a lack of funding. These closures also impact the remaining shelters as the present (limited) capacity becomes further strained. While it was mentioned that Government intends to open more shelters, NGOs have stated that there needs to be more support for the shelters that currently exists.
- B. There is an overall shortage of safe houses and shelters especially for minority groups (LGBTQI23+ and migrants) as well as male victims of Domestic Violence. Specifically, for the minority groups, the pandemic and its associated restrictions have highlighted the need for safe houses in addition to financial and food assistance;
- C. In some cases, there are certain restrictions that pose challenges for victims and survivors to find safe-housing. Besides capacity constraints, there are age and sex restrictions as well as limits on the length of stay placed on residents.
- D. The Committee acknowledges the development of a multi-sectorial task force by the OPM-GCA to review recommendations and develop a work plan to address gaps previously identified in a report on care at some children’s homes. The Committee learnt during the public hearing that gaps have been identified at children’s homes and places of care. Subsequently, a task force has been set up to look at the recommendations to develop a work plan. It was specifically mentioned by the OPM-GCA, that meetings with agencies and representatives have been place to deal with this issue. The task force is multi-sectoral and some services and resources have already been volunteered to rectify some of the gaps discovered.
- E. It was noted that there are still some issues concerning licensing –specifically dealing with infrastructural matters. The OPM-GCA has been discussing some of these issues regarding licensing with the CATT, dealing with infrastructure and similarly related issues. This matter has been under the consideration of the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity.
- F. Emergency and transitional homes are critically needed. While emergency shelters are a source of immediate safety short-term, Transitional housing is important to provide victims of a housing option as well as supportive services for a longer period of time.

Transitional housing facilities could give survivors the time and services needed to achieve goals for long-term safety and stability.

MSDFS' Comment:

The Ministry notes and agrees with the Findings stated. Additionally, the MSDFS is mindful that in its development of transitional homes, consideration needs to be given to all vulnerable individuals including persons with disabilities. Due to the importance and urgency of the issue, the Ministry is avidly pursuing emergency and housing initiatives (through the establishment of the Transitional and Emergency Housing Committee and collaborations with NGOs) for street dwellers, victims of natural and man-made disasters, as well as, victims of human trafficking and other vulnerable groups.

- 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.

MSDFS' Comment:

The NFSD treats with domestic violence related issues almost immediately, which begins with an assessment interview of individuals, as well as, home visits to ascertain the families' immediate needs. Should the victim make an official police report with the TTPS and with the Victims and Witness Support Unit of the TTPS, the NFSD will collaborate closely with the latter going forward. The NFSD also works along with the Non-Governmental Organization to assist in shelter accommodation if needed, as well as, the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (CATT), should children be involved in the case.

- H. Extremely high caseloads negatively impact caseworkers' ability to provide necessary support and intervention in a timely manner.

MSDFS' Comment:

The Ministry continues to work on finding the ideal caseload to caseworker ratio, as it remains aware of the human resource constraints and its impact on caseworkers' abilities to serve clients effectively. Some units/divisions of the Ministry such as the NFSD, however, have recently increased its HR capacity, specifically by adding fifteen (15) Social workers (short term) to the Division's staff complement.

1.7 RECOMMENDATIONS

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

- A. Overall increase of safe housing/shelters needed in Trinidad and Tobago. There is need for an increase of shelters specifically for abused men and boys. The state should also support the establishment of shelters that serve the LGBTQI+ community. Furthermore, in light of the growing migrant population, there should also be safe housing/shelters available. This recommendation can be pursued through a multi-ministerial approach, in collaboration with private sector stakeholders and NGOs. This should be spearheaded by the OPM-GCA in collaboration with the MSDFS.
- B. Transitional housing or Transitional housing programmes to assist survivors in the path to safety and stability is needed. Transitional housing can support economic empowerment and survivor autonomy by not only providing safe housing (a basic primary need) but by providing the tools and a foundation to establish economic self-sufficiency through ameliorative and transformative goals for their futures. The establishment of transitional homes can be initiated by the next fiscal year (2023-2024) and should also take a multi-ministerial approach with the MSDFS, OPM-GCA, MHUD as well as collaboration among private sector stakeholders and NGOs.

MSDFS' Comment:

The MSDFS is in agreement with the Committee's recommendation. The Ministry continues to provide financial support/subventions to NGOs who provide shelters and services to individuals in need. Additionally, the Ministry is in the process of establishing social displacement centres in the form of an Assessment Centre, and transitional facilities. Currently, refurbishment works are ongoing on a six-apartment building in Penal to establish emergency/transitional housing facilities. The MSDFS offers emergency/transitional housing for vulnerable persons including street dwellers, victims of natural or man-made disasters, as well as, victim of human trafficking. Also see response in (F) page 9.

- 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 MSDFS 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.

MSDFS' Comment:

See response at (H) page 10. Additionally, the Ministry continues to pursue vehemently its digitization thrust which will also lend to significant improvements in its administrative services. Currently, the Ministry is in the process of launching pilot operations of its digital platform *Integrated Social Enterprise Management System* (ISMES), at two (2) of its Local Boards namely: Tunapuna and Rio Claro. This platform will be utilized alongside the one-stop-shop Social Support and Empowerment (SSE) concept. This pilot phase is significant as it will serve as an educational tool for the MSDFS allowing the Ministry to experience, test, adjust and adapt the system. The findings from the pilot will be utilized to determine large-scale viability for complete Ministry roll-out.

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

MSDFS' Comment:

The MSDFS has established *800-HOPE*, which is a suicide prevention hotline to offer support to persons in distress including persons experiencing domestic violence. This line is managed by the NFSD and activation protocols are maintained as stated.

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

1.8 FINDINGS

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

- i. Monitoring and Evaluation of policy and programmes is usually done internally (i.e. most agencies are assessing and rating their own effectiveness of support services provided) this raises some question about the validity and accuracy of the effectiveness of support provided.

MSDFS' Comment:

The Ministry's M&E Division developed the criteria based on a standardized scoring method from the European Union's method of evaluating projects and programmes. This method is an international standard used by all M&E practitioners and as such will avoid any bias or validity errors when assessing the outcomes or impacts for projects/programmes. As such, the MSDFS is willing to share this criterion for review or assessment by relevant authorities to ensure transparency and accountability.

- ii. Support needed during the heights of the pandemic extended beyond the usual and included support for basic services, namely food hampers and support for rent payments. The economic impact of the pandemic on many victims and survivors of DV led to a strain on a support system that was already facing major constraints due to the increased demand.
- iii. The strain and difficulty in accessing certain resources was also reiterated by NGOs in their written submissions and during the second Public Hearing. For example, it was mentioned that survivors reported not being able to access legal aid services as calls and emails went unanswered.
- iv. While it was claimed that survivors were not able to access legal aid due to unanswered calls and emails, the Secretary to the Legal Aid Authority responded to this allegation during the 2nd Public Hearing. The response is quoted below:

“We adjusted our systems during the pandemic. We had and continue to have a team that monitors emails and responds accordingly. In addition to, as an essential service, we did not close. Staff would have been rostered but our data shows that our services continued digitally, in person and via telephone access. I would like the affected person to reach out so we can ascertain if there were any gaps in our systems during 2019 to 2020, and 2020 to 2021. Over 9,000 people in each period accessed us through the means previously stated.”
- iv. This claim was also addressed during the JSC Finance and Legal Affairs public hearing held on June 24th 2022.
- vi. Limitations in assessment and evaluation may have contributed to the underestimation of shelters available to accept victims of DV during this time, thus subjecting them to further risk. With reference to the submission provided by the TTPS, difficulty to access safe houses resulted in victims receiving protection orders, living in the same house as the perpetrator.
- vii. While there was some benefit to providing remote services to victims and survivors, the move toward virtual support was not without its challenges. The benefits included a wider reach to persons accessing training and awareness programmes and also a greater sense of comfort for the victim/survivor during virtual court proceedings because they were no longer in the room with the perpetrator. However, the challenges faced included victims who were not technically-literate or had access to devices to meet required schedules.
- viii. Stronger monitoring and tracking of reports made is needed. In a written submission, ASA mentions survivors whose partners/abusers belong to the

protective services have reported that officers sometimes refuse to take reports and those that have escalated have noted that files have ‘gone missing.’

- ix. While there was an increase in the sensitization and education/awareness drives by various agencies, there are limited monitoring initiatives in place to assess the effectiveness of these sessions.

1.9 RECOMMENDATIONS

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

- A. As proposed by the Alliance for State Action to end Gender-Based Violence (ASA), there needs to be a system of accountability to monitor compliance with police obligations e.g. issuance of a receipt of the report and investigative follow up.
- B. The MSDFS should develop and implement standardized risk assessment tools and procedures that can be used across different agencies and Ministries. This will assist with ensuring the provision of consistent support and safety of all victims and survivors of Domestic Violence. It is proposed that this standardized risk assessment toolkit can be developed within 6 months of the presentation of this report.
- C. Additionally, MSDFS and OPM-GCA should initiate the development of Standard Operating Procedures that are grounded in interagency coordination and incorporate clear referral pathways and timelines where necessary to improve responsiveness of service. The development of these SOPs can also be presented within 6 months of this report.

MSDFS’ Comment:

In 2022, the UNFPA in collaboration with the *Coalition Against Domestic Violence* conducted an *Assessment of the Services provided by the NFSD as it relates to Domestic Violence*. The Ministry accepted the recommendations and is currently awaiting the implementation, in the first instance, of the Training for Family Service Social Workers in the Case Management Standard Operating Procedures for domestic violence survivors. The Training will equip social workers to engage both preventative measures, as well as, interventions. These SOPs will be supported by the NFSD’s Lay Responders Initiative currently in place, which provides workshops and sensitisation sessions on identifying and managing Domestic Violence at the Community Level in collaboration with other state agencies and civil society.

- D. Overall improvement in the Monitoring and Evaluation of intervention strategies is needed. There is also need for greater transparency from the state regarding allocation of resources and tracking the impact of those allocations. This tracking should include basic demographic and gendered data.
- E. Monitoring systems should be implemented for training programmes and awareness drives to ensure the effectiveness of these programmes to their targeted audience. While each organization usually conducts its own M&E, standardized criteria can be spearheaded by MSDFS. These criteria can be developed three months after the presentation of this report and should be made available via the Ministry's website.

MSDFS' Comment:

See similar response to Findings paragraph (i) on page 12.

MINISTRY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY SERVICES