

Domestic Violence

Invisible Bruises – witness to violence

The little girl at the back of the class had seen her father beat her mother so many times that she was numb to the tragedy that played out in front of the classroom – the beating of her class teacher. Just another day. Another woman. Perhaps it might be her one day. She closed her eyes and blocked her ears to the sounds of the teacher’s screams. She began to hum a tune as she often did at home – *“Jesus loves me, this I know”* ...

Another day gone. Another woman beaten and bruised, but alive. The usual short-term, knee-jerk reactions to this kind of violence was carried out – counsellors in the schools, talks with the students, tightening up of security, liaise with parents, staff meetings held. **Operation checklist, done!** Until the next time, until the next victim. On to other more important issues such as the discussion of the economic crisis in our country. Get our politicians and economic forecasters on television to present the statistics in the mid-year review of the economy! This is really the news that people want to hear! And so the cultural façade on the issue of domestic violence is played out time and again. As David Rudder sang, *“Them boys with the hidden agendas and the mind-benders, they will always do their do”*.

For those of us who interact with victims of domestic violence – mostly the women and the children, but there are also men who are victims – there is no short-term here. We deal with the invisible bruises, the scars that cannot easily be erased by casual encounters or one-off talks by counsellors. Children who witness violence run the highest risk of repeating the same behaviours from one generation to the next, according to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, in the UK. I call this the inter-generational cycle of instability that permeates many households in Trinidad and Tobago, on many different levels – unhealthy relationships, physical and sexual

abuse, substance abuse, violent temperaments. Children and adolescents who are continually exposed to toxic environments such as these, usually have difficulties in developing and maintaining friendships, in establishing strong emotional ties and they can be emotionally immature. In these toxic households there are usually no healthy boundaries, no clear direction as to solutions and insufficiently developed coping capacities.

Children do not have to be beaten or abused themselves, to be traumatized. **Witnessing abuse** carries the same risk of harm to a child's mental health and stability as being abused directly. While it may be easier to determine physical abuse, the emotional and psychological effects suffered by children exposed to violent trauma are more difficult to trace. There is always some adult who knows however, and many persons do or say nothing, out of fear of reprisals from the abuser.

How can we address this issue in our society, with a means to preventing domestic violence?

The destructive platitudes that suggest that 'police cannot prevent' this scourge is avoidant and regressive. In reality, one of the best advocates for the detection and prevention of domestic violence can come from men themselves. The missing piece in this 'battle', is men's activism, men's accountability for other men and men speaking out on this issue - fathers, sons, brothers, friends and partners of women who have experienced abuse. **Why have men not come forward?**

What are the reasons that men do not speak out? The legal system has already failed many victims and has a long way to go in recognizing the impact of abuse on a child's mental and emotional wellbeing.

Addressing the impact of domestic violence abuse is for the long haul. The ripple effects on an entire school – students, teachers, families and the wider community must be prevented at all costs. Let us put resources and personnel in place to make our homes and schools, the safe places that they should be.