

Dear Editor,

Help & Shelter joins in the observance of International Day against the Elimination of Violence Against Women and 16 days of activism under the theme “Orange the world: Generation Equality stands against Rape”. However, in Guyana, violence against women continues to be the biggest obstacle in achieving gender equality.

As we observe another year of working towards the elimination of violence against women and girls, it is evident that there is much to do in Guyana. According to the “Women’s Health and Life Expectancy Survey” recently conducted, 55% of respondents have experienced some form of intimate partner violence during their lifetime with 38% experiencing physical and or sexual violence within the past twelve months. The report identifies infidelity, alcohol and physical fights among the major characteristics of perpetrators and a general lack of respect for each other as major contributors to violence against women. Persons in the 15-24 age group are reported to be at a higher risk for experiencing violence and 50% of affected persons never report acts of intimate partner violence. At the root of the problem is personal and community beliefs defining roles for men and boys and social norms and expectations that endorse violent behaviors.

The report further states that 20% of respondents experience non partner sexual abuse, 13% of which occurred before age 18. The most important risk factor for NPSV is being young and the acts perpetrated includes rape/attempt rape, sexual harassment and unwanted sexual touching. Sexual violence continues to be the most underreported form of violence either due to a lack of understanding of what constitutes the offence or the shame and guilt experience by victims for a crime committed against them. While we applaud the judicial system on the increase in convictions for sexual offences, greater efforts should be made towards the prevention of such violations as those who are most often affected and suffer in silence are our nation’s children of which 20-30% have reported acts of sexual violence committed against them.

Women and girls in rural communities appear to be most affected due to the lack of services or knowledge of available services and helping agencies given that most CSOs are located within the urban areas.

Guyanese women continue to lose their lives at alarming rates with in excess of twenty women being killed in 2019, the majority being victims of intimate partner violence - a phenomenon which disrupts families and traumatized the wider society. As a result of such acts children are being left orphaned which places added pressure on a system that is already struggling to address issues of children’s welfare.

Help & Shelter continues to address all forms of violence through the various services that we offer. Along with other civil society organizations, considerable efforts are made towards combating this scourge on our society, often with enormous challenges and very limited resources which impedes our ability to reach the most affected regions of our country.

To this end, there needs to be better collaborations, a more cohesive and collective approach, stronger networking amongst NGOs and greater institutional and government support if we are to effectively address not just domestic and sexual violence but the many social ill plaguing our society.

At the governmental level urgent attention must be given to making appropriate services available within all communities to address the needs of citizens. Greater awareness and sensitization with a focus on prevention of the many social issues are needed, better response mechanisms and ensuring systems, structures and policies that are in place are equipped/upgraded and fully functional to appropriately respond to the needs of affected persons.

We call upon all Guyanese to each do our part in contributing to the prevention and or elimination of the use of violence in all its forms, to examine and address our own attitudes and behaviors that perpetuate violence, educate ourselves on alternative ways of handling conflicts and seek help where available and speak out against violence in all its forms.

We wish to acknowledge the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI), the Government of Guyana, our networking partners and private sector companies and organizations for their continued support of the services we offer to the public.

Finally, let us begin to LISTEN to each other and be genuinely RESPECTFUL of each other.

A life free of violence is everyone's right.

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