



OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER
(GENDER & CHILD AFFAIRS)

***Comments on the Twelfth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity on
The Sexual Exploitation of Children in Trinidad and Tobago with a specific focus on Child Prostitution and Child Pornography***

Foreword

Since 2015, the Office of the Prime Minister has led the portfolios of Gender and Child Affairs. The mandates of the Gender and Child Affairs Divisions (GCA) cover pivotal areas of national development through its contributions to service delivery, policy development and project implementation. Together, each Division within this portfolio plays critical roles across the governmental and non-governmental sectors. Each Division plays a crucial role since gender and child-specific issues are cross-cutting throughout society and these challenges require collaboration, coordination amongst state actors and resounding national response.

Specifically related to children, the OPM has been committed to the protection of the rights of our nation's children - supporting, educating and fostering an enabling environment conducive to the development of our greatest treasure. The overarching objective of the Child Affairs Division (CAD) is to manage, coordinate and develop policies, strategies, initiatives, and programmes geared towards child development in Trinidad and Tobago. By committing to this course, the OPM expects that all boys and girls will be happy, healthy and confident; and their rights respected, protected and promoted to facilitate their holistic development towards achieving their fullest potential as active contributors to society.

The OPM is in support of the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity in achieving their mandate as outlined in Standing Orders 110(6) and 100 (6) of the House of Representatives and the Senate respectively. As such, the following document presents the comments of the OPM on the findings and recommendations of the Committee.

After a meticulous review of the report, the OPM is of the view that the report captures the rich discussion among stakeholders. Moreover, the statistics presented and the responses offered by each agency highlight the challenges and issues that converge and present a challenge for Trinidad and Tobago in combatting this issue. However, considering the nuances, limitations and the glaring shortfalls within the child protection system, there is an opportunity for all lead agencies to work together to

develop and implement innovative strategies to prevent and address child prostitution and pornography. Thus the OPM is committed to working with the Committee and all other agencies in addressing this threat to the wellbeing and overall development of children exposed by sexual exploitation, child prostitution and pornography.

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Objective 1: To explore the extent to which child prostitution and child pornography exist in Trinidad and Tobago.

General Comments

There is a dearth of research on the prevalence of child pornography and child prostitution in Trinidad and Tobago coupled with hypersexuality among many children and suspected low reporting of child abuse. Considering the national context and the gaps in the available data, the extent to which child pornography and child prostitution exist is unknown. The OPM is ready to lend support wherever necessary to close these data gaps and expand research so that evidence-based strategies can be employed to reduce the prevalence of these crimes and adequately safeguard the nation's children.

Recommendation 4.15

The OPM is in agreement with the recommendation that there is a need for inter-agency data sharing and for the development of an inter-agency protocol to enable this. The OPM is of the view that although the Ministry of Education, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS) and the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (CATT) may be identified as leading agencies in deterring, preventing and addressing issues and occurrences of child pornography and child prostitution, there may be other agencies to be included in this protocol to ensure the necessary social services are extended to victims and their families.

Considering some representatives support the view that there are underlying social issues that increase child vulnerabilities, the information that needs to be shared could be used to develop policies and programming in other social sector ministries such as the Ministries of Social Development and Family Services, Health and the CAD at the OPM.

The Committee should also consider that the National Children's Registry which is at the build phase and is a projected initiative for fiscal 2020. In this regard, this project, as well as other information sharing and data collection platforms, should be considered to ensure no duplication and efficient use of public service resources.

Recommendation 4.16

The OPM is in agreement that the TTPS and the Counter-Trafficking Unit (CTU) should collaborate to reconcile the contrasting data and that this exercise should be treated with urgency.

Recommendation 4.17

Research is necessary to inform the development of effective strategies that can change behaviour and prevent the occurrences of child prostitution and pornography. Thus, the OPM is in agreement that there should be collaboration between the Ministry of Education (MOE), the CATT and the TTPS in conducting research on child prostitution and child pornography.

The OPM recommends that in addition to the identified agencies, civil society organisations and academia should also be engaged to assist in developing research studies, design research methodology and aid lead agencies in interfacing with the target groups. It is also important to note that it will be difficult for the MOE, the CATT or many of the Government agencies to access children outside of the education system. However, civil society organisations are better positioned to gain the trust of the target groups and connect agencies to these groups.

Objective 2: To evaluate the efficacy of measures which discourage and penalise child pornography and child prostitution and treat victims of child pornography and child prostitution.

General Comments

There are several challenges that arise when addressing the elusive and pervasive nature of online child pornography as well as child prostitution. The OPM believes there must be a greater effort to combat this crime collectively both nationally and internationally. Trinidad and Tobago must learn from other jurisdictions in order to improve the strategies used to detect this crime.

There is also a need for public education campaigns that empower children and parents to make better choices to protect this vulnerable group. More research is needed in order to guide the implementation of effective mechanisms and interventions that will address this scourge.

As stated by some agencies such as the CATT during the hearing, it is also vital to pay attention to the underlying social issues that exacerbate child vulnerabilities and create the foundation upon which child pornography and child prostitution stand on. A greater understanding of the social and economic determinants of child prostitution and child pornography may aid in creating a robust and effective response to address these issues.

Recommendation 4.54

The OPM agrees that there should be innovative strategies utilised by the Cyber Crime Unit of the TTPS such as partnering with social media providers and using online tools to monitor online usage related to child pornography and child prostitution.

Recommendation 4.55

Cybercrime, specifically online offences of child prostitution and child pornography transcends geographical borders. The need to synergize prevention efforts internationally must be underscored. The OPM is in agreement that the Cyber Crime

Unit and the Counter-Trafficking Unit of the TTPS should collaborate with international partners in combatting this issue. It is argued that a collective approach may be more effective to better utilise the available resources in countering these attacks and threats to child protection.

Recommendation 4.56

The OPM has taken note of the recommendations by stakeholders. However, the recommendation for stronger enforcement of the law and associated penalties is of utmost importance. In addition, the recommendation for increased parenting and family programmes offered by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services is supported.

Recommendation 4.57

The OPM is in agreement with the Committee that the TTPS should initiate awareness programmes with the hotel industry to encourage reporting of suspected cases of child pornography and child prostitution. It is also important to better understand the local context which will include greater awareness of the “meeting places” used by these criminals to better target the industries or sectors where these crimes are more likely to take place.

Recommendation 4.59

The OPM agrees with the recommendation that the CATT, CTU, Victim and Witness Support Unit, Child Protection Unit and National Parent/Teachers Association collaborate with international organisations to conduct sensitisation and training session with the hotels, airlines, general public, teachers, parents and students. The OPM is of the view that there should be a plan devised to target children that may be out of the school system and who are vulnerable due to other social deprivations to ensure that they do not fall prey to the grooming of child predators. This can be done through the health care system and increased social programming which encourages practitioners to go into communities and liaise closely with civil society organisations. It is also important in any communication and public education strategy on the matter of child prostitution and child pornography to partner with relevant civil society organisations.

Office of the Prime Minister