

Harmonise all T&T's child laws

SOME time ago, I wrote a letter to the editor about the discrepancy between our Customs form and the laws of Trinidad and Tobago. The form gives a duty free allowance to 17-year-olds to bring liquor and cigarettes into the country, while our laws prohibit the sale of such products to children of that age.

A high official explained to me then that they had such a huge stock of forms on hand that it would be too costly to abandon them and print new forms. New forms were to reflect that the Liquor Licences Act, which previously defined a minor as under 16 years, was changed in 2000, so that a minor is now a person under 18 years for the purposes of sale of liquor, and in 2009, the Tobacco Control Act was similarly amended.

Although children cannot buy alcohol and cigarettes, adults, until recently, could have purchased these products and used children as couriers to bring them into the country. However the Children Act, recently proclaimed, now provides heavy penalties for using children as couriers to sell, buy or deliver alcohol and tobacco. Despite this, I have

observed that a new Immigration and Customs form still grants the allowance to 17-year-olds. Duty free shops at the airport carry the requisite signs that they sell only to persons over 18 years. They, therefore, cannot sell children alcohol and cigarettes. Children under 17 cannot buy and parents cannot have them carry these items on their behalf. How is the allowance to be used by 17-year-olds? Visitors to our country must believe we are a confused people.

I would urge the new Government to move to harmonise all our laws regarding children.

In this regard, I recommend that the minimum age for marriage for both sexes be increased to age 18 or, at the very least, be harmonised with the law regarding sexual consent. The Hindu Women's Organisation must be commended for supporting an increase in the minimum age for marriage. The Hindu Marriage Act, the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act and the Orisha Marriage Act must be amended.

Guyana, with a population which includes Hindus and Muslims, has long had

a uniform Marriage Act with a minimum age of 16 years. India has also increased the minimum age to 18 years for women and 21 years for men. We must protect our children from those who, even though bearing rings, would rob them of their childhood.

Our Constitution guarantees equal protection under the law. Our law protects even animals from violence. But, despite new children laws, children are not protected from assault and battery at the hands of their parents, as the law provides parents with a defence of reasonable chastisement. This is an issue, as I said at a public forum last year, on which governments must lead, and not be guided by the misguided populace.

How many more must die, Dr Rowley? Congratulations on your victory at the polls. I trust that it marks the dawn of a new era where rhetoric meets resources to make of child rights a reality to "transform the lives of the next generation and lay the foundation" for a better Trinidad and Tobago. I stand ready to assist you.

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