



PRESS STATEMENT

Apia, 9 July 2020 – *Unpacking myths and facts about sexual violence*

A Bible Class session publicised on Facebook on Thursday 2 July 2020, has generated the expression of views and different attitudes on social media on sexual violence. This is a matter of great public importance.

The Office of the Ombudsman wishes to comment on some of the issues that have been raised as they relate to major concerns to which the Office and the Government (through the Ministry of Women, Community, and Social Development) have been giving attention in recent years. The Office of the Ombudsman in 2017 conducted a National Inquiry into Family Violence in Samoa. Prior to that, the Ministry of Women conducted a study on Family Safety in 2017.

One of the matters covered in the bible class was Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5: 28 on the adulterous heart of the man who looks at a woman in lust. A vivid explanation is given in the session of how a man, by his nature, can react to the physical presence and sight of a woman. This perspective is assumed in a narrative that is told of a man returning from a day's plantation work and coming across an "inappropriately dressed" young woman ('koe a papa oga maso i gei ofu e fai') in his path. The man becomes the villain and is blamed for what inevitably happens, so the narrative goes. On the other hand, nothing much is made of the young lady's actions; on her unwisely being where she was at that time and wearing the clothes she did.

The Priest was obviously intent on giving clear advice to women in his class on modes of dress he considered appropriate. He talked expansively on this theme with regard to other situations outside of the particular narrative spelled out above. He criticizes what he sees women wearing to church.

Sexual violence is a problem that is close to us all in Samoa. It is widespread and clearly not a matter simply of victims being in the wrong place at the wrong time. They are being victimized in the very places where they are supposed to be safely in. The National Inquiry Report into Family Violence found that 20% of women reported being raped while 10% reported having been raped by a family member in their lifetime.

In cases of sexual violence on children and young girls many were victimized at home. The pattern is one of worsening violence against children. Barely a day now passes

without a report of sexual violence or acts done on young girls at the hands of perpetrators they know.

It needs to be made quite clear that responsibility for these hideous acts lie with the perpetrators and **should never** be palmed off onto the victims of the crimes. No woman or child wants to be sexually abused and the psychological and physical impact can be devastating and lifelong. For the most part there is self-blame, shame, and guilt.

A young girl child cannot give consent for sexual activity and cannot be held responsible for any sexual acts performed on her. Blame falls squarely on the child abuser and other perpetrators of violence against women. There must be no ambiguity on this point in society's attitude towards these vile activities if we are to make headway in battling the unprecedented upsurge we are witnessing in their occurrence around us. Shifting blame onto the victim in any way serves to let abusers off the hook.

When, instead of fostering no-tolerance of sexual violence, society views victims also to have a role in these acts, and deserving of censure for what they wear or where they go, we need to ask what it is that we are thereby teaching our children, and our boys in particular. Are we teaching them that wearing revealing clothes is an invitation to rape? Are we teaching them that women who are out late deserve to be raped?

For public awareness and education, the Office shares below important facts on sexual violence and on some commonly held myths.

Sexual violence is an act of a sexual nature where one person has not given consent.

Not giving consent means not giving your permission for something to happen, either explicitly (by saying 'no') or implicitly (through body language which indicates that you are not interested).

Sexual violence is a crime and should be reported to Police.

Myth 1: Dressing a certain way, being out late, or drinking alcohol means that you are asking for it.

Fact: The clothes a person wears, or the alcohol they drink or the place they are at, do not show that they want to engage in sexual acts with another person. Consent to have sex has to be communicated directly. Where you are, or your clothing is never an invitation for rape. The offender is ultimately responsible for the assault. Women are victims of sexual violence even in countries of the Middle East where it is compulsory for women to be fully covered by their clothing. This myth distorts the truth by shifting blame away from the offender and onto the victim.

Myth 2: Most sexual assaults are committed by strangers

Fact: Most sexual violence is committed by people known to the survivor. Most offenders are someone that the survivor knows and may have trusted. The majority of sexual violence is carried out by someone known to the survivor, such as partners, friends, work colleagues, or family members.

The Office of the Ombudsman acknowledges wide ranging efforts by Government agencies and many partners in this space of work. It commends in particular collective efforts to unpack and to address behaviours and deeply rooted beliefs and myths that continue to fuel the different forms of violence in our society. **We look with high hopes to those we see as game changers/influencers in a society wherein their words and teachings can have a life lasting effect on young minds. One of the recommendations in the two reports mentioned above appeals to Churches to help quell attitudes in our country that breed family violence; and to become leading actors in preventing family violence.**

The Office encourages victims of rape and sexual violence to contact Police on 22222 or the Samoa Victim Support Group on the free calling number: 800-7874.

ENDS.