

PRIMARY & SECONDARY

GENERAL ISSUES

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

SECONDARY SCHOOLS STUDENTS - SEXUAL ABUSE - JANUARY 2015 TO 10 MAY 2022

(10.05.2022)

(No. B/547) **Dr. M. Gungapersad (Second Member for Grand'Baie & Poudre d'Or)** asked the Vice-Prime Minister, Minister of Education, Tertiary Education, Science and Technology whether, in regard to the State and private secondary schools in mainland Mauritius and in Rodrigues Island, she will state the reported number of students thereof having allegedly been victims of sexual abuse inside and outside the school premises, respectively, since January 2015 to date.

The Vice-Prime Minister, Minister of Education, Tertiary Education, Science and Technology (Mrs L. D. Dookun-Luchoomun): Mr Speaker, Sir, cases of alleged sexual abuse reported are immediately referred to the Child Development Unit of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Welfare in accordance with the provisions of the Children's Act and to the Police for investigation as well as to the National Education and Counselling Services of my Ministry, thus with a view to providing psychological support to both victims and perpetrators in case the latter are students.

Mr Speaker, Sir, I am informed that since January 2015 to date, there were 16 reported cases of students who allegedly have been victims of sexual abuse with respect to both State and private secondary schools in Mauritius and 2 cases in Rodrigues.

The number of cases of alleged sexual abuse in the community that were reported to the Police over the past 8 years stands at 1,222 in Mauritius, and 176 in Rodrigues.

Mr Speaker, Sir, my Ministry has a zero tolerance policy in respect of cases occurring on school premises. The assistance and intervention of our institutional partners, namely the CDU, the *Brigade Pour La Protection Des Mineurs*, and the Police, as the case may call for, are solicited for further investigation and any criminal proceedings required. Where school staff

have been identified as perpetrators, strict disciplinary actions such as interdiction and dismissal are resorted to.

Dr. Gungapersad: Thank you, hon. Minister. May I, Mr Speaker, Sir, ask the hon. Minister what measures are taken by the Ministry to provide a secure environment in respect to Section 30 and Section 31 of the Children's Act 2020, when we have victims who come from certain environment, certain families where parents or relatives themselves are the perpetrators of these acts?

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Mr Speaker, Sir, any child involved in such cases are referred to us, the National Education Counselling Service Department of the Ministry, and Educational Psychologists intervene at the level of the school to help the student to reintegrate school life and ensure that learning is not disrupted. The NECS works in complementarity with the CDU, the Heads of schools, Senior Educators and the Student Care and Counselling Desk Officers to help the reintegration of the students to occur smoothly without any fear or stigmatisation or intimidation by school friends. At the same time, we do liaise with the Police, with educational social workers and the CDU to ensure that a follow-up is done at the level of the student's house, at home and to see to it that further protection is provided to the child.

Dr. Gungapersad: Will the hon. Minister inform the House, if she has the figures, how many of these victims have had to quit their studies or whether the Ministry has ever gauged the adverse impact the sexual abuses have on the education and well-being of these victims?

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: As I have just stated, Mr Speaker, Sir, when the cases are reported to the Ministry and we are aware, the National Education Counselling Services, the Educational Psychologists, the educational social workers do make sure that the child gets the support required. However, we do understand that in certain cases, at home, the protection of Police is then sought to ensure that the child is, let us say, in a well-protected environment. But, then, as far as schooling is concerned, in the cases that I have just mentioned, the students are at school except, perhaps, for one who has already passed out of school, meaning to say, that has completed schooling.

Dr. Gungapersad: Hon. Minister, there is often a stigma associated with reporting the cases of sexual abuse and so on, and in respect of Section 34 of Children's Act 2020, where mandatory reporting for child in danger, what mechanisms has the Ministry put in place so that victims can easily have recourse to the support of Police and the authorities?

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Mr Speaker, Sir, as I have just mentioned, we have got the counselling desk in schools and we have got the Educational Psychologists and educational social workers who normally try to give the support required to the students, and then all these cases are treated with strict confidentiality so as not to make other students aware, and so as to avoid having the child going through harassment, intimidation or stigmatisation at the level of the school.