

Devastated Childhoods



**Study of Perceptions of, Attitudes to, and
Opinions on Child Sexual Abuse in the Eastern
Caribbean**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF FINDINGS
INTERIM REPORT**

INTRODUCTION

This Executive Summary of Findings provides an overview of some of the main findings of a study of Perceptions of, Attitudes to, and Opinions on Child Sexual Abuse in the Eastern Caribbean carried out during 2008/9 (more detailed findings are discussed in the full report). A brief outline of the social context and the research methods is provided and a regional overview of the key themes to emerge from both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the study is presented. Although there were some differences in relation to specific countries, and according to different variables (age, gender, socio economic status and so on) there were fewer differences than one might have expected and these are not discussed in any detail here. Data from individual countries are not presented in the Executive Summary, although they are discussed in the full report.

The report represents a commitment by the research team to present emerging findings at the soonest opportunity and at this stage does not include a full discussion of recommendations, although some views from research participants on the kinds of action needed are offered. The project is currently at the stage of eliciting responses to the findings and engaging the views of stakeholders towards the development of effective child protection systems. In line with the participative approach adopted throughout the study, we believe that in this way the recommendations will be both informed and 'owned' by people who are committed to change.

BACKGROUND

While the effects of child abuse are a part of the lived reality of survivors of abuse, and as such are 'concrete' and real, it is also the case that perceptions and definitions of child abuse are socially constructed. This means that the meanings ascribed to the term are a product of a specific cultural, social and historical context. Child maltreatment has existed throughout history (infanticide, abandonment, severe physical punishment, prostitution, incest, harsh labour); however, the extent and interpretation of abuse, i.e. what is considered to be abusive in a particular society, alters over time and in relation to circumstances and context. For example, the growth of internet pornography, child prostitution and the trafficking of children have resulted in wider, more inclusive and universally applicable definitions than existed 20 years ago. Defining child sexual abuse is both complex and problematic, although most definitions are based on the acknowledgement that sexual activity between an adult and a child or between a young person and a younger child involves a violation of the rights and personhood of the child, often with severe and long-lasting psychosocial consequences, and that the coercion and betrayal of trust involved in most acts of child sexual abuse is deeply destructive to both child and family.

Child sexual abuse may or may not involve actual physical contact and includes penetrative acts (e.g. rape or buggery) and also non penetrative and non-contact activities, such as involving children in watching sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually explicit ways and exposing them to inappropriate sexual material. Child sexual abuse also includes the involvement of children in prostitution and pornography. Child sexual abuse occurs in all countries, across all racial, ethnic, religious and socioeconomic groups, is far

more common than previously thought and affects children of all ages, including infants. Both boys and girls are sexually abused although in all reported studies girls outnumber boys. Although sexual abuse can occur as a single phenomenon, the presence and interplay of other social factors may indicate increased risk. These factors include: social norms based on patriarchal values, domestic violence, family history of sexual abuse, status of children, cultural perceptions and attitudes to abuse, substance abuse, witnessing abuse, education level, socio-economic status (especially economic dependence of women), gender inequality and lack of social supports.

Although there is extensive international research, few empirical studies of child sexual abuse have been carried out in the Caribbean and there are no reliable data on the prevalence of child sexual abuse, or indeed on attitudes and perceptions of abuse across the region. Statistics are generally collected on convictions for sexual offences involving children, however these figures do not include the numbers of reported cases, they do not address the problem of under-reporting and quantitative methods are, in any case, inadequate in investigating this social problem. In many Caribbean countries the onset of sexual activity is occurring at younger ages; the World Bank's Caribbean Youth Development Report (2003) shows that the Caribbean has the earliest age of sexual 'debut' in the world with many young people being initiated into sexual behaviour as a consequence of child abuse as early as 10 years (in some cases even earlier) (World Bank, 2003). Early sexual initiation has also been positively correlated with child sexual abuse in other studies. Another problem is the increasing practice of the commercialisation of sex among minors as a commodity for material exchange. Recent research suggests that boys and girls, especially those in poverty, are increasingly using sex as a source of economic exchange (exchanging sex for money or material goods) (Phillips, 2006), and young girls especially are at risk of being solicited for child prostitution. Understanding the significance of these factors is important both in terms of addressing the social and psychological effects of child sexual abuse, turning around the Caribbean's high teenage pregnancy rate, and also in changing behaviours that contribute to the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

This is the context in which the study of *Perceptions of, Attitudes to, and Opinions on Child Sexual Abuse in the Eastern Caribbean* was carried out. The study was commissioned by UNICEF/UNIFEM, with the agreement of the respective governments, as part of an initiative aimed at reducing sexual violence against children.

THE STUDY

This was a landmark study since not only was it the first time that a comprehensive investigation of child sexual abuse had been carried out across several Caribbean countries, it was unique because it was underpinned by the philosophy that policy and programmes for dealing with child sexual abuse should be relevant to the cultural and social context in which abuse occurs. Whereas most research on the topic is often premised on knowledge that has emerged out of Western (predominantly the UK and the US) contexts, *this* study aimed to understand how Caribbean people perceive the problem, what behaviours and social conditions contribute to it, what the impact of child sexual abuse is on those most affected, and what views are held about the forms of action that might be needed.

The objectives were to:

- Increase understanding of the perceptions and behaviours associated with child sexual abuse, including incest, within the cultural contexts of the Eastern Caribbean region.
- Increase research capacity in the Eastern Caribbean into issues affecting children.
- Provide base-line data on perceptions on the scale of the problem within the region.
- Investigate the manifestations of child sexual abuse across diverse ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic groups.
- Sensitise stakeholders to the socio-cultural and psycho-social issues underlying child sexual abuse.
- Develop partnerships with key stakeholders and professionals in order to enhance country and regional capacity for addressing child sexual abuse and addressing its psychosocial effects.
- Identify inter-country and country-specific policies and strategies for reducing child sexual abuse.
- Contribute to the establishment of a shared language on the definition of child sexual abuse and to regional partnerships and consensus on what needs to be done to address the problem within Caribbean contexts.
- Make recommendations for the development of relevant policy, protocols and programming.

The study was carried out across six countries collectively considered representative of the region: Anguilla; Barbados; Dominica; Grenada; Montserrat; St. Kitts & Nevis.

Methods - Conceptualised as a *socially transformative action research project*, the study was designed to provide opportunities throughout the research process to generate awareness of the effects of child sexual abuse, to share strategies on appropriate interventions, and to develop alliances for social transformation towards the greater protection of children. A mixed-methods approach was used to gather data from five stakeholder groups: the general population, professionals in relevant fields, policy makers, survivors of sexual abuse, and parents. The research tools were designed to facilitate the meaningful participation of diverse populations across all the participating countries. The methods used:

1. Literature Reviews:

- i. Overview of International Research (including the Caribbean) on Child Sexual Abuse.
- ii. The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents: Issues for the Caribbean.

2. Policy and Legislative Analysis.

3. Stakeholder Consultation Sessions in each country.

4. Stakeholder Engagement at the Regional Level (with regional bodies).

5. Focus Group Discussions sample in each country.
6. Practice-focused interviews with key informants (e.g. teachers, police, social workers, health professionals, staff of NGOs and FBOs) in each country.
7. Policy-focused interviews with key informants (e.g. government staff and other professionals) in each country.
8. Narrative interviews with Adult Survivors in three countries.
9. Community Survey of Perceptions, Attitudes and Opinions across a representative sample in each country.

Sampling - Robust sampling frames were developed for focus groups, key-informant interviews and the community survey to ensure that participants were representative of the general population in terms of age (18 years and over – this was not a study of children’s views); gender; socioeconomic status; occupation; urban/rural dwelling; parents/non-parents; religion; education. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to identify participants for the narrative interviews. About 1,400 people participated in the study overall: approximately 120 people attended stakeholder consultation sessions; 859 respondents completed the community survey, 300 people participated in 35 focus groups; 110 interviews (42 policy-focused and 68 practice-focused) were carried out with policymakers, practitioners and clinicians in the disciplines of the police, judiciary, education, law, social work, nursing, policy and planning and the church; and 11 adult survivors of child sexual abuse participated in narrative interviews.

The study aimed for an equal representation of men and women. This was largely achieved with focus group participants, however key informants reflected the gendered make-up of the professional groups involved in child abuse cases and although a large number of males participated, there were more females overall. With regard to the Community Survey, although extensive efforts were made to recruit male respondents, there were still more women than men - 37.9% (319) of the respondents were men and 62.1% (522) female. We found many men supportive of the study and most men we talked to were convinced of the need for men’s behaviour and attitudes to change; however overall more men declined to participate than women and in one community men were overtly hostile. While we do not know the reasons for this, it is likely that some men may have had concerns about spotlighting behaviour they wanted to distance themselves from. This was typified by one case, in which having originally taken the questionnaire, a male respondent returned it explaining that he could not possibly fill it in because he himself had faced an accusation of child sexual abuse.

Data Analysis – Stakeholders’ consultation sessions generated information that informed the design of the interview schedules and the questionnaire. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS and qualitative data were analysed thematically using a template approach to ensure consistency across all countries.

FINDINGS

In order to obtain as broad based and comprehensive a view on the subject as the resources permitted, many factors were explored in this research. It is reassuring to see from some of the findings that Caribbean Society is generally clear about the unacceptability of child sexual abuse, cognizant of where the dangers lie and in some cases the reasons for this. The differences along gender, age, and socio-economic lines (where they occur) can only serve to remind us that perceptions, attitudes and opinions to child sexual abuse must be understood before meaningful intervention can take place and change occur. It is also the case that the majority of people (who were asked this question) state that they grew up in families in which they were generally protected from harm. While child abuse is not a new phenomenon, if the types of sexual behaviour that are harmful to children are increasing (as is indicated by this study), it must also be remembered that there are protective factors within many Caribbean families and communities that can and must be harnessed to protect children.

One of the most heartening aspects of this study was that Caribbean women, and men too, came forward because they believe that it is time to face the truth, to break the silence of collusion and to stop the abuse of children. In protecting our children, we do it because we must.

The study has yielded rich information and provides a platform from which further scientific enquiry can be made, professional roles and practice re-examined and refocused, public education renewed and the community (including the media) mobilised to better protect children from the violation of sexual abuse in the Caribbean.

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CONSTRUCTIONS OF CHILDHOOD

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines 'child' as being a person under the age of 18 years and, as signatories to the Convention, many Caribbean countries are striving towards harmonising domestic law with this definition. Indeed current debates on the topic are concerned with whether the legal age of sexual consent should be raised to 18 years. It is beyond the remit of this project for us to comment on whether this is a progressive or regressive step. Certainly, there are many ambiguities and contradictions in respect of age limits within the laws of the Caribbean and the lack of consistency and clarity regarding the legal status of the child may be a contributing factor to illegal sex with minors. However, it is also the case that much child sexual abuse occurs in situations in which childhood status is not in doubt and where the illegality of the act is abundantly clear. As the law in itself is not an effective protector of children, it is difficult to see how increasing the age of sexual

consent (with the risk of criminalising young people themselves and restricting some of their freedoms) will provide the necessary protection for young people, especially in contexts which lack the necessary infrastructure for the effective enforcement of existing laws.

In order to explore people's perceptions of child sexual abuse, we felt it was necessary to first examine the different ways in which childhood might be understood. Clearly while age is the legal and most commonly accepted social marker for the status 'child', we wondered whether there were other indicators that relate to the ways in which childhood is conceptualised. For example, we wanted to explore whether puberty is considered as marking the end of childhood, whether sexual debut or sexual experience affects how people regard children, and whether motherhood and childhood are states that can co-exist for teenage mothers. We explored these questions in the Community Survey. Respondents' comments on childhood are as follows:

Children over 13 yrs of age - When asked to comment on the question: *'I do not consider anyone over the age of 13 to still be a child'* most respondents (77.2%, 663) did not agree with this although 15.9% (137) did and 2.1% (18) were not sure.

Girls at puberty - When asked whether commencing menstruation marked the end of childhood for girls, most people (82.2%, 706) did not agree with this although 13.5% (116) either did think this or were not sure.

Boys at puberty - A similar result was obtained when we asked respondents to comment on the statement: *'A boy is no longer a boy when he enters puberty'* - 80.2% (689) did not think this and 13.8% (118) either did agree or were not sure.

Sexual activity - boys and girls are still children - We explored people's perceptions on whether childhood status was ended as a consequence of sexual experience. However, most respondents did not agree with this. When asked to comment on the statement: *'A girl who has sex is no longer a child'*, 88.5% (760) people did not agree, 7.1% (61) *did* agree and 2.1% (18) were not sure. Almost identical results were obtained when we asked respondents to comment on the statement: *'A boy stops being a boy once he has his first experience of sex'*.

Age clearly seen as defining childhood - except in motherhood! - Age was the clearest marker of childhood for most respondents. For just over half of the respondents (51.9%, 446) the end of childhood is reached once the child is 16 years of age, although 37.3% (320) did not agree with this, 5% (43) were not sure and 50 people did not answer the question. When asked whether the age of 18 marked the end of childhood, 77.4% (665) agreed with this although 19.4% (166) were either not sure or did not agree. Motherhood was a different story.

Children as mothers - incompatibility and a contradiction - While sexual activity was not considered a particularly significant marker of childhood, if the sexual experience led to pregnancy, then this was a different matter. Once a girl became pregnant, twice as many people (14.7%, 126) thought this marked the end of childhood than if she had had sex without becoming pregnant.

In linking these responses to child sexual abuse it was clear that overall the majority of the respondents were of the view that children were children at least until the legal age of sexual consent (16 years). However, there was a significant number of people who believe that childhood ends at 13 years. This may help to explain why, in the focus group discussions, some men indicated that they considered girls to be 'legitimate sexual prey' once they reach their teens;

The bible says that when a woman goes through puberty she is ready, so if it happens at 11 she is ready (Male Focus Group Participant).

There was also disturbing and overwhelming evidence that some women regard men having sex with their girl children as a means of generating income for the family once the girls reach an age *they* (the mother) considers appropriate even though, in all the instances reported, the girls were minors. Evidence of this was provided in every focus group, by many key informants and through the Community Survey. This is discussed later in the report but is mentioned here since it relates to the way in which the status of the child is viewed. While the CRC requires us to consider the status of childhood as distinct from adulthood, and to provide children with protection in line with this, the boundaries between childhood and adulthood are not universally accepted.

Another important issue was that some people believe that childhood ends if a girl becomes pregnant. This suggests that at the conceptual level, for a significant number of people, the state of motherhood is not considered compatible with the status of childhood. This highlights the contradictions and dilemmas that many teenage mothers face as they come to terms with being mothers while they are still children. Juxtaposed against the construction of young motherhood, however, is the reality that these respondents overlooked the fact that for a girl to become pregnant, she must have first been a *child* victim of rape or unlawful sexual intercourse. This response also suggests a lack of awareness of the impact of early pregnancy on physically immature teenagers, as was raised by one participant:

In obstetrics, that 16 year old is a high risk pregnancy because she can fit to death. She is prone to arrest because her womb is not properly developed; she can end-up making a deformed baby. She has to leave school. She fails to fulfil her functions as an adolescent, fails to perform in school, fails to be a productive member of society. She ends up in a cycle of failure (Male key informant).

Related to this is the issue of abortion. Although illegal in most circumstances, we found evidence that abortions were performed on young girls who had been raped by adult men and this practice was not uncommon. This topic was not explored in the focus groups or Community Survey but was raised independently by key informants and Survivors of Abuse. One government minister described this as '*girls being further abused by abortion*'. She also described a 'collusive network' of adults who are all aware that the child has been abused and all play their part in the abortion but take no part in addressing the cause of the girl's circumstances.

There are two important public education lessons from these findings:

- Changing perceptions on who is considered a 'child' and thus in need of special protection is unlikely to be achieved simply by enforcing (or raising) the legal age of sexual consent.
- Public education strategies should address the view held by some people (especially men) that children can ever be considered 'legitimate' targets for sex.

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OVERVIEW - THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

Child sexual abuse was acknowledged as occurring at all levels of society in every country, with its prevalence being summed up by the following comments:

Child sexual abuse is very prevalent in our society. A lot of it...the sexual abuse is done by someone the child knows very very very well (Interviewee).

There has always been child sexual abuse but what's missing is the public outcry against it.

There is a wanton disregard for the law...somehow we have lost the value of what a child is, we've all turned a blind eye, we've turned our backs on the community...we know that child sexual abuse is wrong but we allow it to happen, we know it's illegal...there's a disregard for personal responsibility.

Who is responsible? - We believe that responsibility for abuse must be owned and accountability of those who turn away must be confronted; however, we also believe that it will be counterproductive to demonise people with harmful sexual behaviours and that what is required is for us to collectively harness the best qualities of humanity to end the abuse of children. Most important is that in facing up to the problem we do so in a way that creates alliances rather than enemies, acceptance rather than denial, and creative responses rather than destructive scapegoating.

Perpetrators and victims – The study confirms findings reflected in other studies, that most child sexual abuse is committed by adult men (both heterosexual and homosexual) and most victims are girls; although respondents report that the abuse of boys is a significant and growing problem and that most abuse of boys is also by men. Men who abuse children were reported as coming from all social backgrounds, walks of life, professional groups, levels of education and ages.

The role of women - The study also shows that while women abuse children too, the major contribution that women make to the problem is in failing to protect children even when

they are aware that abuse is going on, disbelieving the child, putting male partners before the protection of the child, minimising the harm that abuse does, physically abusing children and, in some instances, actively encouraging abuse to take place for material gain. In the Community Survey, the majority of respondents (70.2%, 603) thought that *'Women sometimes turn a 'blind eye' when their partners have sex with children in their families'*, 14% (120) did not agree with this and 11.2% (96) were not sure.

While some women in these circumstances were clearly victims themselves, and this may help us to understand, if not excuse their behaviour, there were other examples in which women were described as taking a direct and active role in 'selling' their daughters for sex. Such was the extent of this that it even had its own term *'Mothers pimping their children'*. Within the family the reported culpability of mothers in denying and or disbelieving the abuse resonated with an alarming clarity and was commented upon by almost all respondents. The vicious cycle of abuse was seen as being not only related to the actual abuse inflicted on the child but also in the profound effects on children and families of the abdication of the mothering role to protect, nurture and instill values and mores to her children and, by implication, their children.

It is important to note, however, that respondents were concerned about the blaming of women - as one interviewee said:

What safety nets do we have to support women who stand up against the abuse of men? We didn't have the safety nets to protect them from abuse when they were children, and we don't have the safety nets to help them protect their own children.

The study suggests a combination of factors that contribute to this destructive state of affairs:

- Poverty - single mothers who are unable to sufficiently provide for their family, and being economically dependent on men, ignore abuse within the home in order ensure the family's economic survival.
- The commodification of sex within society more widely.
- Patriarchal values typified by men's sense of entitlement to sexually abuse the female children of their partners because they were the breadwinners. One reported common attitude of non-biological fathers is *'They [step-daughters] are not eating my food for nothing'*.
- Gender socialisation and gender norms.
- Cyclical abuse - many mothers in these circumstances will have been victims themselves and perhaps do not know how to end the cycle of abuse.
- Predatory behaviour of some men who target and exploit vulnerable families.

It is important to stress, however, that poverty in itself was not found to be a cause of child sexual abuse, since many poor families provide good protective care for their children. Furthermore, while many people are victimised by child sexual abuse most victims do not go on to engage in behaviours which place children at risk.

Private and public abuse - Both 'invisible' (intra-familial abuse that takes place in the privacy of the home) was described as well as more 'visible' forms of abuse that take place outside of the family – sex with underage girls in particular, but increasingly with boys, by adult males (of all socio-economic standing and professions). This was seen to be a very common occurrence with sex being traded for money, goods and favours. Such men might be referred to as 'boyfriends' and might be known to the girls' families. Respondents in two countries also gave the graphic example of sexual exploitation by public transport operatives: free bus transportation for victims and, in one country, for mothers as well, the cost of such transport being very high.

Interlocking system of factors that perpetuate the problem - The key informant interviews pointed to some powerful factors which help to maintain child sexual abuse, at the level of the individual (both victim and perpetrator), the family, the community and wider society, and government, their policy directorate and departments. The dominant role that these factors play must be deconstructed and fully understood for the interlocking role that each plays and must play in order to begin to stem the perceived tidal wave of the sexual violation of children by adults in every single country. In summary, the study identified interlocking factors that perpetuate abuse as follows:

*Interlocking factors that perpetuate abuse:
 Harmful sexual cultures
 Sexually abusive men
 Complicit women
 Collusive officials
 Lack of awareness
 Lack of outrage
 Ineffective systems
 Patriarchal values
 Children's
 disempowerment*

- Harmful sexual cultures (implicit social sanctioning)
- Males with sexually abusive behaviours
- Females with complicit behaviours
- Officials with collusive (condoning) behaviours
- Lack of awareness of effects and consequences
- Lack of collective public/professional outrage
- Ineffective systems for reporting and responding to abuse
- Patriarchal values which place protecting male status and privilege above protection of the child
- Disempowerment of children

Child sexual abuse is never acceptable - Most respondents across all aspects of the study thought that sexual activity between adults and children was never acceptable, no matter what the circumstances. Within the Community Survey, 76% (653) of respondents believed this, although 17% (146) thought there were circumstances when sexual activity between adults and children was okay, and 5.2% (15) respondents were not sure. These responses were not significantly affected by gender, socio economic class, religiousness, or level of education. However, respondents without young children or with no children were more than twice as likely as the parents of young children to believe that there were circumstances in which it was okay for adults to have sex with children.

Although this was *not* a prevalence study, respondents were overwhelmingly of the view that child sexual abuse is on the increase and we must therefore acknowledge this as a legitimate concern. It is difficult, though, to determine accurately the scale or rate of escalation of child sexual abuse for several reasons:

- Firstly, definitions and perceptions on what constitutes child sexual abuse differ. For instance, many respondents did not consider sex between a girl of 15 and a 19-year-old male to be sexual abuse if the man believed the girl was older and the girl had 'given consent' (although a minor cannot, in fact, legally consent to sex). If the girl is 15 and the man in his 30s or 40s, however, the number of people who would now describe this as sexual abuse increased, although some people and men in particular, would still not describe this as sexual abuse. This suggests that despite sexual offences being clearly defined in legal terms, at the conceptual level, sexual abuse is not fixed; it depends upon a range of circumstances and how abuse is defined is influenced not only by the characteristics of the victim and the abuser, but also the characteristics (such as gender) and experiences of the person who is asked the question. Asked whether sex between older men and underage girls is increasing, a person might say 'yes'; however, if the same person is asked whether sexual abuse is increasing, he or she might say 'no'. This issue was further highlighted in discussions about the sexual abuse of boys, which again, according to participants in this study, is on the increase. Respondents made it clear that gender socialisation norms make it very difficult for this type of abuse to be acknowledged. If a boy is abused by a woman, social pressures make it more likely that this will be reframed as the boy's 'education' or his 'good luck' regardless of any damaging effects, and if abused by a man, homophobia, fear of becoming homosexual and macho social norms would require that the experienced was suppressed.
- Is child sexual abuse an escalating problem or one about which there is heightened awareness? To answer this with any accuracy would require follow up studies based on pre-existing data on the extent of child abuse; however, the systems and processes for routinely gathering such data do not exist in the Caribbean.
- Any research study, even one with the most effective methods, is likely to *underestimate* the actual prevalence of sexual abuse in the population being investigated.

Terminology

Our research suggests that the term 'sexual abuse' may be too limiting and narrow a term to capture fully the complexity and multiple ways in which sexual behaviour harms children. The term implies a fixed definition which, while useful for policy and legislative purposes, does not allow for the interconnection of different factors that determine the extent to which perpetrators are culpable or the extent to which children are harmed. For example, most people would have difficulty in describing a male of 18 who has 'consensual' sex with his girlfriend a week before her 16th birthday as sexual abuse and the effects of this would be very different than if the girl was much younger, if there was coercion or force, if the man was much older, or indeed if a whole range of factors were present. Also, while the

study showed that some men are dangerous serial predators who inflict devastating harm on children and the term 'sexual abuser' is justified, there are others (especially adolescent young men) who may unknowingly have had unlawful sexual intercourse with a minor but who do not present any threat to children generally and for these men, the label 'sexual abuser' is unhelpful and unnecessarily pathologises young people. We therefore suggest that the term 'harmful sexual behaviours' is a more appropriate term for public education messages and should be used alongside legal definitions of 'sexual abuse'.

Insight into some perceived reasons

Cultural issues - Respondents described three main features of Caribbean society that impact on child sexual abuse: '*highly sexualised cultures*'; the power and privilege of men and the view that society is adult-focused rather than child-focused - in contradiction of the CRC, many respondents reported that children are not considered as having a special status and are viewed as 'little people', as implied when a counsellor was working with a family in which a child had been abused: '*why you telling my child about her rights?*'

Cycle of abuse - Survey results showed that approximately half of the respondents thought that men and women who sexually abuse children have been sexually abused themselves - 52.4% (450) thought this was the case, 25.5% (219) were not sure and 16.6% (143) did not agree. Women were more likely to think this than men (60.7% of women respondents as compared to 47% of male respondents thought this). A similar response was reported in relation to women who sexually abuse children, with 50.3% (432) of respondents agreeing with this, 17.6% disagreeing and 27.7% of respondents stating that they were not sure. This finding is important and concurs with other studies which show that despite the cyclical nature of child abuse, a great many victims of child abuse *do not* go on to abuse their own or other children. We do not know enough about what causes some people to become abusers and others to not abuse children (this is explored in the full report). However, there are clearly resiliency and protective characteristics in play here that we can learn from and perhaps extend in other ways. Despite this, there can be little doubt that abuse generates further abuse - interviewees and focus group participants believed that in many cases, men themselves *had* been abused as children or had grown up in circumstances in which they were prematurely exposed to sexual behaviour:

Some of the men who are doing it are not paedophiles they just grow up seeing so they think it is normal (focus group Participant).

Sex is a man's right! – There was evidence that some men believe that they have a right to have sex and that if their partners refuse to have sex with them, then children are 'fair game'. We explored this in the Community Survey - results showed that although most people (62.6%) do not accept that women refusing to have sex with partners was a reason

'Harmful Sexual Behaviours'

This term incorporates a wide range of behaviours and attitudes and would seem to be an appropriate term for public education messages.

This may help to address the wider behaviour and attitude change needed among people whose behaviour is harmful but not necessarily considered 'abuse'

for men seeking to have sex with children, a significant proportion of respondents *did* think this (17.5%, 150). When the numbers of those who agree were combined with the numbers who were not sure, 51% of female respondents and 48% of male respondents either think that women who refuse partners sex are partially responsible for child sexual abuse or at least are not sure.

Why children don't tell - Most survey respondents (82.3%, 707) believed that children do not tell about sexual abuse because they are scared of the consequences. Some people thought that children did not tell because they did not mind that this had happened to them - 9.2% (79) thought this, although the majority (79.7%, 685) did not agree with this. Of note, men were almost twice as likely to think that children did not tell because they did not mind, than women (13.5% as compared to 7.3%).

Children must have a place to go. If they tell their mother, they will get one rap in their head and they will be scared. Where would they go? (Focus Group Participant)

Focus group participants and interviewees shared the view that not only are children not believed, but the consequences of telling can be very grave, as expressed by this survivor of abuse:

...I was seven, he was about 15 or 16, I don't know but he was a man to me and he was big...he held me down and then did it. He also raped my sister, she is three years younger than me but she don't talk about it...When my mother came home, I told her...She held me down too and took a stick to beat me – I still have a scar on my face [points to a scar about 1½ inches long]... I don't know why she beat me, she beat me real bad... I guess she didn't believe me but I don't know why she beat me.

Children fear being disbelieved and being blamed. One interviewee shared her experience of working with a child of eight who had been raped by her step-father. The child was blamed by the mother *'It was her fault, she sat on his knee'*.

Children also risk being punished, being held responsible for family break-up, for the family's impoverishment, for causing family distress. A common response to disclosure was reported by this respondent:

Who's going to support you now...you send my husband to prison?

Children also fear creating guilt, creating conflict, the loss of relationships (even, in some cases, the loss of the relationship with the person abusing them). They may fear losing being singled out and made to feel special (part of the predatory behaviour of male abusers); they may crave the attention and gifts they receive (if this is part of the abuse behaviour) and they may have been threatened and fear violence. Additionally, children fear their private nightmare being turned into a public shame and will be well aware of the negative effects of gossip; they may fear being targeted by other abusers, discriminated against, being shunned or mocked by their peers.

There are numerous reasons why children don't tell - these factors are powerful and the burden of releasing any of them may simply be too much to bear. While all children want the abuse to end, the cost of telling may be too great.

THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

The Community Survey, focus groups, and Informant interviews clearly indicate that most people believe child sexual abuse is a serious and extensive problem in the region. Drawing on personal experiences in many cases, respondents presented an alarming picture of a social problem that is escalating, has increasingly severe consequences for Caribbean societies, has multiple layers and is perpetuated not only by adults who carry out harmful sexual practices with children but also by non-abusing adults through complicity, silence, denial and failure to take appropriate action.

We can state, with certainty, that there is both heightened awareness of child sexual abuse and, in the perception of research participants, an increasing problem of child sexual abuse

While this was not a prevalence study and being cognizant of the limitations of prevalence studies, we can nevertheless state, with certainty, that

there is both heightened awareness of child sexual abuse and, in the perception of the majority of people who participated in the study, an increasing problem.

If any predictions can be made about the scale of the problem, the study suggests that there are particular issues for Caribbean societies which affect the reporting of abuse and which may also add to problems of estimating scale:

- in small societies anonymity and confidentiality cannot be assured;
- in small societies the perpetrator may be in a position of power or is likely to know someone who is and may be able to influence the outcome of a report;
- the procedures for dealing with reports, systems for monitoring abuse and services to deal with the impact of disclosure are underdeveloped;
- cultural values about the status of children means that they are not always believed;
- poverty and the economic and social reliance of many Caribbean women on men mean that action which may affect the main breadwinner is often undermined by women themselves.

Under-reporting: in small societies, anonymity and confidentiality cannot be assured.

In small societies the perpetrator may be in a position of power or may know someone who is and who can influence the outcome of a report.

The procedures for dealing with reports and services to deal with the impact of disclosure are underdeveloped.

Cultural values about the status of children may stop them being believed.

Poverty and the social/economic reliance of women on men may mean that the freedom of the male is protected rather than the child.

In addition to these factors, we are mindful of evidence that shows that for adult survivors of abuse, denial or minimisation of the abuse is a common defence mechanism that helps the adult to function in their daily lives and that many survivors do not actually remember their abuse. Other research studies show that as many as one in three incidents of child sexual abuse are not remembered by adults who experienced them, and that the younger the child was at the time of the abuse, and the closer the relationship to the abuser, the more likely one is not to remember.

For all of these reasons the study is unable to provide any definitive evidence on the numbers of children and adults who are affected by child sexual abuse.

Through the Community Survey we did, however, seek adults' retrospective views about whether they had been involved in any type of behaviour that might be described as child sexual abuse. We did not define sexual abuse and allowed participants to determine this for themselves, nevertheless this is unlikely to affect the results significantly as within focus groups there was overall agreement about behaviours that constitute sexual abuse (participants were drawn from the same population as Community Survey respondents and therefore we can reasonably assume that there would be similar understandings). Most of the respondents 82.8% (711) reported that they had *not* been involved in behaviour that could be described as child sexual abuse, although a significant percentage 13.2% (113) of respondents answered 'yes'. When asked whether respondents were concerned that a child they knew was being sexually abused at the time of the study, approximately one in seven of those who answered (12.2%, 105) said 'yes', 82.3% (707) said 'no' and 47 people did not answer.

Reports of CSA - the gender difference - Unsurprisingly there were more women than men who had had experiences of child sexual abuse and almost three times as many women as men reported these experiences. Perhaps more surprising is that 31% of those who reported such experiences were men. Also, more women than men reported that they were concerned that a child they knew was being abused at the time of the study.

There were differences relating to specific countries and in one country the percentage of respondents who had said they had had an experience that could be described as child sexual abuse was as high as 25% and in another, 10% of the respondents reported that they had had such experiences. The country-specific data need to be treated with caution, however; while the regional sample size was large enough to be able to draw some generalisable conclusions, at the country level the samples were small and one cannot rule out the possibility that sampling methods may have naturally led to a larger number of abuse survivors being engaged in the research (although this does not account for the lower numbers reported in one country).

For the reasons that have been stated, these figures underestimate the size of the problem, however if under-reporting were to account for only 20% of cases (international studies suggest that this figure is higher as many more cases are unreported than reported) then, based on our survey, the numbers of people in the Caribbean who have experienced behaviour that could be described as child sexual abuse can be estimated at between 20%-45%. Although comparisons among countries have to be treated with caution because of

methodological and definitional differences, general population surveys of child sexual abuse among adults have been conducted in at least 19 countries in addition to the United States and Canada, including 10 national probability samples. All studies have found rates ranging from 7% to 36% for women and 3% to 29% for men. Most studies found females to be abused at 1.5 to 3 times the rate for males (Finkelhor, 1994).

Harmful Sexual Behaviours - Respondents identified a range of harmful sexual behaviours they were aware of in their communities, some of which were clearly examples of sexual abuse:

- Children used as objects in videos, photos or as pimps
- Invading the child's privacy, peeping while child undresses or bathes
- Video taping of the child for sexual purposes
- Rape, forced and 'consensual' sexual intercourse with a minor
- Use of sexual language to, and in front of, a child
- Inappropriate touching of minor
- Looking at children inappropriately
- Child overhearing sexual language
- Exposure to sexual materials e.g. radio, photos, movies, text, laptop, mobile telephone, Internet, computer, parent/adult sexual toys, sexual DVDs
- Exposing the child to the sexual act deliberately or unknowingly
- Incest – child with parent or other family member, biological or step parent, guardian, siblings
- Obsessive watching of child
- Watching 'nude', 'partially nude' pictures of the child
- Uncomfortable or intrusive touching of child

A common view expressed among many focus group participants was that the dressing of young children in revealing clothes (dressing inappropriately) was also harmful sexual behaviour on the part of the parent (the mother) since this was believed to contribute to the early sexualisation of the child. Early sexual initiation is an important issue that must be addressed; however, despite the popularity of this view, whether there is a link between the way a young child is dressed and early sexual initiation cannot be substantiated for several reasons. Firstly, it assumes the problem is the child rather than the adult – who is viewing the child in a sexual way – indeed the child may be unaware of the sexual connotation of her clothing; secondly, it suggests that girls who are not 'dressed inappropriately' are not sexually abused – this is not true; thirdly, it implies that boys are not sexually abused (since they are never dressed 'inappropriately') - this too is not true. Additionally, the clothing worn by girls in the Caribbean is similar to clothing worn in many parts of the world and there appear to be no studies which suggest that sexual abuse is either increased or decreased depending upon the way girls are dressed.

If under-reporting were to account for only 20% of cases (and this figure is likely to be higher as many more cases are unreported than reported) then based on this study, the numbers of people in the Caribbean who have experienced behaviour that could be described as child sexual abuse can be estimated at 20%-45%

The most likely explanations for early sexual initiation are sexual abuse, social pressure, emulating observed behaviours, a lack of social inhibition factors and the socialisation of sexual norms, as indicated by this comment:

In [this country], everybody is having sex with everybody else. That's the norm (Focus Group Participant)

Children and teenagers appear over-sexed...and it's not from interaction with their peers...this must be coming from the home (Focus Group Participant)

Halcon, Blum, Beuhring, Pate, Campbell-Forrester and Venema (2003), in a study of young people and health in nine Caribbean countries, reported the following:

Of the one-third of young persons who had had intercourse, almost half reported that their first sexual intercourse was forced. Over half of the sexually active boys and about a quarter of females stated that the age of first intercourse was 10 years old or younger and almost two-thirds had intercourse before the age of 13 (p.1854).

Early sexual initiation is an issue that must be addressed as, according to a World Bank study (2003), young people in the Caribbean are the earliest to have sex in the world. The most likely explanations for this are sexual abuse, social pressure, emulating observed behaviours, a lack of social inhibition factors and socialisation of sexual norms.

We wanted to explore whether sexy dressing by teenage girls is considered a reflection of societal sexual norms or a contributing factor to sexual abuse. The way that teenage girls dress was largely viewed, not so much as an expression of the girl's sexuality, but as an explicit *sexual invitation* to men, as suggested by this respondent:

Some girls dress up and act up in ways to provoke you. They want something from you and they think sex is the way to get it. They know how to turn you on (Focus Group Participant)

Survey results showed that the majority of respondents (77.2%, 663) thought that 'girls draw men's attention by the way they dress'. Only 12.5% (107) did not agree with this and 5.4% (46) were not sure. Whether simply stating a fact or suggesting that girls may in some way be contributing to their own abuse because of the way they dress, was not clear. However a further question helped to clarify things. Respondents were asked to comment on the statement: 'Men view girls who show off their bodies as inviting them to have sex' – although more respondents disagreed with this than the previous statement (19%, 163), the majority of respondents (65.8%, 565) agreed with the statement and 10.1% (87) were not sure. There were no significant gender differences in these views, between those who were parents of girls and those who were not, or between different education levels.

There appears to be a dominant perception that men are easily tempted and thus perhaps lack sexual control. Conversely, the findings also suggest that girls are somehow held as partially responsible for men's behaviour because of the way they dress; furthermore the very fact of girls' physical/sexual development was considered by a small number of respondents as a contributing factor to sexual abuse. Nevertheless it was also clear that respondents considered that sexual attraction was a contributing factor and not a cause of child sexual abuse.

There is a dominant perception that men are easily tempted and lack sexual control. Conversely, girls are somehow held as partially responsible for men's behavior because of their sexual development and the way they dress.

MAIN FORMS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Most child sexual abuse takes place in the home - this is the finding of most studies on the topic and was further reinforced by this study. Respondents in the Community Survey (65.5%, 563) believed that the most likely perpetrators of child sexual abuse are the child's parents, although 11.3% (97) did not agree with this and 17.9% (154) were not sure. When asked whether the most likely perpetrators were other family members, the responses were more mixed: 37.8% did not think this, 28.1% agreed with this and 26.2% of respondents were not sure.

We just received a case for counselling because the client is suicidal. Her father has been molesting her since she was eight years old and she is now twenty (Interviewee).

While most victims are girls, the extent of sexual abuse of boys seems to have been largely overlooked by researchers and we found evidence that the abuse of boys was a serious problem and that, in the public perception, is an increasing problem. The growing phenomenon of the abuse of boys (both within and outside the home) was reported as a major issue in all except one country and in *this* country, the view was offered that such was the extent of homophobia, that this problem is deeply buried.

Boys are a growing target of child sexual offenders- with more cases of buggery, indecent assault and other acts. (Interviewee)

The example below, shared by one respondent, demonstrates the negative learning and modeling that takes place following abuse which then further labels the child as deviant (and most likely leads to punishment):

I know of a child in foster care who practised bestiality with the foster parent's dog after being abused. (Interviewee)

Incest - (sexual intercourse between biologically-related siblings and between children and biological parents). Some focus group participants held the view that incest is largely a

problem of poor families, poor education, specific isolated communities (e.g. some ethnic groups and some religious groups), or rural communities. However, while there may be some social factors that increase the likelihood of incest among these groups, the evidence of the survey, informant interviews and survivor interviews is that incest cuts across social class and is not affected by levels of education, professional status or social standing. This was evident across all aspects of the study and was reinforced by Adult Survivors.

Incest cuts across social class regardless of education, professional status and social standing.

In some families incest may be considered 'normal'.

We attempted to find out whether people thought that incest was considered 'normal' in some families and communities. Respondents were asked to comment on the statement: *'In some families sex between adults and children is considered normal'* – only half of the respondents (50.2%, 431) did not think this was the case, 25.3% (217) did think that in some families incest is considered normal, 19.7% (169) were not sure and 41 people did not answer the question. Respondents were also asked to comment on the statement *'In some families sex between brothers and sisters is considered normal'* – 22.4% (192) thought that this was the case, 57.2% (491) did not think so and 16.6% (143) were not sure. There was variance between countries (ranging from 15% of respondents who did think this in one country, to 26% in another who also thought this).

We also investigated this topic through interviews with key informants. Although a problem across all levels of society, respondents in all countries cited anecdotal evidence where some small communities were known to have a culture of incest. The description of the violation being 'normalised' was used. The challenge for child protection in such places is to reverse this 'cultural' trend. This participant describes the way in which incest becomes normalised within families:

The victims are usually involved in multiple abuse cases or have victim siblings in the same household as if it is like a cycle. The cases are never solved since the child 'victim' doesn't talk when the authorities get involved. They are naïve and unaware that a crime was committed against them (Interviewee).

Whether they thought that some families considered incest to be normal or not, respondents were overwhelmingly of the view that incest is harmful even if it is a long-standing family pattern and even if the effects are not apparent - 84% of people who participated in the survey thought this.

My experience has been that victims of incest are usually being abused by more than one family member. In one such case the young girl was being abused by her stepfather and uncle (Interviewee).

Stepfathers - Survey results showed that more than half of the respondents (53.6%, 460) thought that step-fathers were more likely than biological fathers to sexually abuse children in the family although a quarter of respondents (215) did not believe this and 16.4% (141)

were not sure. Men were more likely to think this than women (61% of male respondents compared to 53.7% of female respondents agreed with this). International studies suggest that step-father abuse is significantly higher than abuse by biological fathers and the evidence from this study supports this.

We recently had to address a situation where a 10-year-old was impregnated by her step-father. The mother was reluctant to do anything about it (Interviewee).

One view offered for this was that biological fathers have a bond with children from the child's infancy and that the biological ties function as a protective factor that is non-existent among step-fathers. It is likely that this is the case in some circumstances, however given that biological fathers also abuse children, that incest is often intergenerational and that there are step-fathers who do not abuse children, the likely explanation in most cases is simply that some men abuse children in their care and some do not.

Mother's boyfriends - A stepfather implies a more stable relationship than the status 'mother's boyfriend'. In some communities, female single-parent headed households account for almost 50% of family form and in many of these families the adult male in the household is the mother's boyfriend or boyfriends. Characterised by impermanence, multiple partnering or serial partnering is common in these circumstances. In many of these families, despite the lack of permanent attachment, the man is either the main breadwinner in the family or substantially contributes to the family's household income. We explored whether children were more at risk from mother's boyfriends than from other men. The survey results were that almost half (47%, 404) of the respondents thought the most likely person to abuse a child was the mother's boyfriend although 26% (223) did not agree with this and 21.7% (186) respondents were not sure. This issue was also discussed by focus group participants and key informants who were overwhelmingly of the view that these circumstances *did* increase risk for children.

There is a lot of sexual abuse involving step-fathers. He chooses to come around if the mother is not there...it seems to be very common...the mother's boyfriend is also the daughter's boyfriend (focus group Participant)

Furthermore, mothers were seen as often contributing to the abuse of their children by protecting the perpetrator in order to ensure the financial survival of the family. Silence, denial or encouragement of abuse was reported as being common among mothers in these circumstances. Although not limited to mothers' boyfriends, the collusion of women in men's abuse of their children was regarded as very common and was reported by all focus group participants and by several key informants.

Mothers were often seen as contributing to the abuse of their children by protecting the perpetrator in order to ensure the financial survival of the family. Silence, denial or encouragement of abuse was reported as being common among mothers in these circumstances.

OLDER MEN AND TRANSACTIONAL SEXUAL ABUSE

A form of abuse that was reportedly widely sanctioned in all countries is the transactional sexual abuse of girls and, increasingly, boys, by older men. This form of abuse is often quite visible, i.e. an 'open secret'- and happens often with the full knowledge of parents, communities and officials. Such is the extent of this problem, that it is considered a firmly entrenched and established pattern of behaviour that does not even need to be hidden, since it is unlikely to attract penalty and may not even be disapproved of. This is reflected in these comments by focus group participants:

I think they've totally lost respect for that law because they rarely see anybody prosecuted in court for that. They don't think anybody is taking it seriously including the police. I think everything has become lax and there is a trend towards men wanting young girls. I think to me it's less about the children needing things and more about adult preying on the children. They might see where children are in need and are vulnerable and take advantage of them

... a lot of older men are taking advantage of our little boys, they are very young children aged 13-14 years being paid \$100.00 to have sex and then the child walks away to buy a pair of shoes or something else

there is a lot of homosexual activity with boys. Business men are doing it with young boys for money

Bus drivers and persons with vehicles use young girls a lot. Particularly young girls going to school who can't afford to pay for bus fare. They trade in transportation for sex

Man bullying little boys. These boys getting sex for shoes and Ipods...Some older boys bullying to get work

This is getting outrageous. Students are having relationships to get grades

Transactional sexual abuse was reported as being committed by men at all levels of society, including politicians and senior professionals. However, both men and women in the study believe that this behaviour is destructive and unacceptable. Survey results showed that over 93% of respondents do not believe that transactional sex between teenage girls and older men is justifiable, even if the money is needed to help the girls or their families.

While there are damaging psychosocial effects on the teenage girls, there are also other consequences such as unwanted pregnancies and abortions. One of the most disturbing findings was that presented with such evidence of unlawful sexual intercourse, medical professionals and other officials often took no action since they believed that reporting would be futile or they did not want to create trouble:

Everyone knows who the father is of a [a baby born to a] teenaged mother...the justice system and the social system need to pull together to ensure that children are protected

Most of the girls in the programme for adolescent mothers have become pregnant in relationships with much older men. In many cases, the family endorses it and these men are actually paying for their girlfriends to continue their education (Interviewee)

We are an exceptionally enmeshed community and many people are related...here they don't want to be the one who spilled the beans. (Interviewee)

Emergent issues and risks - Although not discussed here, the study identified some emergent risks for children:

- Natural disasters and the resultant dislocation and disruption of family life (loss of protective family functions).
- The sexual violation of children on the internet and mobile phones. Respondents in several countries gave graphic examples of pornographic images of uniformed school girls engaging in sexually explicit scenes. The 'addiction' to this 'glamorous' medium makes exploitation easy to achieve.
- Sex tourism.
- A growing problem with girls' sexual aggression.

CONSEQUENCES OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

We found evidence of devastating consequences of child sexual abuse at the individual, family and societal level and there were physical, social psychological and economic effects. The effects to the child and the family also impacted on the quality of life in the community and in some instances the state was held responsible for the medical bills of individuals who may have suffered psychological breakdown. In other instances, the state became the financier of the education and health of the teenager's unplanned offspring, especially if the mother was unable to complete her education and/or gain a valuable skill, in order to secure employment.

Survey results showed that over 85% of respondents (85.1%, 731) believed that long-term emotional harm was caused to children as a consequence of sexual abuse and this is regardless of whether the child feels loved by the person who abuses them.

Analysis of interviews with survivors of abuse showed that common effects were as follows:

We found evidence of devastating consequences of child sexual abuse at the individual, family and societal level. There were physical, social, psychological and economic effects. These effects also impacted on the quality of life in the community.

- Anger
- Bed-wetting
- Disturbed behaviour
- Low self-esteem
- Self-hate
- Difficulties with school work
- Family break up
- Child runaways
- Depression
- Mental illness
- Alcoholism
- Inability to trust
- Distorted sexual boundaries

Effects were described as never going away – *'key is learning to manage them'*.

Relationships - Family relationships distorted - trust betrayal, hate and love are all mixed up; child often gets on well with the abuser because he showers her with attention, gifts and special treatment; child often hates non-abusing parent for failing to pick up what is going on and having no ability to protect her; can destroy sibling relationships but equally siblings may try to protect one another; difficulty in forming relationships in later life.

A Public Health or Children's Rights Issue - It is one of the conclusions of this study that such are the health implications of child sexual abuse that children might be better served if the problem were viewed as a **public health issue** as well as a children's rights issue since there was clear evidence that the sexual abuse of children contributes to:

- Mental illness and depression
- Increased alcohol and drug use/abuse
- HIV and STIs
- Increased medical risks associated with teen pregnancy
- Medical risks associated with abortions
- Physical injuries to children's sexual organs and genitalia

Don't turn it inward? It's already inward! It's inside! It'll never get out!... I mean I'm an alcoholic already. (Survivor)

Child sexual abuse is at epidemic proportions in this country, as a paediatrician, I use this term quite deliberately.... we have a ton of depressed women who cannot rise above what has happened. (Paediatrician)

LEGISLATION, POLICY AND AGENCY EFFECTIVENESS

The criminal justice system – failing to protect - The state of countries' legislation to adequately protect children was generally regarded as ineffective by interviewees.

Practitioners more than policy makers tended to see it as weak in its ability. This was compounded by the view that the criminal justice systems in all the countries are failing to protect children against child sexual abuse. The consensus was that the main failing of the law was in its ineffectual implementation. Common sentiments are summed up in the following excerpts from interviews:

Known paedophiles are walking around and no action is being taken against them

It depends on who commits the sexual abuse. If the person is an important person in society, they might get away

Law enforcement - Many respondents criticised the police for their response/non-response to child sexual abuse, as expressed by this interviewee:

Law enforcement is weak and they [the Police] do not seem to want to pursue these cases. They look to avoid pursuing charges whenever possible

The survey results suggest, however, that most people still think the police have an important role to play. The majority of respondents (67.4%, 579) said that if an adult in their family was sexually abusing a child within the family, they would always report it to the police; however, a significant number of people would try to sort out such a problem *without* informing the police - 22.4% (192). When asked about the *ability* of the police to deal with child sexual abuse, almost half of respondents (48%, 412) did not think that police officers generally know how to deal with sexual abuse, 21.8% (187) *did* think so and 22.5% (193) were not sure.

Mandatory reporting - Survey respondents (82.3%, 767) were largely in favour of legislation that makes the reporting of child sexual abuse cases mandatory, although some focus group participants did not believe that this development would help victims. There were also concerns about increasing or extending legislation when there were difficulties with the implementation of current laws and countries lacked the systems and resources to protect and support children and families that do report abuse. Nevertheless, it was clear that people *do* consider law enforcement to be an essential aspect of an effective child protection system.

Non-existent, weak or unimplemented Policies and Protocols - A resounding call was made for sound child protection policies and protocols where they do not exist and for the updating of others to reflect the particular needs of the sexually abused child, and for their consistent application across all disciplines. All respondents recognised that the duty of safeguarding and protecting children cannot any longer be individualistically pursued; it requires a shared inter-agency approach reflecting the complexity of the violation and the needs of the child and family. As one respondent commented:

The duty of safeguarding and protecting children cannot any longer be individualistically pursued; it requires a shared inter-agency approach reflecting the complexity of sexual violation and the needs of the child and the family.

If the system does not fight for defenceless children, who will?

The variable picture across the region with some countries having no up-to-date policies and written protocols, others having recently crafted policies but which are unimplemented, and some countries having policies but known about by limited departments, was recognised as a major reason for ineffectiveness.

There was also a call for improvements in the Justice system:

- Specialist and multidisciplinary training for all personnel involved in the legal safeguarding and social protection of children
- Harmonisation of the family law legislation
- Implementation of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) reformed family law and domestic violence legislation.

The family - using the legislation for personal gain - Respondents were incredulous in their reporting that, in the 21st century, families can pervert the course of justice through outdated legislation that depends on their permission to bring cases against an alleged perpetrator. The consensus view of respondents is that many of those parents (mothers) who so do are motivated by financial gain - if not entirely, then in part. Financial gain as a motivating factor was due to fear of losing the breadwinner and receiving 'pay-outs' to drop or not bring a case in the first place. Also culpable here are the men who use bribery, threats and coercion to prevent cases from being followed up.

Agency limitations -The perceived present scale of child sexual abuse is one that is largely beyond the ability of every agency to manage effectively. Respondents acknowledged the severe challenges of an absence of or severe shortage of skilled persons to intervene and provide therapeutic intervention. In one country which is slightly better served and can provide some support and counselling, the position of 'overwhelming' caseloads immediately cancels out any meaningful work. Countries cited non-prioritisation and underfunding of the statutory agencies and the other support agencies dealing with this area of work as severe impediments to progress.

CALL FOR REMEDIAL ACTION

There were many recommendations for change – some of these are summed up below.

Improving institutional capacity - Specialist well-resourced regional agencies with country-level satellite specialist agencies were urgently called for. Mandatory reporting would make this even more imperative. In recognition of the far-reaching effects of child sexual abuse on child victims, adult survivors and by implication the whole of society, skilled specialist trained staff were required. This was summed up thus 'therapeutic communities (facilities) with a wide range of skilled persons (counsellors, nurses, therapists) for interventions'.

Public education – Survey respondents highlighted that the topic is still quite taboo in many places, reinforced by an absence of public education on its causes, deleterious effects and societal unacceptability. Recommendations include:

- Mass public multimedia education on child sexual abuse (this would include specific programmes targeted at mothers, fathers, children, adolescents and, men in general).
- Public education to address harmful sexual behaviours more widely.

Role of families and communities - Survey respondents were strongly of the view that both men and women could take more action to protect children. Most people (86.6%, 744) also thought it would help if people generally talked more openly about the problem of children being targeted for unlawful sex. Respondents were overwhelmingly in support of the idea that children should be empowered more generally within society and they should be helped to speak out if an adult had taken sexual advantage of them - 92.9% (798) of respondents were in favour of this approach. Recommendations from interviewees were that there is need for programmes that focus on strengthening the role of families and communities through:

- Implementation of multi-agency support programmes to mothers (particularly very young single mothers) whose children are at high risk of being exploited.
- Robust parenting education programmes to parents with components on keeping children safe from sexual exploitation as an implicit role of parents.

Role of religious leaders - Religion was found to be a major aspect of the lives of Caribbean people, with most respondents describing themselves as religious and the majority being active in their faith. Anecdotal evidence suggested that religious leaders are often complicit in keeping child abuse secret with the emphasis being on protecting reputations and preserving families at the cost of protecting children. Additionally, there were also concerns of some religious leaders using their position of trust and authority to abuse children themselves. The view was also expressed that some people '*hide behind their religion*' and believe that it does not matter what harm they inflict as '*Jesus will wash their sins away*'.

Given these factors - the importance of religion to Caribbean people, the secretive methods for dealing with abuse within religious settings, and the actual abuse of children by some religious leaders - we explored respondents' views on the role of religious leaders in tackling the problem. Survey results showed that the majority of respondents (84.4%, 725) think that religious leaders should do more to stop the sexual abuse of children.

Role of Schools - Reports often suggest that Caribbean parents are generally not in favour of sex education being provided within the school setting, with the popular view being that this may actually encourage children to have sex (although no research evidence supports this and in fact the opposite has been found, i.e. sex education can delay sexual debut). However, in this study, respondents were overwhelmingly of the view that schools *should* take a role in educating children about healthy sexual behaviour – 92% (790) of respondents agree with this and only 2.2% (N19) disagreed.

Role of the media - The media is a central feature of the way in which sexual behaviour is portrayed within societies and both reflects and contributes to values and attitudes held by the general public. With regard to child sexual abuse, several issues were raised about the

role of the media which concerned the research team. One major concern is the representation of women as sexual objects, and the ways in which sexual abuse is sensationalised and regarded as a salacious media commodity often with little regard for the victims. Also, media reporting on the topic often seems to perpetuate the notion of the man as victim – falling prey to temptations and girls being held responsible for their own abuse because of the way they dress. While these are important issues to explore, it is also the case that responsible media reporting and media involvement to address social problems can be an extremely effective tool for change.

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