

Dear Editor,

The 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence is a good time for us to assess the status of women as it relates to violence against women and girls and generally. This month marks 18 months of a new APNU + AFC political administration, whose manifesto promises and actions as they relate to women have by and large not been delivered.

This is the first of several letters that we hope you will publish to mark the 16 Days of Activism.

No gender policy has resulted in spite of the hosting of a national women's conference at great expense and further consultations with women's groups, NGOs and in the regions. A year ago, Help & Shelter and Red Thread, submitted to the Ministry of Social Protection's Gender Unit, written recommendations for Guyana's gender policy. On enquiring about the status of the policy we were told that the Gender Unit was awaiting a gender specialist and was still consulting in the regions. Recommendations were also made repeatedly to the Minister of Social Protection by Help & Shelter that in the interim, the National Domestic Violence Policy should be re-activated and implemented, as it is as relevant today as it was in 2008 when it was first introduced after country wide consultations and the setting up of the multi-sectoral oversight committee for monitoring policy implementation. During the past 18 months, domestic violence has continued to escalate, femicides (killing of women by intimate partners) have continued to claim the life of at least one woman a month, making Guyana one of the countries with the highest per capita rate for women being murdered as a result of domestic violence, and leaving scores of vulnerable children not only motherless but fatherless, as many of the killers either committed suicide or are imprisoned. This cannot be the good life promised for the countless victims and survivors of gender-based violence including orphaned and at risk children. It seems that the failure of government to deliver a national response to the problem of domestic violence, lumping it within the category of interpersonal violence and failing to deliver a coherent and informed national gender policy, bodes no good for the advancement of women and girls and gender equality in Guyana.

It is inexplicable why the Ministry of Social Protection has also failed to convene the Sexual Offences Task Force, to which an entire section of the Sexual Offences Act is devoted. This failure occurs in the face of sexual offences continuing unabated in homes, communities, schools and workplaces, and affecting girls and women disproportionately more than any other category of persons. As with domestic violence, there has been no coherent plan, policy or programme by the APNU + AFC government to address these heinous crimes. This is even more perplexing when UNICEF's recent situational analysis reports states that 'boys and girls in Guyana are exposed to elevated levels of sexual psychological and physical abuse at home and in their communities' and that exposure to gender-based violence in the home 'contributes to the aggravated situation of violence against children'. Sexual abuse was identified in UNICEF's situational analysis report as the second most frequent form of abuse perpetuated on children in Guyana. The 2016 US State Department report on Guyana indicates that out of the 233 reports of rape received in 2015, only 36 persons were actually charged. These numbers reflect either poor or no investigation by police, survivors opting or being coerced to drop charges - a frequent occurrence for child victims but one that is now a sexual offence with penalties of 5 years and fine of \$1 million - or the slow working of the courts and the lack of adequate number of judges. The UNICEF report identifies impunity as a major bottleneck in the system, with victims and witnesses afraid of reporting abuses.

We note the recent establishment of a Sexual & Domestic Violence Unit in the Ministry of Social Protection and sincerely hope that this will result in long overdue action being taken to address the deficiencies mentioned above.

Yours faithfully,

Danuta Radzik
Margaret Kertzious
Gaitrie Shivsankar
Josephine Whitehead
For Help & Shelter

Dear Editor,

This is the second of our letters to mark the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence

While we acknowledge improvements made by the Guyana Police Force to address and reduce crime generally, little information is available to NGOs and members of the general public about the composition and functioning of the police domestic sexual violence units. Quite a few years ago when these units were first being discussed, it was recognized that NGOs and other civil society organizations have a crucial role to play in any system for prevention, protection and prosecution of domestic and sexual violence. The police force has initiated the Cops and Faith programme, which has been cited as being very successful, especially as it relates to juveniles in conflict with the law, but little effort has been made to initiate similar collaborations with NGOs that have years of experience and who run successful programmes addressing all forms of gender-based violence including all forms of child abuse.

We know that domestic and sexual violence is seen as playing an important role in constructing gender roles, power relations and as a means for some men to dominate and inflict harm on women. We only have to listen to some of the lyrics dominating popular music to understand how this is affecting the psyche of young men and boys and young women and girls. All forms of gender-based violence share a common thread, i.e. power relations between men and women and gender inequality. Sexual violence is often used as a mechanism for controlling the body and sexuality of women. The pervasiveness of rape culture and rape myths also fuels a psychological and cultural mindset that blames the victim/survivor ('She asked for it') and trivializes sexual offences ('Boys will be boys'). It tolerates sexual harassment in the workplace and schools; defines masculinity and manhood as the ability of men to exert power and control, especially over their women, including control over their sexuality and defines femininity and womanhood as being submissive, sexually passive, obedient and subservient. Rape culture believes that when women say no they mean yes in sexual matters and that when men get sexually turned on it is impossible for them to stop; assumes that men don't get raped or that only 'weak' men get raped; is influenced by music styles and lyrics that glorify violence, portray explicit sexual imagery and is homophobic, insults and denigrates women and incites and encourages sexual assault and rape of women and the killing and maiming of gay and homosexual men; assumes that only promiscuous - 'fast', 'easy' - women and girls get raped and minimizes the physical and psychological trauma of sexual violence. Factors that increase men's risk of committing sexual violence include gang membership; harmful or illicit use of alcohol or drugs; exposure to domestic violence as a child; history of physical or sexual abuse as a child; belief in gender inequality; limited education; acceptance of violence (belief that it is acceptable to beat one's wife or girlfriend); multiple partners and infidelity.

Let us not forget that criminals and persons in conflict with the law are not born but are the product of the social, economic, cultural and political environment in which they are raised. And as long as programmes and policies fail to address the acceptance, and tolerance for gender-based violence in Guyana, the high level of intimate partner domestic and sexual violence will continue.

Yours faithfully,
Danuta Radzik
Niveta Shivjatan
Denise Dias
Chabela Lord
For Help & Shelter
<http://www.hands.org.gy>

Dear Editor,

This is the third of our letters to mark the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence

The Childcare & Protection Agency (CPA), which has responsibility for overall protection of children and whose mandate requires that cases of child abuse be reported to them, lacks the human and financial resources to adequately respond to the number of child abuse cases reported to them. While there have been many consultations and promises of collaboration between the CPA and NGOs such as Help & Shelter, this has not materialized except for a few referrals, usually to our shelter.

Prior to the setting up of the CPA, Help & Shelter offered successful psycho-social counselling and court support services to hundreds of child survivors of abuse, including survivors of sexual violence, and that our face-to-face and court support counselling services are not being fully utilized fully by the agency is hard to understand.

In keeping with the Protection of Children Act and related legislation, we refer all cases of child abuse to the CPA and follow up on cases we refer. As such, we are well aware of the deficiencies and absence of an effective, inclusive, transparent and well publicised national child protection policy, plan and system. The UNICEF situational analysis reports that only around 100 social workers, child protection officers and school welfare officers are employed in the entire country. This number is wholly inadequate and it is imperative that it be increased and that the skills and services available in the NGO and civil society sector be utilized for the prevention of, protection from and the safety and well-being of victims and survivors of all forms of gender based violence.

We welcome the provision in the budget for parenting programmes and agree wholeheartedly that all child protection programmes have a duty and responsibility to not only address the needs of children but also work with parents and guardians in the best interest of children and their families. This is a step in the right direction but not enough.

Yours faithfully,
Danuta Radzik
Selina Lepps
Colin Marks
Desiree Ramdeen
For Help & Shelter
<http://www.hands.org.gy>

Dear Editor,

This is the fourth and final of our letters to mark the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence

Despite the APNU + AFC manifesto promise, so far as we are aware, no code of conduct for the public service relating to sexual harassment, gender discrimination, sexual violence and other forms of discrimination against women has been put into effect. Sexual harassment prevention policies for all public and private sector entities including ministries, security agencies, schools, businesses and other educational institutions should be introduced and made enforceable with penalties for those who transgress.

Similarly, the introduction of tax credits for companies providing in-house daycare facilities for their employees promised in the APNU + AFC manifesto has, so far as we are aware, not materialised or even been discussed the private sector, nor has the government increased funding for childcare centres to

support women, especially estranged mothers, single mothers, and victims of various forms of abuse, apart from a Georgetown Public Hospital day care center, which, according to the 2017 budget, is to be established.

The continuing use of corporal punishment in schools and the unbelievable stripping and caning of students at an interior school highlight the need for the abolition of corporal punishment in schools, as corporal punishment teaches and mainstreams the use of violence as an acceptable means of solving and resolving problems.

We welcome the calls by top officials in the APNU + AFC government, such as the president and the minister of education, for the ending of corporal punishment in schools. But this is not enough and must be followed by accepting the recommendation of the Guyana Teachers Union, NGOs and Civil Society Organizations and individuals to replace the use of corporal punishment with training programmes for teachers on new disciplinary measures and classroom management techniques that do not violate the rights of children. This is an achievable goal but lack of political will seems to be allowing the status quo to continue.

We acknowledge that it is the responsibility of all Guyanese to ensure that women, girls, men, boys and members of LGBT community live lives free from all forms of gender-based violence, discrimination and abuse. But multi-sectoral and representative responses that involve collaboration between all sectors of society must be fashioned in order to achieve this and the government is crucial for effecting this goal.

We salute all social service providers who work tirelessly and often above the call of duty to offer help, protection, support and services for the many victims and survivors of gender-based violence and their families. We know that this valuable and at times transformative work is often not acknowledged and that confidentiality often does not permit it to be accorded the appreciation it deserves.

We recognize the genuine attempts on the part of sections of the APNU + AFC government to improve the conditions of women and girls, especially through expansion of skills training programmes. But this in itself is not enough to transform the structural and ideological barriers to gender inequality.

We also recognize the work done by all NGOs, civil society organizations and Constitutional Commissions towards the elimination and reduction of gender-based violence.

In particular, we salute all those women and girls who have had the strength to overcome their experiences of abuse and violence by transforming their lives and the lives of their children. Their struggles are a testimony to resilience and offer hope to all others still struggling to free themselves from gender-based violence.

In ending, we call on the APNU + AFC government to ensure that another year will not pass with little or no progress made in the realization of the human rights of women and girls to live lives free from violence and the threat of violence.

Yours faithfully,
Danuta Radzik
Karen Shaw
Petal Baboolall
Carol Innis-Baptiste
For Help & Shelter
<http://www.hands.org.gy>