Vernella offers ‘qualified’ apology after making Rowley rape allegations in Parliament

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Amid an avalanche of criticism over statements she made in the Parliament that Opposition Leader Dr Keith Rowley was a “product of rape,” Minister in the Ministry of the People and Social Development, Vernella Alleyne-Toppin yesterday apologised for “parts” of her comments. In the same breath, however, Alleyne-Toppin defended her actions, saying issues such as these must not be swept under the carpet. She made the statements during her contribution to the motion of no confidence in Rowley on Wednesday.

They caused a social media firestorm overnight and brought scathing criticism from some sectors of the public yesterday. In a two-page statement in response to the criticism, Toppin said: “I unreservedly apologise to everyone who felt uncomfortable or outraged because of parts of the statement I made in Parliament. “At no time was I intended to cause pain or suffering or to cause people to reopen old wounds of trauma they may have at some time experienced.”

But she held firmly to the view that incidents such as those, which were happening in “our own country,” must never be swept under the carpet. “As difficult as it is, these are conversations we must be having as a people if we are to protect young girls from experiencing this kind of horrific violation. “And while I apologise from the heart to anyone who felt hurt by my statements, I intend to stand my ground and will insist that questions that have been asked of the Leader of the Opposition must be answered,” Alleyne-Toppin added.

She said anyone who was seeking to hold the office of prime minister must not have such questions that remain unanswered as the issue probed the depth of character and the emotional intelligence that not only influenced a person’s decisions but also impacted on the rest of the country. Alleyne-Toppin also posed several questions to Rowley:

“Questions that Dr Rowley must answer include the paternity of a young man who was the product of a relationship out of wedlock. Questions include whether Dr Rowley is the grandfather of one, or in fact two young children. “Questions include whether Dr Rowley knows of any school teacher who was a tenant in Charlottesville? Was he a tenant? Was he boarding (getting meals) by Ms Gray? Was Ms Gray sending her niece to drop meals?”

“I will not allow Dr Rowley to use public outrage to hide from the duty he has to answer these questions and put deep and frightening suspicions to rest once and for all,” Roman Catholic Archbishop Father Joseph Harris said yesterday he was appalled by Alleyne-Toppin’s comments. It was only on Tuesday Harris, who was instrumental in conceptualising the Code of Ethical Political
"I don’t want to be condemning people but political parties have signed on to the code and must abide by it."

"It is a bleak day when a woman rises in the national Parliament to shame another woman and her family but it borders on psychotic when that woman and her family are the alleged victims and product of sexual abuse. Nothing good can come of this. "What is worse for me, and it can hardly get worse, is that the thoughtless dribbler of this venom is a Tobagonian woman, carelessly destroying another Tobagonian woman, her child and grandchildren, all in an effort to destroy a Tobagonian man. I weep. I hold no brief for this particular man but I weep," Moore said.

She, however, said if those aspiring for leadership positions were criminally flawed then the public deserved the truth. "But truth is a slippery thing, easily transformed and shaped by ugly hands. Truth is often by itself insufficient and needs to be seasoned with other ingredients to meet the circumstances. "In this instance, what was needed as well was a healthy dose of tact, ladies of sensitivity, pounds of dignity and a portion each of common sense, self respect and courtesy.

"For my own part, some truths don’t need to be told, as they serve no wider good, reveal no crime or sin and are simply vainglorious rants of a empty and seething mind," Moore said. She said Allyne-Toppin, who by her own public admissions was a victim of various abuses, both politically and personally, should know how abhorrent it was to shame a victim.

**What was said in Parliament**

Alleyne-Toppin related a story of a young girl who was sexually assaulted many years ago in Tobago. "One day in Mason Hall, Tobago, Mr Speaker, look at the nexus. "One day a young girl went to take lunch for her father in a coalspit. When she got there, her father had gone to change his cow. It’s a true story. She, however, met her father’s best friend and co-worker, alone in the coalspit. "This young girl was then raped by her father’s best friend. The product today is the aspirant to lofty office."

Alleyne-Toppin continued: "Mr Speaker, can you imagine this mother carrying this pain and shame for nine months and the impact it had on the unborn child?"

**Vile and abusive**

In a statement yesterday, Mary King, former government minister and executive member of the Global Organisation of Parliamentarians Against Corruption (GOPAC), said Alleyne-Toppin should be awarded for the most vile abuse of parliamentary privilege. On the issue of parliamentary privilege, she said: "In common with British constitutional practice, in T&T the issue of parliamentary privilege is essentially uncodified and relies upon a gentleman’s agreement among the Members of Parliament to behave with decorum and in a manner suitable to the dignity of their office.

"So much so that any conduct that offends the dignity of the House, and indeed Ms Alleyne-Toppin’s did that, even though no breach of any specific privilege may have been committed, is in contempt of the House." King also waded into House Speaker Wade Mark, saying, in general, he has the power to render decisions on whether a member has abused the House procedures and in this case he should have censured Alleyne-Toppin or even excluded her from the House until she apologised.

"Ms Alleyne-Toppin, who has brought the House into disrepute by her abusive and uncalled for statements, is in contempt of the House with regard to a fellow parliamentarian.

**NGO: Set higher standards**

The Network of NGOs for the Advancement of Women said yesterday it was completely taken aback by Alleyne-Toppin’s comments. especially since T&T celebrated International Women’s Day less than two weeks ago, where T&T’s female leaders concentrated on the Beijing-20 Platform for Women’s Rights and the elimination of forms of violence to women. It added the matter was also clearly in breach of the Code of Ethical Political Conduct which the Network of NGOs had helped to formulate.

"This country is affected by issues of rape, incest and domestic violence and we want all victims, men and women, to come forward. This is not an issue to
be used for political gain, more so by a minister whose ministry is responsible for people and social development. "Ms Alleyne-Toppin was insensitive and not trauma-informed to trivialise any issue surrounding rape or sexual assault and we implore her to take this issue off the political platform, which reaches into our homes and our schools," the statement said.

It added that in any progressive nation rape could not be spoken about flippantly and children born of rape could not be stereotyped. In addition, it said, calling on the Opposition Leader to “man-up” had pushed back the organisation’s initiative to get men and boys to report such crimes when they were victims. "Being masculine does not mean you cannot and would not be a victim. We want to create an enabling environment for all victims, not to set-up more barriers for dealing with these important issues.

“We understand the current election climate is going to be full of the usual ‘picong’ and inappropriate banter that has marred our culture over the last few decades but we ask both sides to work with us and think. "As a mother, wife and daughter and fellow women in service, we expected more from Alleyne-Toppin. We call on all our female hopefuls to take responsibility for their individual standards, set them high," the statement added.

COP Youth Congress chair Jeremy Edwards also condemned Alleyne-Toppin's unacceptable rhetoric. "Whilst the 'dog and cat' colloquial saying used by Dr Rowley last week was deemed inappropriate and sexist, the comments made by Ms Alleyne-Toppin have sunk to a new low," Edwards said in a statement

“There is no excuse for what the Minister of the People attempted to introduce into the parliamentary debate. Notwithstanding the fact that the importance of bringing to Parliament the no-confidence motion over other issues of national importance is in itself questionable, any point that the minister would have wanted to make against Dr Rowley cannot now be considered serious anymore," he added. He also criticised the unwarranted public shaming of Rowley's past and the circumstances that affected his youth.

"Such callous remarks only act to further desensitise this issue and its debilitating effects. Ms Alleyne-Toppin's statements were an unforgiveable abuse of parliamentary privilege and a gross disrespect to the office she holds, particularly since her main role in government involves people and social development," Edwards said.