

Good afternoon every one.

Today as we join the rest of the world in observing International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, Belize takes an extra step in advocacy with the launch of the 16 Days of Activism to End Violence Against Women And Girls. This annual campaign takes the plight of women and girls who experience violence in their daily lives and puts it squarely in the public domain. It is a time when we cannot ignore the issues, no matter how hard it is to hear about the physical abuse, the sexual abuse, the murders of our Belizean women and girls.

I am disheartened to say that this year in particular, our society seems to have taken a step backward. We live in a time when technology is continuously advancing. But with all its benefits, another form of violence against women and girls has evolved. Social media, which gives us an outlet to connect with friends and family worldwide, has unfortunately, also given rise to an increase in cyber bullying and what has been termed “slut shaming”. We have seen quite frequently, nude or intimate photos and videos of women being made public without their permission. This is also a form of sexual violence and troubling one at that. It is done purely out of the malicious intent to humiliate, shame, and publicly expose women. The effects are real; they are devastating and they are lasting; especially in a small society like ours.

In far too many cases of violence against women and girls, the perpetrator is someone known and trusted: an intimate partner, a parent or relative. And this is not confined to any specific culture or ethnic group, region or country. It is widespread, pervasive and knows no boundaries.

What is worse is that the problem continues to be compounded by victim blaming, a sad trend that seems to be a reflex response for many. Let me say outright... these horrible violations of human rights are NEVER justifiable. What a woman does in private with an intimate partner is not for public consumption. What she wears—no matter how revealing—is not an invitation to be sexually assaulted.

We need to change this culture of thinking “she shouldn’t have”. No more she shouldn’t have taken those pictures”. “She shouldn’t have been wearing that”. “She shouldn’t have been out at that hour”. “She shouldn’t have provoked him”. Sound familiar? We’ve all heard it and perhaps even said it at times. But it’s time to stop making excuses for this inexcusable behavior!

Perpetrators of violence against women and girls must hear us loud and clear; their actions cannot and will not be tolerated. Each of us has a role to play and so my message for everyone in Belize, men and women, is to be an advocate, in your own right, for the elimination of violence against women and girls. Take whatever small steps you can to help to protect the rights of women and girls across this country.

That being said, I applaud WIN-Belize and UNICEF who collaborated on today’s launch, the Women’s Department and every other organization that will be participating in these 16 Days of Activism. I am certainly looking forward to the rest of the scheduled events.

Thank you.