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

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CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE AND HIV

While there is the problem of under-reporting, there is no doubt that child sexual abuse (CSA) and childhood incest are significant problems in Trinidad and Tobago. In a six-month period in 2006, some 165 cases of CSA were reported to the police, of which 85% related to violations of girls (16% were cases of incest)¹ This statistic was further supported by the reports of community members and front line service providers who participated in a large qualitative study from 2008 –2011 spearheaded by the Institute for Gender and Development Studies (IGDS) at the University of West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine campus². This study which investigated attitudes and perceptions surrounding CSA and childhood incest revealed the socio-cultural, economic and gender ideologies in communities that maintained the practice of CSA and childhood incest, and protected the perpetrators of these acts. Gender ideologies included the acceptance of sexual activity with young girls as a sexual rite of passage by male caregivers, especially when the caregiver was not a biological relative. The absence of children's rights was glaring with children being afraid to disclose CSA or incest because of severe repercussions related to loss of stability and/or financial support for the family. Poverty, shame and the need to protect men in the

community frequently led to disbelief or denial of the occurrence of CSA or incest within families and communities.

One of the main factors put forward as contributing to the spread of HIV infection among women and girls in Trinidad and Tobago is early onset of sexual activity, which often is associated with gender socialization practices and crimes of child abuse, predominantly against the girl child. Service providers and community members who participated in the study reported the high prevalence of CSA and childhood incest in Trinidad and Tobago. This was interpreted in the context of the epidemiology of HIV among children in Trinidad and Tobago, where the majority of paediatric infections occur through mother-child transmission, a small proportion through other modes of transmission and almost a quarter of infections are due to unknown causes. Findings suggested that child sexual abuse and childhood incest may be the source of HIV infection in some of these unknown cases and is therefore a significant risk factor for HIV infection among children, a position that was supported by frontline service providers and community members in the study.

¹ Barclay, R. (2008). Child Sexual Abuse and Incest in Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean: A Literature Review, Prepared for Institute of Gender and Development Studies, University of West Indies, St. Augustine.

² From 2008 – 2011, the Institute for Gender and Development Studies (IGDS) at the University of West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine embarked on a study exploring the attitudes and perceptions of community members and service providers in Trinidad and Tobago surrounding gender and sexuality, including information on child sexual abuse and incest. A sub-study explored the protocols, policies and practices of service provision related to child sexual abuse in Trinidad and Tobago by gathering information on (1) schools (2) teachers, principals and guidance officers involved in frontline service delivery. Information in this policy brief is based on findings from that study. The study was conducted in partnership with the Trinidad and Tobago Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CADV), UNICEF, Trinidad and Tobago, and UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women as part of a three-year action research project entitled, *Breaking the Silence: A Multi-Sectoral Approach to Preventing and Addressing Child Sexual Abuse in Trinidad and Tobago*.

The consequences of CSA and childhood incest in Trinidad and Tobago have not been fully explored. Stakeholders who participated in the IGDS study reported high prevalence of not just CSA and childhood incest, but also the associated behavioural consequences that put adult survivors at greater risk for HIV infection, such as alcohol abuse, psychiatric illness and commercial sex work or transactional sex. There were fewer reports of a perceived association between CSA and HIV infection. Only 69% of service providers who provide direct service to children at risk of CSA and incest regarded CSA/incest as a potential HIV risk factor

Investigation of the policies and procedures of agencies providing care and treatment for CSA and childhood incest victims, showed that few agencies recommend HIV testing for victims of CSA and incest as a policy. Recommendations for HIV testing were often left to the discretion of the frontline staff, who in spite of having received HIV training, did not always make the recommendation. Further, not all agencies that provide HIV treatment and prevention assessed children for CSA and incest, and there were no specialized services for children, and families of children who were sexually abused and HIV positive. This stark gap in the service provision and referral system in the country has clear implications for HIV prevalence in the nation, especially among young children.

Recommendations

- Curricula for sexuality and HIV education for all children, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders involved in the education of children, must include awareness and prevention of CSA and incest, CSA and incest as a risk factor for HIV infection, and the procedure for the management of CSA and incest.

- Children must be made more aware of their rights as outlined in the Convention of the Rights of a Child.
- Social marketing campaigns such as the Blue Teddy campaign (Break the Silence: end child sexual abuse)³ developed by IGDS, UWI, St. Augustine campus must be supported and extended throughout the country.
- National HIV programming should expand to contradict the socio-cultural and gender ideologies that promote acceptance of CSA and incest and bring into focus the relationship between CSA, incest and HIV infection.

Key Partners

- Ministry of Education
- Ministry of Science, Technology and Tertiary Education
- Division of Education, Youth and Sport, Tobago House of Assembly
- Ministry of Health
- Division of Health and Social Services, Tobago House of Assembly
- Ministry of Gender, Youth and Child Development
- Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago
- Institute for Gender and Development Studies, UWI
- Communications Studies Programme, Department of Liberal Arts, UWI
- HIV/AIDS Coordinators in each Ministry
- National HIV Programme, Office of the Prime Minister
- Tobago AIDS Coordinating Committee, Tobago House of Assembly
- Family Planning Association of Trinidad and Tobago
- Trinidad and Tobago Rape Crisis Society
- National Parent Teacher Association (NPTA)

³ *Break the Silence: end child sexual abuse* media campaign derives from an action research project spearheaded by the IGDS at The UWI, St. Augustine campus in collaboration with the T&T Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CADV) and in partnership with UNICEF and the UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women. Other partners include ChildLine, Toco Foundation, Arts-in-Action (the theatre in education programme of the Department of Creative and Festival Arts at UWI, St Augustine), the Tobago House of Assembly, and Citizen's Security Programme, the Ministry of National Security. The campaign aims to specifically 1) raise awareness about child sexual abuse (CSA)/incest and implication for HIV/AIDS, 2) increase public awareness about existing resources for preventing and responding to CSA/incest, and 3) influence leaders to increase their commitment to policies and interventions that prevent and address it. The campaign symbol — a blue teddy bear with a plaster on its heart — will be highlighted throughout Trinidad and Tobago and is being made available for use by communities, specifically for this cause. It is hoped that the symbol will become as well known as the Red Ribbon for HIV/AIDS.