

**Comments on the Eighth Report of  
the Joint Select Committee on Human  
Rights, Equality and Diversity on an  
Examination of the Perceived  
Inequality Faced by Single Fathers in  
Trinidad and Tobago with Specific  
Focus on Custody Matters, Policies  
and Access to Programmes and  
Services**

Ministry of Social  
Development  
and Family  
Services

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## Foreword

The Ministry of the Social Development and Family Services, (MSDFS) is the core social sector Ministry charged with the responsibility for coordinating the implementation of Government's social and human development objectives. The Ministry is therefore obligated to undertake social sector planning monitoring and evaluation, social research and social impact assessment and review and social services delivery with the aim to improve the standard of living of the nation's citizenry, particularly those who are vulnerable, at risk and marginalised. Given this mandate, the MSDFS remains committed to adhere to the first thematic pillar of the National Development Strategy of Trinidad and Tobago, Vision 2030 that is *Putting people first so as to nurture our greatest assets*.

Bearing in mind the scope and range of its portfolio, the MSDFS takes seriously Government's obligation to comply with national and international human rights instruments to which Trinidad and Tobago is a party. As such, the MSDFS welcomes the opportunity to collaborate with the Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity in fulfilling its role in the promotion of measures designed to enhance the equalisation of opportunities and improvement in the quality of life and status of all peoples including marginalised groups.

**Comments on the Findings and Recommendations on the Eighth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity on an Examination of the Perceived Inequality Faced by Single Fathers in Trinidad and Tobago**

**Objective 1- To Understand the Unique Challenges Faced by Male Single Parents in Trinidad and Tobago.**

**General Comments:** The MSDFS sees it beneficial to obtain demographic data on the cohort audience and welcomes the CSO's intention to include a question on single parenthood in the upcoming 2020 Population and Housing Census. The MSDFS is also mindful of the importance of collecting relevant data on programme applicants/beneficiaries and building the capacity to do so.

**Recommendation 4.13** The MSDFS notes the challenges faced by single fathers in Trinidad and Tobago and the need to adjust its outreach public sensitization strategies for programmes/services to target male single parents as one of its audiences. In view of the foregoing, the MSDFS will engage with the membership of the SFATT to obtain the data required to conduct targeted needs analysis to determine adjustments to its Public Information, Education and Sensitization Series (PIES) and other outreach activities in collaboration with key stakeholders.

The Committee may wish to note that the National Family Services Division (NFS) of the Ministry is charged with the responsibility of executing the *Community Parenting Workshop and It's Family Time-Lets Talk* to facilitate the development of all parents. Their efforts include parenting training and skill enhancement workshops within the community on issues such as domestic violence, marital problems, mediation between and amongst family members and support for parents as caregivers of children. In this regard, the Ministry sees it relevant to revisit the methodology employed in targeting parents to attend these workshops by shifting from a traditional approach of mobilising participants at the community level. New avenues would be explored to collaborate with other institutions to offer such programmes.

**Recommendation 4.14** The Ministry is revisiting the procurement of the Integrated Social Enterprise Management Systems (ISEMS) in conjunction with iGovTT for the transition to an electronic Case Management System. Although the Ministry has been assiduously working toward the transition to ISEMS, the MSDFS has developed an interim solution- the Social Services Client Management System (SSCMS) to be used to collect and manage data Ministry-wide. This system is already operational and is expected to become fully operational by January 2019. This will support the data requirements for research and policy development.

**Recommendation 4.15** The Ministry is expected to hold discussions with CSO on the conduct of more in-depth, targeted research on single parent households to support and inform future policy and programming on this issue. The key discussion items with the CSO to be considered in the upcoming Survey of Living Conditions (HBS/SLC 2019) directly related to single parents is the collection and disaggregation of data by gender, age and

socioeconomic demographics. This would facilitate further analysis on this cohort to support evidence based decision-making, policy development and review.

Such data as mentioned above, inclusive of the data provided by the CSO, would essentially be count data. The Ministry also recognises the need to conduct research on other issues related to single fathers. As such, the MSDFS will pursue the inclusion of various subject areas related to single fathers on its Social Research Agenda. The MSDFS, as chair of the Inter-Ministerial Research Council for the Social Sector, will also commit to encourage/advocate that this social phenomenon be explored by other social sector agencies serving on the Council. It should be noted that during the upcoming Focus Group Sessions on the draft National Parenting Policy, consideration be given to the specific circumstances of single fathers and will allow qualitative research data to be obtained on their situation. The MSDFS also agrees that it is extremely beneficial, and is of high importance, that all programme data on all beneficiaries be captured and properly mined by relevant agencies so as to allow for meaningful disaggregation to inform research and policy development.

**Objective 2: To Examine the Equality of the Policies Which Exist in Trinidad and Tobago with Respect to Single Fathers.**

**General Comments:** The Ministry acknowledges the value of a gender impact assessment and will give consideration to the foregoing as it works toward finalisation of the National Parenting Policy. The Ministry is reminded of the need for a clear definition/description of the term *single father* so as to bring about consistency in interpretation across policies, programmes and services. In keeping with this commitment, the MSDFS will engage key stakeholders on the definition of ‘single father’. Focus group questions for the drafting of the National Parenting Policy would include discussion on same. Partner agencies such as Office of the Prime Minister, Gender and Child Affairs, would serve on the technical team for the planning of these discussions and encouraging the attendance of their key stakeholder groups. The SFATT would be included in this process to assist in mobilising their membership. The Ministry is also committed to equality and equity-two of the core principles in social programming.

The Ministry remains committed to ensuring that fathers play the requisite role in the life of their children hence the inclusion of the topic on paternity leave during public consultations on the National Parenting Policy. In this regard, a national stance on this issue will be included in the final document.

The MSDFS will partner with the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) to ensure that all policies emanating from the Ministry are gender-sensitive. Selection of the appropriate methodology is critical, as it would inform the data collection processes informing the development of said policies. Both OPM and MSDFS should be able to access any relevant training on gender-sensitive policy formulation and programme development.

**Recommendation 4.21** The MSDFS is currently in the process of developing the National Parenting Policy and will utilise the information garnered from the consultations and focus groups to inform gender-equitable implementation and distribution of its policies and programmes.

### **Draft National Parenting Policy**

#### **Objective 3: To Determine Whether the Programmes and Services Offered to Single Parents in Trinidad and Tobago Adequately Meet the Needs of Single Fathers of Trinidad and Tobago.**

**General Comments:** While the MSDFS concurs that there is a need to review the existing offerings of social programmes/grants/services to ensure that they are relevant and in keeping with the current socio-economic environment, on closer examination the Ministry surmised that the current suite of services are tailored to meet some, if not all of the needs of single parents who qualify for same.

Key amongst these are as follows:

The Public Assistance Act Chapter 32:03 made provision for the payment of a Public Assistance Grant to a single parent under Regulation 3A. (b) and (c) and 4(2). (c). Additionally, the Public Assistance Act Chapter 32:03, by its very nature makes financial provision for single parent household on behalf of their child/children as evident under Regulation 4. It is to be noted that this specific legislation is gender neutral. Single Parent households can also qualify for Food Support as well as other services of the Ministry once deemed eligible. The National Family Services Division of the Ministry, though not specifically stated, provides services to this specific cohort. In this regard, such service is tailored to meet the unique need of the beneficiary household/family.

The Committee is asked to keep in mind that the Ministry is still in the process of completing the National Parenting Policy. In this regard, research collected from stakeholders, mainly parents and children, will be used as evidence to inform the types of programme interventions that will be developed for parents including single parents. The Committee notes this finding that single fathers face the same and more challenges as their female counterparts. Adequate research initiatives to determine cause and effect relationships would be conducted prior to programme changes. Efforts would be made to complete the relevant policies already in train for finalisation before the end of fiscal 2019.

**Recommendation 4.30 +4.31** The Directorate of the Social Welfare Division recently met with its staff for the purpose of sensitizing and training in the application of the Public Assistance Act, Chapter 32:03 and its Regulations, which speak to the criteria for providing assistance, exclusive of bias in respect of males; and by extension single fathers. The tenets of the Regulations in question, specifically No. 3 to 6, were examined, highlighting an absolute need to put policy into practice, transitioning away from traditional and cultural biases. The MSDFS will continue to monitor the responses received by single fathers through its multiple feedback mechanisms, inclusive of social media, customer feedback forms placed at the Social Welfare Offices and hotline number 800-1MSD or 800-1673. In addition, the MSDFS will keep up the efforts in training to all staff frontline and technical to counteract the issue with regard to bias in respect of males.

**Objective 4: To Evaluate Current Laws Which May Impact on the Custodial Rights of Single Fathers in Trinidad and Tobago**

**General Comments:** In accordance with the Public Assistance Act, Chap.32:03, Regulation 3. (1)- Public assistance may be provided to a person who is in need by reason of his being prevented by some physical or mental disability from earning a living. Regulation 4. (1) went on to indicate that public assistance shall normally be paid to the person who, in the opinion of the Local Board, is the head of a family and whose needs shall be deemed to include those of his dependents. Notwithstanding, where the affected person is a father (or mother as the case may be) of children, by virtue of his/her inability to work, the parent/guardian of these children can also apply for public assistance on behalf of these children and same will be paid where they meet the requirements.

**Recommendation 4.41**      **See comments above**

**Ministry of Social Development and Family Services**