



## ***Perversion in Paradise***

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On the night of December 28, 2016, police officers patrolling the town of Santa Cruz in the Jamaican parish of St. Elizabeth in approached a parked car which aroused their suspicions. Upon investigating, authorities reportedly found 64-year-old Rupert Clarke, the pastor of a church in the nearby parish of Manchester, in what they called a “compromising position” with a 15-year-old girl.<sup>i</sup> Clarke was arrested and charged with having sex with a minor in a case which has shocked the nation.<sup>ii</sup> Unfortunately, this appalling incident is only a small part of a much broader problem in Jamaican society. The prevalence of child sexual abuse.

### **“A National Crisis”**

In 2014, Lisa Hanna, then the Minister of Youth and Culture described child sex abuse in Jamaica as a “national crisis.”<sup>iii</sup> Between 2007 and 2014 nearly 17,000 cases were recorded by Jamaica’s *Office of the Children’s Registry (OCR)*.<sup>iv</sup> The United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) notes however that “the available data does not reflect the actual magnitude of the problem” because the vast majority of incidents go unreported.<sup>vi</sup> In all, 40% of Jamaicans have said that their first sexual experience occurred without their consent and before the age of 16.<sup>vii</sup>

The number of recorded molestations has been increasing each year. 1,541 cases of child sexual abuse were recorded in 2011 compared with 2,671 in 2012 and well over 3,000 in 2014.<sup>viii</sup> It should be noted that the rising numbers do not necessarily indicate an increase in actual incidents, but could simply be reflective of improved recording capabilities or more willingness on the part of victims to report sexual abuse. In either case, the statistics suggest the existence of a serious child sex abuse epidemic in Jamaica, one the actual scale of which has yet to be fully understood.

### **“Toddlers Are Now Being Attacked”**

The numbers alone are not what makes child sex abuse such an urgent crisis for Jamaica. According to the government’s Child Development Agency (CDA), increasingly younger children are now being victimized.<sup>ix</sup> Nearly a fifth of sexual assault victims in Jamaica are under the age of 10, and these attacks too often have tragic consequences.<sup>x</sup>

Greg Smith, the head of OCR reports that that even “toddlers are now being attacked by

[sexual] predators” and are contracting syphilis and gonorrhea in increasing numbers.<sup>xi</sup> Dr. Sandra Knight of Bustamante Hospital for Children in Kingston was among the first to speak publicly about the horrors of child sex abuse in Jamaica.<sup>xii</sup> She reports encountering similar cases in her practice, among the most notable being a young girl infected with four sexually transmitted diseases including HIV after being raped by an uncle, and a one-year-old boy who died of severe damage to his internal organs resulting from also being raped by his uncle.<sup>xiii</sup> Over 90% of sexual assaults of children in Jamaica were perpetrated by a relative or acquaintance of the victim, with police and clergymen among other common offenders.<sup>xiv</sup>

On top of the physical consequences of sexual abuse for child victims, there are also significant mental health concerns. Many sexually abused children go on to suffer from chronic depression, separation anxiety, low self-esteem, inability to trust and other intimacy issues.<sup>xv</sup> UNICEF reports that 42% of all attempted suicides in Jamaica were committed by youths aged 10 to 19 and sexual abuse is understood to be a major contributing factor.<sup>xvi</sup>

### **Causes of the Crisis**

The horrifying statistics and details of Jamaica’s sex abuse crisis begs the question of why this is happening. Activists and analysts have put forward several explanations. Smith points the finger at poverty, also a major problem on the island. Nearly 20% of Jamaicans are currently living below the poverty line, and some children have been “prostituted by their parents to raise money to help with their schooling and to buy food for the house.”<sup>xvii</sup> He also identifies the one room dwellings in which many poor families live as a contributing factor. Children can be exposed to sexual activity among adults from very young ages and they sometimes sleep in the same bed with adult family members due to limited space. These conditions, Smith argues, increase the likelihood for sexual abuse to occur.<sup>xviii</sup>

Men constitute the majority of sex abuse perpetrators and those offenders have varying motivations. Superintendent Enid Ross-Stewart, head of the Jamaica Constabulary Force’s Centre for Investigation of Sexual Offences and Child Abuse (CISOCA), reports that some men still believe in the so-called ‘virgin cleansing myth.’ This myth, thought to have originated in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe still exists in many parts of the globe. Its adherents believe that some diseases can be cured through sexual intercourse with a virgin and generally target young children.<sup>xix</sup> Ross-Stewart also argues that some offenders abuse children for no other reason than to live out perverted sexual fantasies.<sup>xx</sup>

Other sex offenders have financial motivations. A 2015 report by *Al Jazeera* states that because men in Jamaica generally support their girlfriends financially, some find it more cost effective to pursue a relationship with a young girl on the idea that she can be satisfied with smaller monetary contributions than could a woman of their own age.<sup>xxi</sup> Also, adds Smith, some men who are the sole breadwinners in their households believe that they have “rights to all the females within the house.”<sup>xxii</sup> Unfortunately, in many cases mothers do not stop or report incidents of sexual abuse of their children by male breadwinners for fear of losing their financial subsistence.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Even when finances are not considered, as a CISOCA investigator told the *Jamaica Gleaner*, some women simply do not consider child sexual abuse to be wrong or abnormal and therefore raise no objections. Moreover, because failing to report the abuse of a child is a prosecutable offense in Jamaica, some mothers of sexual abuse victims go so far as to “threaten the children, demanding that they lie to [the police] to keep them out of prison.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

Betty-Anne Blaine, head of the advocacy group Hear the Children's Cry agrees with the CISOCA assessment, adding that even some mothers who were themselves victims of sexual abuse will “[turn] a blind eye to their children's abuse.”<sup>xxv</sup> Thus, a vicious cycle is perpetuated. It should be noted however that in most cases when sexual abuse is reported, the victim’s mother is fully cooperative with authorities.

### **The Silence of Lambs**

Another driver of the child sex abuse crisis is an unwillingness on the part of many victims to report their abuse. Aside from the feelings of shame which plague sex abuse victims all over the world, many young Jamaican victims are cowed into silence by the anti-informant culture present in many rural and inner-city communities on the island where interaction with law enforcement is discouraged and fear of reprisal is widespread.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Some victims also opt to remain silent out of uncertainty about whether anyone would believe or support them. In cases where the offender is the mother’s boyfriend, some victims stay silent because they do not want to endanger their mother’s relationship with the offender.<sup>xxvii</sup> There have also been many instances where neighbors or other relatives of the victims who are aware of the abuse choose to remain silent, unwilling to see the offender—who is a friend or relative—go to prison.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Jamaica has laws and institutions designed specifically to combat child sex abuse, however poor enforcement remains a problem.<sup>xxix</sup> As Julie Mansfield, a Jamaican-born writer and advocate—herself a survivor of childhood sexual abuse—explains, most government resources and awareness campaigns are focused on the major cities. Rural locales where child sex abuse is rampant but largely unreported are, she argues, “not on the government’s radar.”<sup>xxx</sup> Therefore, many victims and their supporters have little to no understanding of any state support potentially available to them and are thus reluctant to report.

### **“The Flare Dies”**

For those who do report incidents of sexual abuse, the road to justice can be long and arduous, if it can be traversed at all. When reports are made, there is oftentimes poor coordination among the agencies responsible for addressing child sex abuse. At a community meeting addressing the crisis in the parish of St. Thomas last year, one attendee spoke of her experiences in trying to report the abuse of a young child. She went first to the local police who referred her to the Child Development Agency, which

then referred her to the OCR from which several months have passed without a response.<sup>xxx</sup>

Rodje Malcolm of the advocacy group Jamaicans for Justice reported a similar experience in which a report referred to the CDA was reported lost after six weeks without a response. According to Malcolm, what makes this case and those like it so upsetting is that this lack of organization and coordination could very well have meant “six weeks of daily rape” for a child.<sup>xxxii</sup> In response to these reports, CDA head Rosalee Gauge-Gray blamed a lack of resources for the agency’s performance saying “we need additional resources in terms of technical...and psycho-social support.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> Mansfield argues that state attention to the crisis is inconsistent, with bursts of attention following certain incidents but, she says, after a while “the flare dies and everything seems to go back to business as usual.”<sup>xxxiv</sup>

### **The Slow Pace of Justice**

Even when victims’ cases are successfully reported and the perpetrator is arrested, there are still substantial obstacles to justice. Currently, Jamaican law does not allow child victims of sex abuse to submit videotaped statements or to communicate with the court through a video-link system. Victims are required to face their abusers in court, and this contributes to some victims being unwilling to report their abuse or pursue prosecution of the offender.<sup>xxxv</sup> Moreover, in many cases trial juries refuse to convict offenders. Blaine notes that this occurs even in some cases where DNA evidence was presented.<sup>xxxvi</sup> According to Diahann Gordon Harrison, the Children’s Advocate of Jamaica, some jurors acquit sex offenders because they are willing to believe that the young victims somehow invited the abuse.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

### **Potential Solutions**

Jamaica’s child sex abuse epidemic is an entrenched and complex problem, effectively fighting it will require a consistent, multi-faceted approach by the state. As Dr. Knight has emphasized, the first steps in addressing the crisis must be to “make society aware” of its existence, and to “let everyone know that it is wrong.”<sup>xxxviii</sup>

A plan of action developed by the UK-based National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) may prove successful in increasing awareness and spurring action if implemented in Jamaica. The NSPCC suggests that a curriculum be implemented in all schools nationwide teaching children what constitutes a healthy relationship, how to recognize sexual abuse, ‘good and bad secrets,’ strategies for escaping abusive situations and the importance of disclosing incidents of abuse to trusted adults.<sup>xxxix</sup> Additionally, all teachers and school workers should be thoroughly trained in recognizing the signs and symptoms of child sexual abuse and in what to do if abuse is suspected or reported to them.<sup>xl</sup> The NSPCC also encourages the creation of training programs for parents and caregivers, teaching them to recognize the signs of sexual abuse and urging them to ensure their children understand the nature of sexual abuse, that it is wrong even in cases involving other family members and is to be reported immediately.<sup>xli</sup>

For any of these strategies to have an impact however, a substantial overhaul of the agencies in Jamaica responsible for addressing child sex abuse is necessary. The existing agencies should either be merged or put under a single coordinative authority under which they will work together in separate, clearly defined capacities. They must also be given the necessary financial, technical and material resources they currently lack. Also, every agency and police precinct—in part through equipping them with more advanced technologies—should be made capable of taking reports of abuse, submitting the case to the proper authority and ensuring it is investigated without any further action required of the complainant.

The California-based Prevention Institute (PI) offers possible solutions to funding concerns. It recommends that governments encourage philanthropic organizations to include prevention of child sexual abuse in their funding realm.<sup>xliii</sup> Also, states are urged to form “prevention coalitions,” pooling resources and expertise with community-based advocacy, faith-based and survivor groups.<sup>xliiii</sup> Jamaica has already had successes in gathering funds for community development programs through partnerships between the government, the private sector, foreign governments, and international aid organizations. A similar approach could be successful in the fight against child sex abuse.<sup>xliv</sup>

Strong efforts must also be made to address the root causes of child sex abuse, chief among which are poverty and economic dependence among mothers. Poverty alleviation, skills training and employment programs aimed at poor mothers should be a priority for the state, non-state organizations and any “prevention coalitions.” Above all, it is imperative that all anti-sex abuse efforts and campaigns be distributed evenly across the country and are not confined to the major cities.

## **Legislative Reforms**

In addition to expanding education and awareness of child sex abuse, legislative reforms are necessary in combating the existing crisis. UNICEF recommends that Jamaica revise existing legislation to allow child victims to submit videotaped statements in their offenders’ trials to reduce the degree of trauma and intimidation children may feel when asked to testify, and which contribute to some victims refusing to give or withdrawing testimony.<sup>xlv</sup> Furthermore, in child sex abuse cases it needs to be made clear to jurors from the beginning of the trial process that the only relevant question is whether or not sexual intercourse took place between the child and the adult. Whether the sex was ‘invited’ must be understood by jurors to be irrelevant.

## **Conclusion**

Sexual abuse of children is a particularly heinous and despicable crime, one which should not occur anywhere, least of all in a place which is for so many a paradise, and certainly not to the degree it does in Jamaica today. With the numbers of reported abuses increasing and the ages of the victims decreasing, the time for silence and inaction has long passed. It must be made clear to all who believe otherwise that sexual abuse of children is a problem in Jamaica and it is wrong. All children and those who

care about them need to be equipped with a clear understanding of how to recognize abuse and what to do about it.

Furthermore, the justice system must be reformed, and operate in a way in which all victims and their supporters feel confident that if they report abuse they can expect action, while perpetrators and their enablers must be advised that they will be held accountable for their actions or omissions. With the lives and well-being of thousands of children at risk, the cost of inaction is too steep for Jamaica or any other society to afford.

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