

## Chairman's Report to the Nation 2010, June 21, 2011

Trinidad and Tobago is at a crossroads. Gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people are going public and demanding the same human rights as every other person in this country. Young people are having sex in schools. Everywhere, the sexual landscape is changing. Is this a crisis? Or is this an opportunity? We at the Family Planning Association of Trinidad and Tobago (FPATT) see these events as a tremendous opportunity for this country to make strides in the provision of sexual rights for its citizens, to lift the pall of stigma and discrimination and to fulfil the promise of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and human rights."

Last year FPATT adopted our parent body's Declaration of Sexual Rights, and the core concept that sexual rights are human rights. The International Planned Parenthood Federation's Declaration is a comprehensive document that outlines the rights of all human beings to fulfilling and pleasurable sexual lives, to sexual and reproductive health services and information, to safety and security from persecution and attack. The document is available on the IPPF website and I encourage you to read it to get a fuller sense of its gist and provisions. This Declaration has been at the core of our vision at FPATT since we adopted it last year and it has helped to solidify our purpose and direction as one of the premier providers of SRH services and education in Trinidad and Tobago. A year after its adoption, we are very pleased to say we have increased our provision of services, both contraceptive and non-contraceptive, to 140,615 in total for 2010. Clients had 139,822 visits in all, an increase of 65,537 over the previous year.

However, FPATT and its partner organisations don't work in a vacuum. We work in a real country, with real people, some of whom see the changing landscape as a crisis. We who see it as an opportunity must raise our voices in support of our position.

For example, early this year the question of same-sex marriage was raised in a Parliamentary debate. As it turned out, the most vocal GLBT group to respond, the Coalition Advocating for the Inclusion of Sexual Orientation (CAISO), said same sex marriage was NOT something on which the GLBT community wanted immediate discussion. Instead, CAISO said, the GLBT community wants a guarantee of freedom from the harassment and attacks, bullying in schools, police intimidation and victimization, and homelessness and underemployment that come as a result of stigma and discrimination. FPATT sees this moment in our country's history as the ideal time to correct a serious omission in the Equal Opportunity Act, which currently excludes GLBT status as a basis for its protections. The treatment of this marginalized group is indeed a human rights issue—and only a week ago the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a resolution to carry out a study detailing "discriminatory laws and practices and acts of violence against individuals based on their sexual orientation and gender identity" and to consider "how international human rights law can be used to

end violence and related human rights violations based on sexual orientation and gender identity.”

We must ensure that our legislative environment helps, not hinders, in protecting the human rights of all our people. In this context we noted the recent call for the criminalisation of the reckless and wilful spread of HIV. The call came from a sitting High Court Justice and prompted the Attorney General to say the issue would be revisited. Legislation had previously been introduced in the Senate years ago but had been allowed to lapse. FPATT unequivocally urges the Honorable AG in revisiting this piece of legislation to hew closely to the UNAIDS guidelines on this, guidelines that give very specific circumstances where the infection of someone with HIV could be considered “wilful”—and we were very pleased to note the justice’s subsequent remarks to this effect. In our country so many people are still not tested and therefore do not know their status; and there is still so much stigma and discrimination around HIV and AIDS that even some people who know their status are reluctant to disclose it for fear of victimization or attack. People living with HIV and AIDS are people, full stop. We ought to encourage them to protect themselves and their partners from infection, to seek treatment and care, to fight for their human rights to work, housing, family and dignity. Laws that hamper these things should not be passed.

Just this month FPATT was included in a T&T delegation to the High Level Meeting (HLM) on HIV and AIDS. Among the resolutions adopted at the HLM was a call to improve young people’s access to SRH services and education. Too many children are victims of sexual violence, including incest, and participate in early sexual activity to the detriment of their health and welfare. Worldwide, according to the Political Declaration on HIV and AIDS from the HLM, “young people between 15 and 24 years account for more than one third of all new HIV infections, with some 3,000 young people becoming infected with HIV each day”. The resolution noted that most young people have limited information about HIV and limited access to SRH programmes “that provide the information, skills, services and commodities they need to protect themselves”. We once again advocate for the development and implementation of a comprehensive national Health and Family Life Education curriculum. We are willing to work with educators, parents, and youth themselves to develop this and put it in place.

Another resolution coming from the HLM said, in part, that “women and girls are still the most affected by the epidemic... and that the ability of women and girls to protect themselves from HIV continues to be compromised by physiological factors, gender inequalities, including unequal... economic and social status, insufficient access to health care and services, including for sexual and reproductive health, and all forms of discrimination and violence, including sexual violence and exploitation against them”. Last year, at this very meeting, our keynote speaker was Mr Stephen Lewis, the Co-Director of AIDS-Free World. Mr Lewis outlined the reasons he felt ending women’s oppression is the single most important challenge we face in the world today. With daily news reports of women being beaten, raped, and murdered—even, in a horrifying new trend, set on fire—it hardly need be said that Trinidad and Tobago’s women face oppression too. Yes, our women and girls have access to education and

employment, contraception and other SRH services. Yet, we at FPATT recognize that stigmatization of and discrimination against women is still, unfortunately, endemic. This stigma and discrimination is not only a driver in the HIV epidemic in Trinidad and Tobago, it is a human rights issue; if we fail to adequately protect half our population from gender-based discrimination and violence how can we stand and say we respect human rights?

In October of this year Trinidad and Tobago will be called to account on its protection of human rights at the Twelfth Session of the United Nations' Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review. What will we have to say for ourselves? Did we, as a nation, try our very best to ensure that all our people had full human rights?

"Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals." These are the words of the late civil rights activist Martin Luther King, Jr. FPATT calls on those who want to see Trinidad and Tobago progress towards the fuller realization of a clean human rights record to join with us in our tireless exertions to end stigma and discrimination and promote sexual rights for all.

I take this opportunity to thank for their enduring support and co-operation our parent organization the IPPF; the Ministry of the People and Social Development; the Ministry of Health; PSI Caribbean; UNFPA; UNICEF; UNIFEM; PAHO; and each and every one of the non-governmental, faith-based and community organisations we work with. We thank our sponsors, large and small, for without your support we would achieve little but good intentions.

One of our main sponsors is the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. As the Honorable Minister of Health is with us today I wish to reiterate our special thanks for the continued support. However, Madam Minister, I also want to ask you to intervene on our behalf. We have received an annual government subvention of \$1 million since 1992 and we would very much appreciate an increase in this amount. A million dollars is not what it used to be. We invite you to sit with us to discuss this subvention and how we can further collaborate in the provision of services and education to our population.

As you know, Madam Minister, FPATT is represented on the Sexual and Reproductive Health Technical Working Committee, headed by your Population Programme Unit. In this context, FPATT can pledge support in assisting your Ministry in at least three ways:

- The design and implementation of youth clinics based on our successful model De Living Room;
- training nursing personnel in SRH services;
- and the sharing of protocols for delivery of SRH services.

In the past year we at FPATT strengthened our programmes for adolescents, providing 15,152 contraceptive services, and 6,518 other services such as HIV and other STI testing, gynaecological services and specialised counselling to clients aged 14-25. Our Youth Centre De Living Room, and its Outreach arm De Rovin' Living Room, have been accepted by youth and recognised by other countries as best practice; quite simply put, it works. So, firstly, FPATT would like to invite the Honourable Minister of Health to look at using De Living Room as a model for a national system of youth SRH clinics. We would be happy to work with the Regional Health Authorities so we can replicate the model at a national level.

Secondly, sexual and reproductive healthcare training is not part of the education provided to nursing students in this country. For years FPATT has provided such training, specifically in family planning techniques. Could we formalise this training by developing a certified programme for the nurses through the Nursing Council? We would like to work with the relevant bodies to do so.

Thirdly, regarding sharing of protocols, you will appreciate that as part of an international organisation we must adhere to very high quality of care standards. We would be happy to share these protocols with the Ministry to make the provision of SRH services more uniform in our national community. We are willing to train nurses in these protocols so all the players in this very important field are operating and delivering services at one standard.

Madam Minister, we know that you are sensitive to our cause. We would like the opportunity to discuss with you how we could contribute to making sure all citizens have access to the best possible SRH services and education our country can provide.

Special thanks for a successful year go to our enterprising team: members of our Board of Directors, YAM members, staff, and volunteers; and their fearless leader Executive Director Dona Da Costa Martinez. We also recognise the sterling contribution of our President Dr Jacqueline Sharpe, who has been doing a great job at the helm of the IPPF.

We are at this moment engaging in a review of our corporate strategic direction. In this our 55th year of operation, we have engaged consultants to develop a plan for the next three years. FPATT and other organisations compete for the same dwindling funds. At the same time we have felt the effects of a dearth of medical personnel, from doctors and nurses to medical technicians across the board. Yet we still have to ramp up our output from year to year and be responsive to changes in the environment and client needs. We must develop a robust human resource plan to treat with these and other challenges.

I have no doubt we can do it, with your continued support. We look forward to another successful year in service to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.