

HELP & SHELTER
STATEMENT TO MARK
INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR THE ELIMINATION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN & 16
DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER VIOLENCE

We stand united with the world in observance of International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (IDEVAW) through sixteen days of activities under the theme “Let's challenge militarism and end violence against women”.

Help & Shelter continues in its efforts to stand against the injustices meted out to women and children, (particularly those vulnerable to the threats and/or practices of violence in all its forms) and individuals of both sexes whose human rights are violated.

Over the years, we have worked tirelessly to empower victims of violence – particularly gender-based violence, which includes domestic and sexual violence - through our counseling and other support services, including court support and shelter for affected women and children, to raise awareness of the dynamics of violence, to sensitize people on laws (the Domestic Violence Act, Sexual Offences Act, Child Protection Act, etc.) available for their protection and strategies for preventing and responding to violent/abusive situations through our public education sessions conducted at schools, health centres and with community- and faith-based organisations, policing groups, etc. across the country, and to seek to transform the culture of violence through our interventions with male perpetrators of domestic abuse through our male engagement group sessions.

On 25th November, 2014, we not only observe IDEVAW, but celebrate 20 years since our establishment. We have provided face-to-face counseling to 10,884 people, hotline counseling to 4,449, court support to 829, shelter to 978, and through our public education workshops and awareness/sensitization sessions have directly reached over 45,000 persons. Monitoring and evaluating our work and considering ways to increase its effectiveness are integral to all that we do.

But in spite of the best efforts of Help & Shelter and other NGOs and stakeholders, gender-based violence continues to be a major cause for concern, with more than 20 women murdered so far this year and reports indicating an increase in rape from 38 reports in 2013 to over 50 in 2014, including brutal murders. The recent ruling of Chief Justice Chang with regard to the constitutionality of paper committals for sexual offences is a retrograde step and we sincerely hope will be given the short shrift it deserves in the appeal that is to be filed and we urge that if necessary the matter be taken to the Caribbean Court of Justice.

Given judicial decisions such as this and statements such as those recently made by a senior ranking police officer, it is no wonder that many women continue to suffer in silence because of a lack of confidence in the police and judicial system to protect them. The low sexual offences prosecution rate and slothfulness in responding to domestic violence reports are totally unacceptable.

Attitudes, beliefs and practices that perpetuate violence (sexual and physical) continue to be a sore point, particularly among those who have responsibility for protecting our rights as citizens. The derogatory remarks by law enforcement officers, such as "what do you want", suggesting the need for financial gain or "If it was a young man you wouldn't ah mine" in

response to victims of rape and sexual harassment, must be condemned. Victims should never be blamed for the abuse they have suffered and efforts should be made to correct such practices and ensure this is not repeated.

In our quest to eliminate/reduce the occurrence of violence against women and girls, we have a responsibility to address the violence in our homes - we can no longer turn a blind eye to or be secretive about the abuse of women and children.

Children should not be brutalized in the name of parenting: adults need to find alternative ways of handling conflicts instead of using violence and should be humble enough to seek help where necessary. Within our schools, violence is often unreported and in many cases overlooked. Violence exists in such forms as bullying, rape, sexual assault and verbal harassment and needs urgent attention as such acts contribute to poor attendance, poor performance, school dropouts and esteem problems among students, all of which may contribute to future problems.

We call on our teachers and other education personnel to be more vigilant, report issues and be supportive of those affected, ensure safe learning environments and recognize the role of education in transforming attitudes and beliefs towards and practices of violence. At the community level, we need a more active approach in responding to and/or reporting violence.

Greater sensitization is also necessary to address the lack of awareness/knowledge that pervades our society, hence the necessity for government to ensure that all citizens have access to information (and those within the discipline services should be exposed to in-depth training) in preventing, responding to, reporting and prosecuting gender-based and sexual violence.

In light of the above, we take this opportunity to renew our call for better implementation of relevant laws and policies and the reconvening of the Domestic Violence Oversight Committee and Sexual Offences Task Force.

In conclusion, we call on all parents, teachers, community and religious leaders, NGOs, CSOs, the government and donors to be united in furthering efforts to reduce and eradicate all forms of violence.

25 November 2014