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## **ENFORCE THE LAWS AND SAVE OUR CHILDREN**

- *Jamaica's ticking time bomb of child abuse and the inadequate social welfare system that supports it must be exposed, prioritized nationally and multi-faceted solutions found and implemented.*
- *Sex with underage children is illegal, why doesn't the country know if and how many perpetrators are sought out and prosecuted?*
- *Allowing the law to be broken with impunity breeds contempt, encourages the illegal activity; in the case of sex with underage children, it tells children their rights do not matter; it shows abusers they need fear no consequences.*
- *Community beliefs which encourage and empower exploitation of children must be corrected through effective, targeted public education.*

Hear The Children's Cry Founder, Child Advocate Betty Ann Blaine is calling for Jamaicans at every level to start 2023 with critical action on one of the most cruel root causes of many of the nation's current challenges. She says:

“While we welcome the New Year with hope and good intentions, Jamaica's frightening social challenges need to be addressed seriously at the national level if our resolutions are to have any meaning at all. We are not referring here to what many see as our most urgent challenge of crime and violence, but we are pointing instead to the ticking time bomb oftentimes feeding the killings and other crimes -- the abuse which so many Jamaican children endure.

“The case of the 14 year-old who gave birth to twins on Christmas morning, leads us to ask some pressing questions, one of the main ones being, "who is the father of the babies?" Sexual relations with a child under the age of 16 is illegal in Jamaica. Yet statistics continue to confirm

that hundreds of underage Jamaican girls give birth to babies in our hospitals, including those who are barely 16, but whose children were conceived before the mother had reached the age of consent.

“Regarding the 14 year old mother of twins, a statement from the Ministry of Health concerning the matter, reported in the media on December 27 contained among other things, this surprising statement:

**‘These young mothers are required to make a report to the Centre for the Investigation of Sexual Offences and Child Abuse (CISOCA) and the clinic partners with the VJH Social Work Department and the Women’s Centre as part of the standard of care for these cases,’ the ministry explained.’**

“Since a crime has been clearly committed with the impregnation of a minor, how could the responsibility for reporting the matter to CISOCA lie with the victim, and not the responsible adults among the health team caring for her? We believe that the Protection of Children Act requires far more assertive action on the part of anyone who witnesses or knows about the abuse of a child.”

Sadly, despite the work of the Centre for the Investigation of Sexual Offences and Child Abuse (CISOCA) over more than two decades, it is uncommon for adult males to be prosecuted in Jamaica for having sex with underage girls. It is equally uncommon, or even rare for a woman to be prosecuted for having sex with an underage boy in our courts. Mrs. Blaine points out:

“Those of us struggling in the social welfare sector know that it is challenging at best, based on evidentiary shortfalls, to secure convictions in cases of child abuse,. We at Hear The Children’s Cry have been heartbroken when an accused abuser has been given bail and gone back to the child’s home against court orders and repeated the abuse on the same child.

“Lack of enforcement of laws to protect children has created a growing culture of unaccountability and disregard for these laws, leading to an increase in cases of child abuse and exploitation. It continues to foster the thinking/feeling that you can do anything you want to a child with little or no consequences.

## MORE LIGHT NEEDED

**“We need to shine light on the problem,”** the Hear The Children’s Cry Founder believes, noting

“ 1) The country needs to know, of the thousands of reports of child sexual abuse over the past few years, how many arrests and prosecutions has law enforcement made?

2) How many adult males have been arrested and charged for sexually abusing minors?

3) Of the number of births by minors, how many were reported by mandatory reporters, eg hospitals, clinics, doctors, etc.

4) Do we know how many of the underage mothers have returned to school, and how their children are doing?

**“Even more urgent, we need to get to work on more far reaching and multi-faceted prevention efforts.** I would like to quote here from a recent, excellent presentation by Tania Chambers, legal consultant to Spotlight Initiative, a global, multiyear partnership between the European Union and the United Nations to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls. In addition to calling for significant law reform and intervention, Ms. Chambers addressed the critically important role of the community, noting:

‘The reality is that child sexual violence is far too often facilitated by myths and misconceptions that have been normalized by many of our communities and families. These myths create a comfort zone for the predator and diminish the strength of the legal protection from sexual violence that children ought to enjoy. Some of the common myths that enable sexual abuse are:

- If a man pays the bills, he has a right of sexual access to any person in the household. ‘Man nuh fatten fowl fi mongoose.’
- A woman having sex with a young boy is not an act of violence nor should it be a crime.
- If a girl acts like she is of age (“force-ripe”), then having a sexual relationship with her is not really a crime.

These norms persist, defying the relatively robust legal framework established to protect children from sexual violence. This helps to account for the approximately 2,000 to 3,000 reports of

sexual abuse received by the National Children's Registry every year. Almost 10,000 cases of child abuse were reported in 2020; 20 per cent or approximately 2, 481 were cases of child sexual abuse. The year 2021 is on pace to match 2020. From January to June 2021, there were 1,203 reports of sexual abuse of children.'

Statistics from the National Children's Registry published on December 19 show that 14,183 reports of child abuse were made to the Registry during 2022.

Betty Ann Blaine concludes,

"I truly believe we can and must come together as a nation to provide REAL protection for our children, at every level, RIGHT NOW. With this in mind, Hear The Children's Cry wishes all Jamaicans, especially our children and their families, a blessed, peaceful and safe New Year."

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