

## **CCSJ calls for an end to violence against women and girls**

*On the occasion of International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (November 25)*

CCSJ calls for an end to violence against women and girls. Violence against women and girls is never justified. It plagues all strata of every society; all religious and ethnic groups. Catholics believe that God imprinted a right moral order in the hearts of men and women. But many have strayed from this path. Violence is fed by a lack of formation of conscience; and by the culture of individualism, secularism and moral relativism that pervade our society/world.

Kofi Annan has rightly said that: “Violence against women is perhaps the most shameful human rights violation, and it is perhaps the most pervasive. It knows no boundaries of geography, culture or wealth. As long as it continues we cannot claim to be making real progress towards equality, development and peace”.

The United Nations defines violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.” As the UN states, physical, sexual, psychological and economic forms of violence against women are “interrelated and affect women from before birth to old age...Women who experience violence suffer a range of health problems and their ability to participate in public life is diminished...Up to 70% of women experience violence in their lifetime”.

If we are to stem the tide of violence against women and girls, we must take urgent action to build a civilization of love; to instill in the hearts and minds of our people morals and values that will lead to mutual respect and right relationships. Too many have lost their moral compass or never had one in the first place.

Love for God and neighbour demands that we act now to stop violence against women and girls which is at crisis point and which manifests itself in many ways in our country e.g. murders, domestic violence, incest, human trafficking, forced-prostitution, poverty and social exclusion.

As well as the personal cost to our sisters whose dignity is violated by such violence against them, we must also consider the social and economic cost of violence and the impact it has on family life and on the wider community.

The Government must put in place more effective legislation, policies and structures, such as safe houses, to protect and enhance the lives of our women and girls who feel the brunt of such violence – sometimes on a daily basis. Faith communities and NGOs have a duty to reach out in compassion and empathy to offer support and protection for victims of violence.

Research has shown that women's greatest risk of violence comes from their intimate partners e.g. boyfriend or husband. Over the past few months there has been an increase in media reports of rape in TT. Since this is an underreported crime, these reports may only be the tip of the iceberg. CCSJ hopes that there will be a thorough investigation into allegations about the way in which a rape victim was treated when she was taken by a kindly couple to a Police Station.

In 2004 Diana Mahabir-Wyatt, Coalition Against Domestic Violence, said that "TT is regarded as the domestic violence capital in the region." We must take urgent action to transform society into one that is more human. There are many strategies that we should adopt if we are to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls e.g.

- offer solidarity and support in parishes/communities to the victims of violence e.g. form victim support groups;
- play our part in building a culture of life, love and mutual respect: from an early age;
- organize more school-based programmes and parenting classes to address this issue.
- address issues relating to the socialisation of boys and girls, unequal power relations between men and women, the need that some men have to control women and the frustrations that both men and women experience because of poverty and social exclusion;
- address the need for values/conscience formation and citizenship programmes – at home, in our educational institutions, in our parishes, in our workplaces etc.;
- offer training sessions for men and women with the aim of promoting attitudinal and behavioural changes;
- review related legislation and procedures and practices used by institutions such as the Police Service for dealing with violence against women;
- offer training to members of the Police Service to raise their awareness of this issue and to consider strategies to deal with it and establish special units to deal with e.g. domestic violence;
- mobilize the media in efforts to eliminate such violence. The media can do much to raise awareness of "risk factors" associated with violence against our sisters.

Let us redouble our efforts to promote the dignity of each woman/girl and to protect their lives. CCSJ prays that God will heal our nation and inspire us to build right relationships and a just society.

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