

DAWN DISCUSSION PAPER #44

POLICY TRANSFORMATIONS



**TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO
SOCIAL PROTECTION AND CARE
POLICIES IN A TIME OF COVID-19**

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FEBRUARY, 2022

DRAFT for discussion

POLICY
TRANSFORMATIONS

REGION: CARIBBEAN	POLICY AREA: ● CARE AND SOCIAL PROTECTION ● MACROECONOMICS
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Using a feminist intersectional and interlinkages approach, this project closely examines policy changes that have taken place during the period of exceptionality produced by the pandemic, exploring how they may impact the future in four policy areas: macroeconomics; labour policies and workers’ rights; migration and human mobilities, care and social protection.

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A. Roopnarine, Karen and Brizan, Crystal. 2022. Trinidad and Tobago. Social Protection and Care Policies in a Time of COVID-19. *DAWN Discussion Papers N^o. 44*. DAWN. Suva (Fiji).

ABBREVIATIONS

CAF	Development Bank of Latin America
CAFRA TT	Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action Trinidad and Tobago
CTs	Cash Transfers
ECLAC	Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
GBV	Gender Based Violence
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GORTT	Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago
HSF	Heritage and Stabilisation Fund
IDB	Inter-American Development Bank
ILO	International Labour Organization
MSDFS	Ministry of Social Development and Family Services
NAMDEVCO Corporation	The National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation
NGOs	Non-governmental Organisations
NIS	National Insurance System
TTPS	Trinidad and Tobago Police Service
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted several economic, social, cultural, and health challenges faced by women in Trinidad and Tobago, not only as poverty levels are higher in female-headed households, but also because a significant share of unpaid care activities is performed by women, including the additional burden of educating children due to the extended closure of schools. This study examined the Government of Trinidad and Tobago's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the main policy area of care and social protection. The main objective of this research was to examine whether the COVID-19 social protection and care policies implemented had any transformational effect on social and gender inequalities and on macroeconomic policy. The targeted cash transfers (CTs) support programme was mostly a continuation of pre-COVID-19 approaches, which focussed on CTs as opposed to strengthened social security systems and social services to address the causal factors contributing to economic and social inequality. A review of the emergency CTs found that more male applications were approved, while fewer women applied. Many women did not meet the criteria to apply for the CTs as they had no payments into the national insurance system, having worked as domestic workers or in the informal economy. Some women could not apply for rental assistance grants as their rental contracts were informal rental agreements. Moreover, many women could not navigate or access the online grant application process. Social protection measures applied in response to COVID-19 focussed on social assistance, and little to no efforts focussed on care services. Unpaid care labour has been a critical way the country absorbed the pandemic shock. Although Trinidad and Tobago has already established some social protection floors, the Government should focus on closing the remaining gaps and changing its policy approach, especially for women. A paradigm shift needs to occur in the way in which the Government delivers social services, addressing the underlying causes of social and gender-based inequalities.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Social protection measures and care policies are critical to addressing three threats to the well-being of persons or households. First, the danger that persons/households are vulnerable because they are identified as “being poor” (for which social assistance is needed); second, because they are at risk of “becoming poor” (for which social insurance is needed); and third, because of structural inequalities and abuses of power (for which “social equity” is needed) – (Deveraux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2004). Fundamentally, social protection that is effective in responding to these threats will be redistributive, empowering and therefore transformational. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), social protection floors are nationally defined sets of basic social security guarantees that secure protection to prevent or alleviate poverty, vulnerability, and social exclusion. National social protection floors may comprise access to essential health care, including maternity care; access to nutrition, education, and care for children; basic income security for persons of economically active age who are unable to earn sufficient income, particularly in cases of sickness, unemployment, maternity, and disability; and basic income security for older persons¹. Social protection systems have specific effects on women due to women’s location in the sexual division of labour and their responsibilities as parents of last resort, that is, ‘mothers’. Social protection therefore, from a feminist standpoint, must be understood as a mechanism for social inclusion and social justice and as the mechanism for social and economic redistribution, and the address and redress of intersecting gender, social, and economic inequalities.

The COVID-19 pandemic was in many ways unprecedented despite the experience of the Spanish flu in 1920-22, which had largely disappeared from public memory. The impact was however much greater due to contemporary developments in aviation and global travel as well as the context of the current global economic paradigm. The prolonged lockdowns however brought to light many of the underlying problems, inequalities, and structural inefficiencies of the current economic paradigm and of course exacerbated them.

¹ Social Protection Floor: <https://www.ilo.org/secsoc/areas-of-work/policy-development-and-applied-research/social-protection-floor/lang--en/index.htm>.

This study will examine the Government of Trinidad and Tobago's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the main policy areas of care and social protection. Social protection was one of the primary mechanisms implemented during this period and reached over 220,000 households (Social Sector Investment Programme, 2021), intersecting policies that affected and relied on care. The study explores four main questions: 1) What were the pandemic-related social protection and care policies implemented by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and the broader social policy context; 2) By examining the hypotheses proposed in DAWN's analytical framework (Llavaneras Blanco and Cuervo, 2021), we will inquire whether these policies were stagnant and path-dependent, i.e., simply extensions of pre-existing policies, or were they innovative or progressive, creating some disjuncture with pre-COVID approaches?; 3) What were the gendered implications of these policies and strategies?; and 4) How did these strategies interface with other state or private sector-related strategies implemented during the pandemic? In other words, did the COVID-19 social protection and care policies have any transformational effect on social and gender inequalities as well as on macroeconomic policy?

The study is organised as follows: Section 2 discusses a macroeconomic background and social protection and care policies in Trinidad and Tobago prior to COVID-19; Section 3 provides a feminist analysis of the COVID-19 related cash transfer programmes and the impact of the closure of all learning institutions; and Section 4 provides the main conclusions and findings of the case study.

1. BRIEF BACKGROUND TO SOCIAL PROTECTION IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

The challenges of social protection and social inclusion in 21st Century Trinidad and Tobago as with the rest of the Caribbean, must be understood against a backdrop of its colonial history and the legacies of the near decimation and later marginalisation of indigenous peoples, forced transportation and enslavement of Africans and indentured migration and bonded labour of South Asians (Indians) and other migrations. African and Indian women entered the Caribbean primarily as workers and not wives, labouring for long hours on plantations, leading to a tradition of women's wage work and involvement in family production. The legacies of these racialised systems of labour exploitation, colonial cultural hegemony and economic extraction, continues to cast a shadow over the societies, politics and the economies of the region.

2. CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND OF THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO ECONOMY

A) MACROECONOMIC AND SOCIAL INDICATORS

Despite repeated calls for diversification from various sectors of the society especially during the last three to four decades, the economy of Trinidad and Tobago remains energy-based and highly sensitive to international oil and natural gas prices. The country experienced fifteen consecutive years of positive economic growth from 1994 to 2008, propelled by the rapid expansion of energy sector output and the sale of natural gas-based products on international markets. In 2009, the economy was hit by three simultaneous shocks – the global financial crisis, the end to the country's (third) energy boom, and the collapse of the largest conglomerate in the country (CL Financial Group of Companies). Since then, the Government has recorded consistent fiscal deficits and rising debt over the last decade.

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) however is an inadequate measure of economic situation of the population as it provides little evidence of internal inequalities. Currently, poverty measurement in Trinidad and Tobago is not done regularly, and measurement involves different methodologies and survey instruments, making comparisons dubious. The latest available official poverty statistics for the country relate to the year 2005. There is a higher incidence of poverty among women-headed households compared to the national rate. However, the overall incidence of poverty among women-headed households has been declining along with the country's enhanced economic prosperity. The national poverty rate moved from 35.9 per cent of all households in 1992 to eleven per cent in 2005. Meanwhile, poverty among women-headed households moved from 43.7 per cent in 1992 to 12.4 per cent in 2005. Comparative figures for men-headed households were 33.2 per cent in 1992 and ten per cent in 2005. Regardless of the economic progress of the country, the poverty gap between women and men remains. Moreover, despite the decreased poverty levels, inequality persisted as there was only a slight decrease in the Gini Coefficient from 0.42 in 1992 to 0.39 in 2005.

Women workers have had higher unemployment rates than male workers. This is so even though unemployed women are often identified as “not in the labour force” as it is assumed that they return to household duties. However, the gender gap in unemployment did improve over the past three decades, decreasing from a gap of 6.3 percentage points in 1990 to 1.4 percentage points in 2019. Similarly, up until the 2008 financial crisis, labour force

participation had also improved. Between 2008 and 2009, the participation rate fell by 0.9 percentage points. More women participated in the labour market, as evidenced by the steady increase in the ratio of female to male participation rate.

The self-employment rate, a rough indicator of the size of the informal sector, had a declining trend up until the global financial crisis. This is a rough indicator as many self-employed do not self-identify due to taxation avoidance. Pre-pandemic, the male self-employment rate was almost double the rate of female self-employment – 16.6 per cent in 2019 for women versus 30.8 per cent for men. In Trinidad and Tobago, self-employed workers are particularly vulnerable as they are currently not covered under the National Insurance Scheme and so lack social security protection.

Based on 2012 labour force data, men out-earned women in all occupational groupings despite women generally being more educated (Roopnarine, 2018). In an earlier study by Seguíno (2003), similar results were found. This has been a consistent reality locally and globally. The raw gender wage gap in 2012 was 11.4 per cent. The largest disparity in the male-female earnings (average gross monthly income) was among sales workers. At the higher end of the pay scale, there was a smaller disparity in wages. The labour market in Trinidad and Tobago appears to have both a “sticky floor” and a “glass ceiling”. In short, there appears to be greater discrimination against women at the lower end of the pay scale, while at the higher end of the pay scale, women need to have more years of education to gain the same rate of pay as men.

B) CARE AND SOCIAL PROTECTION POLICIES IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Trinidad and Tobago’s social policy model combines a partial citizenry contributory pillar for social protection alongside access to social services in health and education and a series of cash transfer programmes of a non-contributory nature for the most vulnerable in society (disabled, poor, single-parents, at-risk youth, children, and the elderly) – (Robles and Vargas, 2012). As a result of complaints from fathers’ associations, colonial-era provisions for women who are unable to locate their breadwinners, were changed to include male single parents.

The non-contributory pillar of social protection is governed by various laws, including the Public Assistance Act (1999) and the Senior Citizens' Pension Act (2010). These Acts outline the types of non-contributory benefits that are included within the social protection system. The Acts also regulate the targeting approach of cash transfers and programmes according to levels of income. The main institution charged with implementing non-contributory social protection programmes is the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services (MSDFS).

The MSDFS offers several Social Assistance Grants, categorised into four types: Senior Citizens' Pension, Public Assistance Grant, Disability Grant, and General Assistance Grants. The latter includes assistance for housing, household items, medical equipment, domestic help², dietary needs, clothing, education, among others. The level of benefits varies, and Table 1 below illustrates the general description of the country's Social Assistance Grants with the targeting (eligibility) criteria. The grants are targeted towards the poor, where being 'poor' is assessed via monthly income, means testing, and level of vulnerability to poverty. Vulnerability to poverty also covers orphans, the elderly, persons living with disabilities, and victims of natural disasters. Several problems arise when examining the overall performance of the social protection system in Trinidad and Tobago, foremost, the lack of detailed information regarding poverty and the impact of different reforms on the 'poor' (Robles and Vargas, 2012).

² This grant facilitates the provision of part-time domestic help to clients who are unable to perform normal household chores, for example, whilst recuperating from surgery, and are unable to afford the cost of domestic assistance.

Table 1 Criteria of Eligibility for Social Assistance Grants in Trinidad and Tobago

CRITERIA OF ELIGIBILITY FOR SOCIAL ASSISTANCE GRANTS IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO		
Grant Criteria of eligibility		Description
Senior Citizen's Pension	Persons aged 65 years and above with a monthly income below TT\$ 3,000 (US\$ 468.7)	The aim of the pension is to reduce the incidence of poverty among the elderly and to improve their quality of life. The transfer ranges between TT\$ 1 850 (US\$ 289.1) and TT\$ 1 950 (US\$ 304.7) delivered monthly (SSA, 2009)
Disability Assistance Grant	Persons with disabilities, unable for work certified by a practitioner, and with a monthly income below TT\$ 1,100 (US\$ 171.9)	Targeted cash transfer for disabled people living in poverty. The transfer consists of TT\$ 1 300 (US\$ 203.1)
Public Assistance Grant	Adults without income caused by ill health. Orphans children, family deserted, ^a and with parents in prison	This grant is received by unemployed, persons unable to work, persons who have little means for financially supporting themselves and guardians of necessitous children. The average transfer in 2011 was TT\$ 754 (US\$ 118) ^b
General Assistance Grants	Persons/household hit by natural/other disasters (hurricanes, fires, floods and landslides); clients of the MPSD	Provides financial assistance to persons living in poverty or vulnerability, provided they have passed a needs' assessment carried by social workers. The benefits for each grant are the following: Housing assistance: TT\$ 15 000 (US\$ 2 339) Household Items: TT\$ 6 000 (US\$ 935.6) (once every 3 years) Medical Equipment: TT\$ 7 500 (US\$ 1 1169.5) Domestic Help: TT\$ 1,800 (US\$ 280.7) Dietary Grant: TT\$ 600 (US\$ 93.6) Clothing Grant: TT\$ 500 (US\$ 78) Funeral Grant: TT\$ 7 000 (US\$ 1,091.6) Special Child Grant: TT\$ 800 (US\$ 124.7) Pharmaceuticals: TT\$ 2 500 (US\$ 389.8) House Rent: TT\$ 7 500 (US\$ 1,169.5) School Supplies Primary: TT\$ 750 (US\$ 117) School Supplies Secondary: TT\$ 1 000 (US\$ 156) Urgent Temporary Assistance: TT\$ 300 (US\$ 46.8)
Source: Own elaboration, based on Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, Social Sector Investment Programme 2012: From steady foundation to economic transformation. Safety, jobs, investment. Port of Spain, 2011.		
^a This situation is generated when one spouse separates from the family—the other spouse and/or the children—without providing them with any financial support.		
^b This figure corresponds to an estimate average monthly amount and was calculated based on the total average amount disbursed in this grant, divided by the informed number of beneficiaries.		

Source: Reproduced from Robles, C. & Vargas, L. H., 2012. *Social Protection Systems in Latin America and the Caribbean: Trinidad and Tobago*, p.19.

From 2004 to 2015, government expenditure tripled, while spending on social protection increased almost six-fold. Central government expenditure on social protection increased from TT\$2,157 million (US\$321.9 million) in 2004 to TT\$12,139 million (US\$1,811.8 million) in 2015. This increase in social protection expenditure coincided with the change in government in 2010 to 2015, whose 2010 manifesto focussed on 'people-centred development' and poverty eradication (People's Partnership, 2010). A breakdown of the programming during this period gives an idea of the focus of this 'social protection approach'. The 2014 Social Investment Plan, a component of the national budget, spoke of a social safety net and not to social programmes. It identified three main strategies: 1) Subventions to NGOs and civil society including faith-based organisations for service

provision (GORTT 2014, p.23); 2) The Targeted Conditional Cash Transfer Programme, which accounted for the largest component of the allocation, provided food assistance including the TT Food Card distributed through members of parliament; 3) Grants – legacy e.g., pensions and social assistance and newer e.g. disability, household repairs etc.; and 3) The National Poverty Reduction and Eradication Programme focussed on micro enterprise as the key mechanism for social protection. This approach, which continued but was reduced due to budgetary constraints under the new administration after 2016, reflected a shift from State to NGO's, a focus on cash transfers and on micro-enterprise development as the main poverty reduction mechanisms. The fact that the social development portfolio has been separate from the gender portfolio for some time, means that the gender impact of policies is seldom considered. None of these strategies, despite the expanded expenditure, were able to substantially reduce the proportions of the working poor and the urban and rural underclasses. This period also saw substantial increases in criminal violence including gender-based violence and narco-trafficking, resulting in a society deeply divided by class and opportunity.

Today, the country's social protection strategy is guided by the country's National Development Strategy (also known as Vision 2020 and later as Vision 2030), which advocates attaining a developed country status by 2030 (originally 2020). According to the Vision 2030 document, "*...our citizens are central to our development and, in fact, are our greatest assets. We must create a society in which all the basic needs are met, and each individual is valued and given the opportunity to contribute and to self-actualise*" (GORTT, 2016, p. 45). However, the Vision 2030 document stated that despite the high expenditure on social protection, there was no significant improvement in socioeconomic indicators. This suggests that the issue may not be the levels of expenditure but the approaches that are used.

3. ANALYSIS OF CASH TRANSFERS AND THE CLOSURE OF CHILDCARE CENTRES AND ALL LEARNING INSTITUTIONS

On 13 March 2020, Trinidad and Tobago recorded its first confirmed case. The underlying philosophy and objective of the Government's intervention was one of balancing containment efforts with the need to maintain livelihoods. This was done using a "*broad set of policy measures to assist the poor and vulnerable, protect businesses, jobs, and incomes, maintain financial resilience, and sustain economic activity*" (GORTT, 2021, p. 6). This statement reflects the current situation where neither the social sector nor its link to equity and social inclusion is well-understood. The Government declared that it had adopted a "Whole of Government" approach as its core strategy to provide support and relief to cushion the impact of COVID-19 on the population (GORTT, 2021). To this end, the MSDFS spearheaded the social protection framework and collaborated with different government ministries, civil society and non-governmental organisations, and faith-based organisations to provide support services to needy citizens³. A targeted social safety net to protect the most vulnerable individuals and households (including current beneficiaries of existing cash transfer programmes such as the Food Support Programme, Senior Citizen Pension, and Disability Assistance Grant) and those retrenched, terminated or suffered a loss of income due to the virus-containment measures were immediately established in a March 18, 2020, announcement. Notably, there was no explicit mention of unpaid domestic and care work in the Government's COVID-19 support strategy. Moreover, in the Government's Roadmap to Recovery Post-Pandemic Report, women were excluded from the pandemic discussion-making as the Committee was all-male, and the Report failed to address existing and exacerbated gender inequalities in a transformative way (Hosein, 2021).

³ The Government relied on faith-based organisations to identify vulnerable persons/families at the community-level largely because the shift from community and family case management to NGO provisions and cash transfers. This reduced direct links with the poor.

A) CASH TRANSFERS

The support programme consisted mainly of targeted cash transfers, including grants for food support, income support, senior citizens, public assistance, disability assistance, rental assistance, among others. In many ways, the support programme was a continuation of the pre-COVID-19 approaches, which focused on cash transfers as opposed to strengthened social security systems and enhanced social services to address the causal factors contributing to economic and social inequality, mental health, and other social problems such as addiction, school dropouts, etc. In essence, based on DAWN's analytical framework (Llavaneras Blanco and Cuervo, 2021), the emergency CTs were stagnant and path-dependent with little to no innovative or socially transformative measures instituted.

The emergency financial programmes that were implemented to cushion both the economic and social adverse impacts of the COVID-19 restrictions can be seen in Table 2. It also shows how the CTs were adapted to the pandemic in terms of eligibility for access, coverage, and the creation of new CT policies. For example, the Salary Relief Grants issued by the Ministry of Finance and Income Support and Rental Assistance Grants issued by the Ministry of Social Development were new and emergency cash transfers created to deal specifically with the loss of income due to the COVID-19 Stay-at-Home order. Between March and September 2020, over 222,000 households were recipients of COVID-19-related social safety net measures. The cost of these interventions amounted to TT\$482 million (US\$71.9 million) – (GORTT, 2021). Despite these adaptations and creation of new emergency CTs, the overall social protection programme remained '*business as usual*'.

Table 2: COVID-19 Grant Support (as of September 2020)

Ministry	COVID-19 Intervention	Description	Households
Ministry of Social Development & Family Services	Food Card	Additional support to existing beneficiaries of food support	25,101
		Food and Income Support-Retrenched/Terminated/Income Reduced for an initial period not exceeding three (3) months.	50,904
		The provision of Food Support to households that receive meals from the School Feeding Programme but who are not current beneficiaries of food support.	20,500
	Income Support	Support to current beneficiaries of the Public Assistance and Disability Assistance Grant	42,451
	Senior Citizens Pension (outstanding)	Food support to persons who applied for Senior Citizens Pension but their applications were pending.	2,818
	Disability Assistance Grant (outstanding)	Food Support to persons who applied for Disability Assistance Grant but their matters were pending.	488
	Hampers	Emergency Hampers were provided to families in urgent need during the stay at home period. This project was executed in collaboration with the 14 Municipal Corporations.	1,400
	Food Vouchers	Food Vouchers/Market Boxes provided to families, in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture during the stay at home period and continuing. This included a basket of fresh produce, inclusive of two chickens, and a grocery voucher. This initiative aims to provide support to 30,000 families.	24,999
	Rental Assistance	Rental Assistance to a family where a member was retrenched/terminated/reduced	3,770
Ministry of Community Development Culture & the Arts	One Off Emergency Relief Grant	A one-off Emergency Relief Grant in the sum of \$5,000.00 to artists and creatives, who have lost income due to cancelled exhibitions, classes, conferences, workshops and other cultural related events.	1,055
NEDCO	Entrepreneurship Relief Grant	A Grant Facility to assist micro and small enterprises earning less than one million dollars (\$1,000,000.00), to recover from the effects of COVID-19	416
Ministry of Finance & National Insurance Board	Salary Relief Grants	A grant available to persons who contributed to NIS and experienced retrenchment/termination/income reduced for an initial period not exceeding 3 months.	46,628
Ministry of Works and Transport	Maxi - Taxi Owners Fuel Relief Grant (Diesel Grant)	The Maxi - Taxi Owners Fuel Relief Grant was provided to mitigate the economic impacts faced by Taxi Owners. This was due to the measures implemented by the Government for maxi-taxi drivers to operate at half capacity when plying their trade on the nation's roads, in an effort to curb the spread of COVID-19. The Ministry of Works and Transport in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance issued a one-time payment valued at \$2,000 as a Relief Grant to qualified, registered owners of operational H-Taxis only.	1973
		TOTAL	222,503

Source: Social Sector Investment Programme 2021 Report, p.60

The third wave of the virus hit the country in April 2021, resulting in the reinstatement of several lockdown measures, closure of all non-essential businesses, and a State of Emergency. Given this, several of the CTs that were introduced in 2020 were extended during 2021. As of May 2021, over 86,000 Salary Relief Grants were paid, with an additional 7,000 grants still to be paid. These Salary Relief Grants were intended to provide financial relief to persons in specific sectors who had suffered a loss of income because of COVID-19-related restrictions. To be eligible for this grant, persons needed to be registered with the National Insurance System (NIS). The grants amounted to TT\$1500 (US\$223.9) per month for a maximum of three months. The bulk of applications were in the food and restaurant and retail sectors, both feminised sectors of employment. The most innovative aspect of the relief programme was the Ministry of Agriculture's initiative where local farmers were paid to provide 25,000 fresh food baskets per month (for May, June, and July 2021) to be distributed to needy households.

In 2020, given that Trinidad and Tobago is a mono-producing extractivist economy, the country was also adversely impacted by a collapse in oil prices in the first quarter of 2020. In a national context of consistent fiscal deficits and rising debt over the last decade, the expanded COVID-19-related CTs do not appear to be fiscally sustainable. The Government financed its COVID-19 related expenditures through external borrowings from development banks like the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the Development Bank of Latin America (CAF), the World Bank, and withdrawals from the country's sovereign wealth fund (the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, HSF). Notably, to finance the emergency COVID-19 social protection programmes, the Government had to amend the HSF legislation to include the allowance of withdrawals due to dangerous infectious diseases as declared under the Public Health Ordinance. The country's public debt-to-GDP ratio currently stands at over eighty per cent.

The objective of the Government's COVID-19 social protection plan was to "leave no one behind". As of September 2020, the MSDFS had received over 56,000 applications. However, a review of the Government's COVID-19 Support Plan found that sixty-three per cent were applications received from men, and 33 per cent from women. Of these applications, fifty-eight per cent of the male applications were approved, while only thirty per cent of female applicants were given approvals. The Ministry did not share the reason(s) for

the lower approval rate for female applicants. However, Kambon (2021) noted that fewer women applied for Salary Relief Grants from the Ministry as many women did not meet the criteria to apply as they had no payments into the national insurance system, having worked as domestic workers⁴ or in the informal economy. Some women could not apply/receive rental grants as their rental contracts were informal rental agreements, and landlords would not or could not comply with the necessary information requirements that formed part of the grant application.

The Inter-American Development Bank conducted an online socioeconomic survey in Trinidad and Tobago during April 2020⁵ to better understand the implications of the shock of the pandemic on livelihoods in Trinidad and Tobago (IDB, 2020). There was a massive jump in the number of households that reported an income level below the minimum wage⁶, moving from 12.4 per cent in January 2020 (pre-pandemic) to 47.1 per cent in April 2020. The three main factors that led to this increase were business closures due to public health restrictions or lack of demand for goods and services, employment loss, and loss of rental income from real estate or vehicles. The employment shock was similar across both sexes, with roughly forty-five per cent of both men and women reporting that they had lost their jobs.

Regarding economic resilience, the pandemic affected all households' income levels, but the magnitude of the shock differed (Ibid, 2020). Households earning below the minimum wage pre-pandemic were more severely impacted by the loss of income source, particularly employment loss (sixty-seven per cent), compared to middle-income and high-income households (forty-nine per cent and twenty-three per cent, respectively) – Figure 1.

⁴ According to the International Labour Organisation, in 2016, it was estimated that Trinidad and Tobago had approximately 30,000 domestic workers, approximately five per cent of the labour force. https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/cooperatives/news/WCMS_536774/lang--en/index.htm.

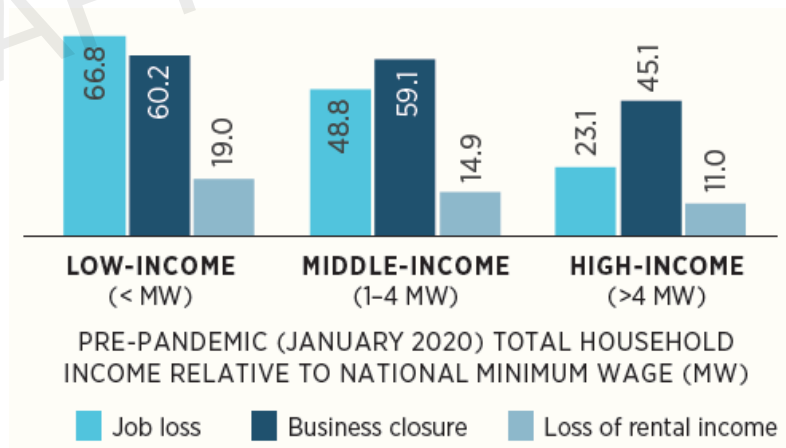
⁵ The online socioeconomic survey was conducted over a two-week period (April 16 to April 30, 2020) and garnered over 4,700 responses.

⁶ The minimum hourly wage rate is \$17.50 Trinidad and Tobago dollars.

Working remotely at home was more prevalent among high-income households (fifty-five per cent) than low- and middle-income households (thirty-seven per cent). Fewer than thirty per cent of households indicated having enough savings to cover an unexpected expense⁷ (Ibid, 2020). Among low-income households (those earning below the minimum wage), less than twenty per cent reported having enough savings for an emergency expense, and forty-three per cent had enough savings to cover one week or more of essential expenses. Unfortunately, there was no analysis by occupation in this study.

Meanwhile, among high-income households (those earning eleven times or more the minimum wage), eighty-nine per cent reported having enough savings to cover an emergency, and ninety-three per cent had enough savings to cover one week of essential expenses. Pre-pandemic, the latest publicly available poverty study for Trinidad and Tobago, found that in 2005, thirty-eight per cent of the poorest households were headed by women (based on the Survey of Living Conditions), and these households comprised about twenty-eight per cent of all households (Kambon, 2021). Indeed, the pandemic would have had devastating effects on these households and expanded the inequality gap in Trinidad and Tobago – Figure 1.

Figure 1: Income Shocks by Source



Source: Inter-American Development Bank (2020). COVID-19 The Caribbean Crisis: Results from an Online Socioeconomic Survey, pp. 17.

⁷ The survey defined an unexpected expense to be equivalent to one month of minimum wage (\$2,800 Trinidad and Tobago dollars or US\$418).

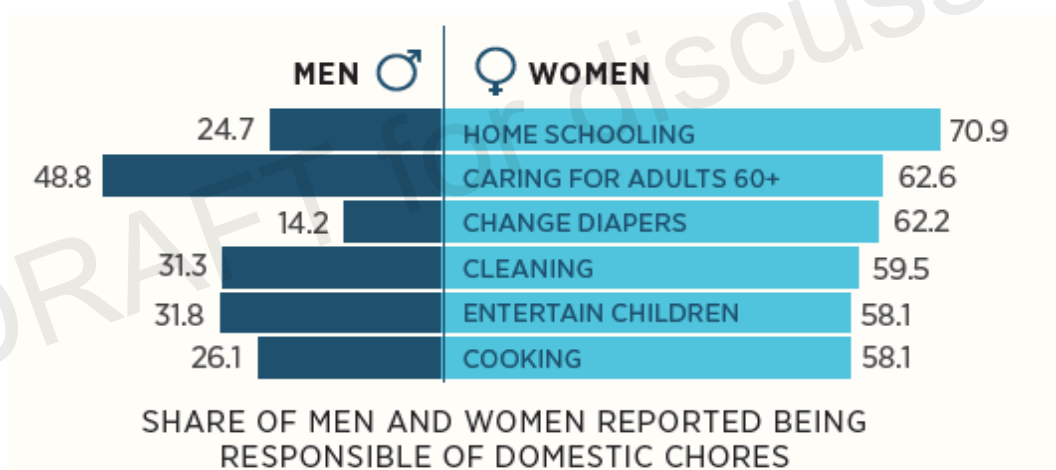
In terms of unpaid care work, the closure of the non-essential service sectors, including domestics, has led to increasing levels of female unemployment and underemployment. This has had severe implications, as many low-income mothers have been challenged to feed their children and sustain their care responsibilities. As noted earlier, women are also more likely than men to be employed in essential services such as the healthcare sector, who have been significantly impacted by excessive pandemic-induced workloads combined with the usual work responsibilities and new care demands at home (ECLAC, 2021). The unpaid care work burden has become more demanding for women considering school closures, social isolation, and the increased number of sick persons in the household, also the loss of household help in middle-class households.

The interface between the Government's COVID-19-related social protection programmes and the existing social insurance system is fraught with shortcomings and inefficiencies. Currently, Trinidad and Tobago's NIS excludes self-employed, informal sector workers, own-account workers, and migrants. A disproportionate number of informal workers are women. COVID-19 brought to the fore how inadequate the official listing of workers registered with the NIS was as a tool for identifying vulnerable persons in society. This was due to a myriad of reasons, including lack of coverage for certain groups of workers (particularly informal workers), financial exclusion and a relatively high proportion of unbanked workers, and corruption among employers. It also brought to light the absence of direct links between communities and the poor and the State's social development and support systems. To this end, some persons could not access COVID-19-related CTs due to no registration details in the NIS system, no bank account to receive financial grants, and corrupt employers having not paid employee contributions even though these were deducted from workers' salaries. In response, the Government leaned on religious organisations to assist with identifying vulnerable persons/households at the community level. The Government provided cash transfers of TT\$30 million (US\$4.5 million) during 2020 to religious bodies to provide food hampers for the most vulnerable persons in their respective communities; during 2020, this amounted to almost 50,000 food hampers to assist needy persons.

B) CLOSURE OF CHILDCARE CENTRES, NURSERIES, AND ALL LEARNING INSTITUTIONS

The shock of the pandemic negatively impacted the quality of life, particularly for women within the household (IDB, 2020). One of the immediate COVID-19 containment measures was the closure of all teaching and learning institutions (effective 13 March 2020), which resulted in children being out of school for an extended period. The distribution of domestic chores was significantly disproportionate between men and women. Women bore a more considerable burden of household chores, including home schooling, caring for the elderly, changing diapers, entertaining children, cleaning, and cooking (Figure 2). During the pandemic, seventy-one per cent of women reported being responsible for coordinating or assisting with home schooling compared with only twenty-five per cent among men. Moreover, almost sixty per cent of women were responsible for cooking and cleaning compared with less than thirty-two per cent of men having to be responsible for these domestic chores.

Figure 2: Distribution of Domestic Chores



Source: Inter-American Development Bank (2020). COVID-19 The Caribbean Crisis: Results from an Online Socioeconomic Survey, pp. 18.

In Trinidad and Tobago there are several categories of educational facilities which are both State and privately operated; these span early childhood, primary, secondary, technical and vocational training, and tertiary. The categories of persons which these closures affected span a wide cross section of society, and insofar as school aged children and teachers, the following numbers give some context to the impact of schools' closure:

1. Early Childhood Care and Education Centres (841), Students (26,657), Teachers (2,394)
2. Primary Schools (557), Students (120,455/State), Teachers (6,978/State)
3. Schools for the Differently Abled (43), Students (552), Teachers (103)
4. Secondary Schools (189), Students (83,554/State), Teachers (6,928/State)
5. TVET (148), Students (37,661/State), Lecturers (2,049/State)⁸

The closure of schools was also coupled with the shutdown of almost all sectors of the economy accompanied by Stay-at-Home measures. This meant that most families were at home with very few opportunities to leave the house unless they were essential workers. From the outset, there was the fear that prolonged confinement of familial units to their homes would result in the increased incidence of gender-based violence (GBV). Dr Gabrielle Hosein, senior lecturer of the Institute for Gender and Development Studies at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus, Trinidad, made the following observation, "*Girls' risk of sexual abuse is especially high now that uncles, step-fathers, cousins and other men are more present and difficult to escape*".⁹ The fears of Dr Hosein as well as those of many other experts were well founded as mere weeks into the lockdown, the former Commissioner of Police, Mr Gary Griffith, reported a disturbing increase in the reports of domestic violence to the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS). Mr Griffith reported that "*police had noticed a spike in domestic cases for February and March compared to last year's figures... The overall figure for reports for 2019 was 232 - but it's already 558 this year*".¹⁰ Further, these numbers only relate to

⁸ Inter-American Development Bank, section: COVID-19 Trinidad and Tobago's response to school closure. <https://socialdigital.iadb.org/en/edu/covid-19/regional-response/6178>

⁹ Hosein, G. (2020). "Emotional pitfalls of isolation", Newsday Newspaper, March 25.

¹⁰ Alexander, G. (2020) "CoP warns abusers amid spike during Stay Home", Guardian Newspaper, April 9, 2020.

reports which were lodged with the TTPS and does not account for the possible thousands of incidents of domestic violence which go unreported as well as the incidents of sexual violence.

The impact of school closures also extends to the financial well-being of families as the teaching vocation is one which is dominated by women, almost exclusively so at the early childhood and day care levels. It is those women who own or are employed by private day care centres and/or pre-schools who would have experienced loss of income. Conversely, schools at other levels were able to adapt in some way to an online learning platform and continue to generate income to pay teaching and support staff. Further exacerbating this loss of income, is the additional unpaid work which women must add to their already full plates: childcare, housework, supervision of online school, mediation of disputes amongst family members. In “normal” circumstances, women are confronted with triple jeopardies, however in the context of the pandemic, these multiple jeopardies have further compounded an environment which pushes women to the very brink; an environment where women are overworked, underpaid and whose emotional wellbeing and mental health, are on a razor’s edge. *“Stay-at-Home measures, school closures and lockdown protocols have seen marked increases in unpaid domestic and care work for both men and women. However, women are bearing the majority of the burden...Again, this represents an exaggeration of pre-existing socio-economic gender dynamics”*.¹¹

Additionally, the closure of schools exposed the issue of food insecurity for large segments of the population. In a recent study it was determined that:

“Food insecurity remains a concern Negative impacts on food security disproportionately affect respondents from low-income households. They are also the ones most worried about not being able to meet their food or other essential needs. They are much more likely to meet their food needs at the expense of selling productive assets and cutting spending on other priorities such as health and education”.¹²

¹¹ Padmore, T (2021) “Status of Women and Men Report – The Impacts of COVID-19 a Gender Analysis of the Impact of COVID-19 on Women and Men in 12 Caribbean Countries February/March 2021, UN Women.

¹² “Caribbean COVID-19 Food Security & Livelihoods Impact Survey Regional Summary Report”, February 2021 CARICOM CDEMA WFP FAO, page 3.

The need for food security was one of the important lessons of the pandemic and one of the more innovative State actions was the provision of fresh produce from local farmers through NAMDEVCO¹³, which allowed for farmers and other related workers, including women producers and farmers, to earn income and for low-income families to access nutritious food. This intervention was very important for the agriculture industry, which has usually been neglected by the State due to its predominant focus on the energy sector. This was significant for several reasons: it reasserted the importance of local food security; it made fresh vegetables and meat (chicken) available, ensuring some sustained nutrition during the pandemic to those in need; it countered some of the impact of the bottlenecks in the global food supply chains; provided local farmers with continued income during the pandemic; and many women welcomed this supply of fresh food for their households. The Ministry also provided free seedlings which were used by households, including women-headed households to plant their own vegetables, hopefully beginning a trend of enhanced local food production and food self-sufficiency.

As it relates to non-monetary relief in combatting the fallout from COVID-19, on 15 March 2020, Mrs. Jennifer Baptiste-Primus, the former Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development, in an address to the nation, announced workplace guidelines for the Public Service and Private Sector. These guidelines centred on the implementation of Pandemic Leave; a novel classification of leave conceptualised to alleviate the impact of the pandemic on employed persons.

Unfortunately, it is unclear whether Pandemic Leave was implemented on a widespread level across the public and private sector and as such any mitigating impact of this new categorisation of leave, is yet to be ascertained.

¹³ The National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO) is a Statutory body created by Act of Parliament No. 16 of 1991 with a mandate “to create, facilitate and maintain an environment conducive to the efficient marketing of agricultural produce and food products through the provision of marketing services and the stimulation of business investment in the agro-industrial sector of Trinidad and Tobago”.

CONCLUSIONS

Using a feminist interlinkages approach, this research sought to explore the transformative impact, if any, of the COVID-19 related social protection and care programmes implemented by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. The Government relied heavily on cash transfers and in-kind (including fresh agricultural produce) transfers to assist the most vulnerable (unemployed, children, elderly, etc.). Notably, there was no explicit mention of unpaid domestic and care work in the Government's COVID-19 support strategy. Within the context of DAWN's analytical framework (Llavaneras Blanco and Cuervo, 2021), these emergency social protection measures were, in general, extensions of pre-existing policies. Moreover, the programmes do not appear to be fiscally sustainable as they were financed, in part, by taking on additional debt. Furthermore, some of the policies, particularly the extended closure of schools, have disproportionately negatively impacted women.

As in many other jurisdictions, the overwhelming increase in unpaid care responsibilities brought on by the pandemic in Trinidad and Tobago, disproportionately became the responsibility of women. In addition to working from home, women had to deal with the added responsibilities of caring for the entire family including school-aged children attempting to learn from home and safeguarding all household members' health and well-being. These added unpaid care responsibilities had significant negative implications for women's productivity alongside their physical and mental health. Moreover, *“the economic and social crisis is not merely due to the disease but too weak social sector structures, gender inequities, inadequate worker protection, food insufficiency, and inequitable access to educational resources”*.¹⁴

Trinidad and Tobago does not have comprehensive data to fully assess the hours spent on unpaid care work or to analyse how this time is divided between women and men. Despite the passage of the Unremunerated Work Act in 1993 (one of the first in the world), which mandated the Central Statistical Office to compile such information, the country has not conducted any recent full-scale time-use surveys to quantify unpaid work undertaken primarily by women (ECLAC, 2021). Economic and sustainable recovery will require

¹⁴ CAFRA TT, 2020 “Submission on the Road to Recovery Committee, Trinidad and Tobago”.

urgently addressing the care economy to reduce the burden of unpaid care work, which falls disproportionately on women. Measures to challenge and transform the existing sexual division of labour must also be prioritised.

The temporary emergency CTs have been dependent on new debt and do not appear to be sustainable given Trinidad and Tobago's limited fiscal space and already high debt burden. Trinidad and Tobago's labour market has a relatively high level of informality, which implies weaker safeguards against the termination of employment as the national insurance scheme does not formally cover these workers. The COVID-19 pandemic shed light on the deep-seated inequalities of the existing social organisation of care. This inequality is manifested in the distribution of care responsibilities and care labour among families, especially between women and men. Unpaid care labour has been a critical way that the country has absorbed the pandemic shock, acting as a countercyclical buffer. (Rodríguez Enríquez, 2020).

With the sharp increase of unemployment levels and significant declines in household income, families have had to rely on social security and social protection systems, mainly in the form of CTs and food programmes. The pandemic has exposed the limitations of the country's existing social insurance systems that are biased in favour of formal labour and have excluded informal workers. Social protection measures applied in response to COVID-19 focused on social assistance, and little to no efforts focused on care services. However, new CT policies focussed on children and youth who were no longer accessing government school-provided meals during the Stay-at-Home period. The elderly were also targeted by providing food support for persons who applied for Senior Citizens Pension prior to COVID-19, and their applications were still pending. For the most part, these new CTs have been funded via increased public debt and development grants and there was little innovation in the delivery of care and social protection that could have led to a positive transformation of the macroeconomy.

School closures and distance learning, and increased reliance on at-home health care and cleaning, among others, have amplified the country's dependence on unpaid care labour, especially overloading women and girls and possibly pushing women out of the labour market. In post-COVID-19, there is a significant risk that the expulsion of women workers

from the labour market becomes further normalised. There is also the risk that the amplified reliance on women's unpaid care labour becomes directly or indirectly a policy measure by which publicly provided care services continue to be weakened and their costs externalised (Llavaneras Blanco and Cuervo, 2021). Trinidad and Tobago has lower female labour force participation rates compared to male participation rates, despite the vast improvements in educational achievements of women in the last decade. Before COVID-19, roughly only half of working-age women chose to actively participate in the labour market (Roopnarine and Ramrattan, 2012). Interestingly, in Trinidad and Tobago, Indo-Trinidadian women are the least likely to participate in the labour market; although this is changing, this may be due to historical and cultural norms within that sub-ethnic grouping (Roopnarine, 2018). We must note however the issue of data collection and definitions of the labour force, where the majority of persons recorded as involved in home duties are women. This is not the case for men who are seldom recorded in this category. Also many informal sector workers are not recorded in the labour force. In the case of Trinidad and Tobago, improvements in data collection, including definitions, are required.

Although the country has already established some social protection floors, the Government should focus on closing the remaining gaps and changing its policy approach, especially for women. For example, the national insurance scheme should expand its coverage to cover self-employed persons such as entrepreneurs, domestic paid and unpaid workers, a sizable portion of whom are women.

Finally, a paradigm shift needs to occur in the way in which the Government delivers social services, addressing the underlying causes of social and gender-based inequalities. This shift relates to the management of social protection and care programmes to become more efficient and effective; programmes need to ensure that children do not suffer because of the circumstances of their parents and women are not penalised for having children. The overarching aim of social protection and care programmes should be to address the underlying social challenges that negatively affect peoples' lives and affect their ability to be fully participating citizens in society. With specific reference to the care economy, the State should actively engage in dismantling patriarchal gender norms by amplifying the message of 'share the care'; this could be facilitated through greater collaboration between the Ministries

of Social Development and Gender and Child Affairs (CAFRA TT, 2020). Moreover, the idea that men should participate equally in the care for their children, including as reliable providers of economic support, should be promoted through gender-sensitive parenting programmes, gender studies programmes in school, and public education programmes. Failure to make the necessary transformational changes in the delivery of the country's social security and social protection services will undermine the nation's long term socio-economic goals, including that of social justice and gender equality.

DRAFT for discussion

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