

**The exploitation of our Children by Barama’s employees or by others is a national disgrace that further tarnishes the international image of Guyana.**

In a recent letter in Kaieteur News (13th Jan, 2007, Titled: ‘Protect the children of Guyana from Predators’), I had written: “The children of any nation are its most prized possessions/assets. It is therefore every citizen/parent's responsibility to do everything possible to protect our children from danger.” That letter was written in the hope that Guyana would take precautions to avoid one of the most undesirable evils of the tourist traffic, that is, the sexual exploitation of our children. Little did I realize that my warning was already too late for some of our most vulnerable children in Guyana.

Dr Gail Whiteman in her Chapter ((11, pages 180 to 204) titled: “Forestry, Gold Mining and Amerindians: The Troubling Example of Samling in Guyana” (in “International businesses and the challenges of poverty in the developing world.” Edited by Bird, Frederick B., and Herman, Stewart W. Published by Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hamshire (England); New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. ISBN 1403921288)) wrote (page 190):

**“Direct impacts of Barama (Samling is the parent Company of Barama).**

Interviews indicate that the economic benefits for local Amerindians from large-scale forestry were not significant... Moreover, despite community expectations of improved health care, as reported in the Edinburgh Centre for Tropical Forests (ECTF) study, the health situation for Amerindians in Region 1 has remained problematic. Amerindians also continue to lack proper education facilities. While Port Kaituma did have a school and Amerindian teachers, they were poorly paid and under-utilized. Social problems related to the alleged sexual exploitation of young Amerindian girls by Barama employees also were reported in interviews: ‘It happened in this community, not with mining but with the Barama Company. They take the young girls and stay over night and bring them back to school.’ ‘I heard that they take rude pictures...’ ‘It’s true. It’s the Malaysians [from Barama] that do these things... The young girls are kicked out of school... These Malaysians take these young Amerindian girls and leave them pregnant.’”

*These actions make a bad situation even worse. Dr Gail Whiteman wrote. “Extreme poverty follows ethnic heritage: Amerindians being by far the poorest, 88 per cent of Guyana’s Amerindians live below the poverty line. In Region 1, the focus of this study, 95 per cent of local Amerindians live in extreme poverty. (IMF 2006) The majority of the Amerindians is illiterate and has limited access to higher education (Government of Guyana 1996) Amerindian women are particularly susceptible to the impacts of poverty. A report commissioned by the National Commission on Women in Guyana identified Amerindian women as one of the most economically, socially, politically and culturally marginalized groups in Guyana. (National Commission on Women 2001)”*

*In addition, The Guyana Human Rights Association’s (GHRA) reports called “Without Conviction” and its most recent study titled. “Getting Serious. Detecting and Protecting Against crimes of sexual violence in Guyana” revealed that sexual violence against girls is most prevalent among girls under 16 years and that young Amerindian girls between ages 12 and 16 years are the most vulnerable in the country especially in Region 1 with the most reported cases. (That is, sexual violence highest against girls 12 to 16 years -*

GHRA study finds – is about 3-fold higher in Amerindian Girls of Region 1. Thursday, March 8th 2007, SN)

In the Western hemisphere, if an employee is sexually harassed at the work place, the employer can be held legally responsible. How can Barama not know that children were being exploited by its imported foreign workers? If the company's executives do not know that their employees are breaking the laws of Guyana, then is it not fair to ask what other illegalities they do not know about in their business operations? If they do know what are going on their company's premises, then why were/are these legal, ethical, and internationally abhorrent and illegal practices not stopped? Why are the Barama Company and its executives not being held responsible for violations by their employees of Guyanese law? Why are Barama's employees allowed to violate the most sacred laws of any modern country - the sexual and physical abuse of its children?

In addition, these are clear violations of the Forestry Stewardship Council (FSC) principles: For example - Principle #1: Compliance with Laws and FSC principles: Forest management shall respect all applicable laws of the country in which they occur, and international treaties and agreements to which the country is a signatory, and comply with all FSC Principles and Criteria. (Guyana is a signatory to the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC), and therefore, Guyana also has an international obligation to take preventative action in regard to preventing the abuse and exploitation of its children.)

Secondly, FSC Principle #4: Community relations and workers' rights. Forest management operations shall maintain or enhance the long-term social and economic well being of forest workers and local communities. How do the abuse and sexual exploitation of local Guyanese children, build community relations? Is this not the beginning of a most destructive cycle of our children?

From the abovementioned research of Dr Gail Whiteman and recent revelations in the local press, not only does Barama Company Ltd exploit the forests, but its employees exploit our children for their gratification and entertainment – leaving the devastating social and health consequences, personal tragedies, etc. for this impoverished nation to correct. What kind of a nation is Guyana that allows this to happen in this day and age? Have we sunk so low that we cannot even protect our children from predators?

I remember reading (during my childhood days) some work of Dr C Jagan, where he mentioned that the “Indian women/indentured servants” were good enough to be used to warm the beds/bodies of the plantation overseers, but were not good enough to be made wives or given legal standings. The situation is worse here, these are children being used, abused, and discarded. How can this be right? I cannot see how the late Dr C. Jagan, Hon Ms. Janet Jagan, and the PPP of yesteryear would condone these current violations of our children, especially when they stood up so valiantly on the side of the victims of abuse in the aftermath of the Rupununi Uprising. In my humble opinion, that was one of their finest hours of the PPP of yesteryear. They always stood up for the underprivileged and the downtrodden. Where is the PPP of today, and why does it fail to address these issues? The allowing of this disgraceful exploitation of children will probably be recorded as one of the current PPP Govt.'s most shameful acts.

Similarly, previously the female slaves were called in to gratify the sexual lusts and pleasures of their owners, and then discarded. Today, we rightly condemned these heinous acts of yesteryear, why are our voices silent now on the current acts of evil?

Should our voices not be raised in protest? We proudly claim our ancestry to those who fought the battles of yesteryear, but are silent and/or ignore the battles against the injustices of our own time. Where are the voices of protest by the current PNC? Where are the young vibrant voices of the GYSM? Are the exploited children (Amerindian) not youths and students? Or is that they are now being viewed as Children of a lesser god like our own ancestral mothers?

Dr Gail Whiteman's work continues to document the abuse, exploitation, degradation, and impoverishment of Guyanese women and children with impunity (by foresters and miners) in their own country. Her work supports and extends the findings of Dr Marcus Colchester. It is a must read for all Guyanese who should know what is going on in their home country. I can quote more of this work, but the readings are so depressing that it may not be suitable for a family newspaper. We might be too embarrassed to hear the questions of our children – e.g. Daddy/Mommy, how can we allow this to happen here?

If we cannot find common ground and speak up for vulnerable children, then we are not worthy of being a nation and deserve the disrespect we get from our own Caricom community brethren and also from the International Community. I expect that all the various groups that speak for children to take up this challenge and speak out. We can no longer be silent. I also expect all those (local and foreign) organizations and individuals who support SN in its struggles to also do the same for even more vulnerable victims - children. Our leaders are busy fighting for power, and in the mean time our resources and children are being plundered and ravaged!

This is a human rights issue - the abuse and exploitation of Children. Our religious groups (Churches, Mosques, Temples), Civil Rights groups, Human Rights groups, Lawyers, Judiciary, Parents, Students, Labour leaders, Citizens, etc., should all protest against the exploitation of our children in our own country. These perpetrators should feel the full force of the law. The officials who should be aware of this and have done nothing should also be charged with negligence or dereliction of duty. The sign must be up that no one is allowed to exploit any of our children anywhere in this country!

Dr. Bertrand Ramcharran (Chancellor of the University of Guyana) is a distinguished Human Rights scholar on the world stage (United Nations). We hope that Dr B Ramcharran tells the Guyana Govt. that Guyana must respect the human rights conventions that were signed – in this case, the Rights of the Child (ROC). We hope that the Foreign Embassies and Consulates, and UN agencies also remind the Guyana Govt. of its international obligations. The care of our children (and all the children of the world) is a sacred responsibility of any society and all humanity.

Seelochan Beharry

7<sup>th</sup> March, 2007