The Spotlight Initiative is a global initiative of the United Nations which has received generous support from the European Union. Its aim is to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls.

Launched in 2017 with a seed funding commitment of €500 million from the European Union, the Initiative represents an unprecedented global effort to invest in gender equality and women’s empowerment as a precondition and driver for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Within the Caribbean region, it prioritizes the reduction of family violence (FV), working closely with governments, civil society organizations, and regional institutions such as CARICOM Secretariat and the OECS Commission to integrate prevention, protection, and essential services responses to FV survivors into regional plans.

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Introduction

Objectives of this resource: To contextualize the intersection between violence against women (VAW) and violence against children (VAC) in the Caribbean region and provide evidence-based guidelines to promote integrated services, based on the opportunities and challenges identified.

This brief focuses on Programme Pillar 2 of the Spotlight Initiative by concentrating on strengthening regional intergovernmental institutions to improve the delivery of essential services for FV survivors, and addresses service gaps by examining the intersections between VAW and VAC. The aim is to enhance collaboration among service providers for women and children who have experienced violence and promote coordination across sectors, including education, parenting programmes, and adolescent health and development initiatives.

The problem

Context of violence against women, adolescent girls and girls in the Caribbean region.

In the Caribbean, a legacy of colonialism and structural inequalities has fostered a deeply-ingrained culture of GBV. This culture often normalizes violence, depicting it as a disciplinary tool and an expression of masculinity, while positioning women and girls as subordinate to men. This has led to pervasive and normalized GBV in the region, with around 45% of women experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV) during their lifetimes, and rates of sexual violence exceeding global averages.

Despite increasing research efforts, there remains a substantial lack of comprehensive, updated, and comparable data, especially concerning sexual violence against adolescent girls who are particularly vulnerable to underreporting due to fear of retaliation, often from family members or close acquaintances. This underreporting, along with barriers like social stigma, insufficient awareness, and the normalization of violence, has hindered the collection of accurate statistics. While Caribbean countries have made legal strides in addressing family violence and protecting children, much work is still needed to combat this deeply ingrained issue effectively.

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What is violence against women and violence against children?

Violence against women (VAW) and violence against children (VAC) represent significant global concerns, with distinct definitions and overlapping implications. VAW encompasses acts of gender-based violence (GBV) that inflict physical, sexual, or psychological harm upon women, emphasizing the role of gender at various societal levels. GBV provides a more expansive framework that extends beyond gender stereotypes against women and girls to also address violence against various other groups, including LGBTIQ+ individuals, men and boys, persons with disabilities, and more. Within the framework of GBV, VAW holds particular significance because it emphasizes how women are affected by the gendered dimensions of violence perpetrated due to societal norms and patriarchal contexts.

Violence against children (VAC) refers to physical or mental violence, abuse, neglect, maltreatment, or exploitation of children and adolescents, which has gendered dimensions. Girls disproportionately bear the brunt of certain forms of violence, such as sexual and intimate partner violence (IPV). Adolescent girls face increased IPV risks in regions with prevalent child marriage and gender-norm-justified wife-beating. Adolescent boys, while experiencing higher homicide rates, are more likely to enact violence against girls due to the acceptance of pervasive harmful gender norms from a young age. LGBTIQ+ and gender nonconforming youth are at heightened risk due to discrimination and inadequate legal protection.

Intersections of VAC and VAW.

Recognizing the intersections between VAC and VAW is crucial. Research has identified six key intersection areas:

1. **Social norms:**
   Shared beliefs and norms within social groups can condone both VAW and VAC, deterring help-seeking behavior. For instance, acceptance of wife-beating often correlates with approval of corporal punishment.

2. **Co-occurrence of child maltreatment and IPV:**
   In households with IPV, children are more susceptible to neglect or abuse, creating a co-occurrence of both forms of violence.

3. **Shared risk factors:**
   Weak legal responses, societal gender inequality, and norms of male dominance are common factors fostering both VAW and VAC. Individual risk factors like young age and antisocial behavior also overlap.

4. **Intergenerational effects:**
   Exposure to violence in childhood correlates with experiencing or perpetrating IPV in adulthood. Similarly, VAW during pregnancy has adverse birth outcomes.

5. **Adolescence:**
   Adolescence marks the onset or exacerbation of certain forms of violence, with girls facing increased risks in early intimate relationships and public spaces.

6. **Common and compounding consequences:**
   Both children and women who experience violence share physical, mental, and social consequences, such as reproductive health issues and cumulative negative outcomes.

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This study employed a comprehensive approach to analyze VAW and VAC services and experiences across the Caribbean region. The methodology encompassed consultations with a wide range of stakeholders and review of pertinent literature. The consultation process involved interviews with key informants in eight Caribbean countries and relevant stakeholders from public institutions, civil society organizations, United Nations agencies, and gender experts. It also included discussions with UNICEF and UNFPA country offices. Through these consultations, the study identified services spanning various sectors, including social protection, education, law enforcement, and health, with a focus on psychosocial support. Services were selected based on specific criteria, such as their target population, gender responsiveness, human rights approach, implementing entity (state or CSO), and evaluation status.

Based on these criteria, the stakeholder mapping identified twelve services in six countries across the Caribbean:

- **Barbados**
  - Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect (SCAN) of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital (Government)

- **Belize**
  - Child Development Foundation (CDF) (CSO)
  - Gender Advocate Programme (GAP) (CSO)
  - Roadmap to end Child Marriage and Early Unions (Government)

- **Guyana**
  - Child Advocacy Centre (CAC) (Government)
  - Specialized Sexual Offences Courts (Government)
  - Specialized hearing rooms for facilitating access to justice for families affected by domestic violence (Government)

- **Haiti**
  - OFAVA (CSO)
  - RAPHA International (CSO)

- **Jamaica**
  - Eve for Life (CSO)
  - Centre for the Investigation of Sexual Offences and Child Abuse (Government)

- **Trinidad and Tobago**
  - CHAMP-GBV (CSO)

This mapping exercise serves as a valuable tool for assessing the status of available services aimed at addressing VAW and VAC in the Caribbean, and should be updated regularly. Engagement with service users and grassroots organizations can “ground-truth” the mapping by authenticating its accuracy.
Key findings and challenges identified for integrated services for VAW and VAC in the Caribbean region

Challenges for integrated services for VAW and VAC in the Caribbean region.

Lack of coordination between VAC and VAW fields, including through normative frameworks, policies, programmes and coalitions

Efforts to address VAW and VAC in the Caribbean have often occurred separately, resulting in parallel and uncoordinated approaches. This disconnect exists at various levels, including policies, institutions, and civil society organizations. Limited collaboration between sectors, such as gender and social protection ministries, compounds this issue, potentially jeopardizing the safety and rights of women and children experiencing violence. Recent initiatives, such as the Regional Essential Services Package Community of Practice, aim to improve coordination among experts from various sectors to enhance service provision for survivors of GBV, including women and children. However, further efforts are needed to foster collaboration and knowledge sharing at both regional and national levels.

More focus on response than prevention

In the Caribbean region, there’s a notable emphasis on responding to VAW and VAC rather than preventing them. The lack of a solid evidence base linking harmful social norms to VAW or VAC contributes to this issue. Services for VAW and VAC often fail to address the fundamental drivers of gender inequality, such as entrenched gender norms and structural barriers. Technical and resource limitations further hinder this effort. As a result, most services primarily focus on responding to incidents rather than preventing them, highlighting the need for more investment in tackling the root causes of VAW and VAC and strengthening prevention services in the region.

Need to further integrate the frameworks of intersectionality, the life cycle and the survivor-centred approach.

VAW and VAC services in the Caribbean often fail to consider intersecting factors such as class, (dis)ability, sexual orientation, or migration status in their programming. For instance, LGTBIQ+ individuals who experience domestic violence may have limited or no access to support services. While there’s growing recognition of the survivor-centered and life-cycle approaches in the region, they have yet to be fully implemented across sectors involved in VAW and VAC services. Targeting government officials or those responsible for responding to victims/survivors of VAC/VAW appears to be a promising strategy, and can go beyond sporadic trainings to also embed it within institutions such as police forces (e.g. Centre for the Investigation of Sexual Offences and Child Abuse (CISOCA) case).
Consultations highlight that the terms "domestic violence" (DV) and "intimate partner violence" (IPV) are commonly used, but they do not cover the various types of violence women experience in public spaces, and often fail to include particularly vulnerable groups like LGBTIQ+ individuals, people with disabilities, older women, and refugees. Furthermore, legal definitions of DV and IPV vary across Caribbean countries, with some having more comprehensive definitions than others. For example, Trinidad and Tobago and Suriname have fairly comprehensive definitions that go beyond physical violence, while Jamaica and Barbados lack clear definitions. This variance can result in key populations being excluded from legal protection. Additionally, terms like physical violence, maltreatment, abuse, and harsh discipline are often used interchangeably, both in legal frameworks and in everyday language, further contributing to the lack of clarity on definitions of violence in the region.

Education programmes in the region rarely focus on promoting violence-free education by addressing gender stereotypes and transforming harmful gender norms and practices, and corporal punishment remains widespread in Caribbean schools. However, there are some emerging initiatives aiming to involve the education sector in preventing and responding to VAC and VAW. For instance, UNICEF leads a global initiative to end VAC in schools called ‘Safe to Learn’ and UN agencies in the Caribbean, through the Spotlight Initiative, have begun promoting the role of the education sector in responding to violence against girls and boys, including through Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) activities.7

Consultations have unveiled significant gaps in data collection, storage, and monitoring systems across the Caribbean region, particularly with administrative data collection systems. There is also a lack of appropriate and accurate protocols for ethical data collection in most countries. Data collection efforts vary between countries in terms of the types of violence covered and the definitions and age categories used. Consequently, substantial data gaps exist within the region, and comparing data across countries is challenging.

7 To date, the key activities carried out have been 1) Formative assessment of CSE within the Health and Family Life Education (HFLE) curriculum in schools in the Caribbean, 2) Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) guidelines and tools to assess the impact of CSE through HFLE, 3) Regional CSE advocacy strategy for the implementation of international standards on CSE, and 4) Adaptation of the CSE international guidance to the Caribbean context.
Opportunities and recommendations to promote integrated services between VAW and VAC in the Caribbean region

1. Legislation, policies and strategies on VAW and VAC

1.1. Designing and implementing comprehensive strategies with the capacity to address multiple types of violence, VAW or VAC, that happen across the life cycle

Developing gender-transformative strategies, policies, and laws is essential to address the intersections of VAW and VAC in the Caribbean region. These measures should incorporate a life-cycle approach, offering support to all survivors. **International and regional standards should guide the creation of region-specific frameworks, involving input from relevant stakeholders.** These frameworks should provide clear definitions of various forms of violence, including emerging types such as technology-facilitated violence, and designate responsible sectors while establishing inter-institutional coordination mechanisms. Implementation, including budget allocation and stakeholder support, is vital to ensuring the effectiveness of these measures.
2. Promoting coordination and dialogue between national and regional institutions involved in VAW and VAC prevention and response

Stakeholders should establish inter-institutional coordination mechanisms at national and regional levels to encourage collaboration among sectors including education, social protection, health, gender, justice, and law enforcement, with the option to create separate committees for prevention and response or sub-committees under a unified coalition. Political support, including input from experts, grassroots organizations, and survivors, is essential for success. **These strategies should outline sector-specific commitments and responsibilities, with a designated top-level coordinator facilitating collaboration across sectors and government levels.**

2.2. Promoting increased collaboration between service providers working on VAW and VAC

Enhancing collaboration involves two key aspects: firstly, providing comprehensive training to professionals on the intersections of VAW and VAC to improve referral systems, and secondly, fostering advocacy efforts and knowledge sharing between service providers in both sectors. Training should equip professionals to understand the connections between VAW and VAC, enabling them to effectively refer cases to the appropriate authorities and services. This includes training child protection professionals to recognize family violence dynamics and refer cases appropriately. Additionally, advocacy efforts should align women’s and children’s rights, recognizing their shared causes and consequences, and encourage coordination networks, platforms, and conferences to facilitate joint discussions and the exchange of best practices.
Increasing efforts to prevent GBV against women and girls by addressing root causes

3.1. Ensuring that VAW and VAC strategies account for social norms in programming efforts

Stakeholders suggested that interventions focusing on gender-equitable social norms can positively reduce VAW and VAC levels, and recommended prioritizing prevention through community-based strategies to potentially impact broader societal violence. To effectively shift harmful norms, gender analyses should precede programming and continue throughout, recognizing gender inequality as a root cause that must be addressed across all services and plans.

3.2. Incorporating a life cycle and survivor-centred approach into the prevention and response to VAW and VAC

Consultations emphasized the importance of conceptualizing the multifaceted nature of violent relationships within Caribbean societies, which requires applying a life cycle and survivor-centred approach to existing frameworks and services. To operationalize an intersectional perspective, stakeholders should seek to promote the individual and collective agency of women, adolescent girls, girls, and people of diverse gender identities through a holistic approach.

3.3. Engaging men and boys in violence prevention

Men play essential roles as agents of change in combating GBV, by promoting more equitable gender relationships and challenging harmful gender norms. Engaging men and boys in violence prevention efforts at various levels is crucial to address the underlying causes of GBV, with influential figures serving as champions for progressive understandings of masculinity. Positive parenting programmes and civic education programmes involving men can contribute to attitudinal and behavioral shifts away from corporal punishment, by incorporating stress management and non-violent communication with family and partners.
Strengthening the education sector

4.1. Strengthening the role of the education sector in response to VAW and VAC

Strengthening the education sector’s role involves developing initiatives and policies that challenge discriminatory gender roles and stereotypes, such as reviewing and removing gender biases in teaching materials and establishing regulations to prevent harassment or violence against girls and boys in schools. Teachers and staff should be trained to respond effectively to violence and provide support through referral pathways. Additionally, promoting comprehensive and age-appropriate sexuality education can improve society’s understanding of sexual violence and consent, building on existing efforts like the Caribbean Spotlight Initiative and the global Safe to Learn initiative.

Data systems on VAW and VAC

5.1. Strengthening the evidence base and knowledge sharing on VAW and VAC in the Caribbean region, specifying the prevalence, consequences and common roots of violence against women, adolescent girls and girls

Collecting more accurate, good quality, and actionable data on the prevalence of VAW and VAC using internationally-vetted methodologies that are fit to the Caribbean context is an important next step for Caribbean governments, international agencies and CSOs. Data collected should go beyond prevalence data, to help illuminate the shared consequences and roots of violence against women and children. The data should also specify the specific challenges faced by women and girls who experience GBV, to help identify the unique protection measures each group requires from a life-cycle and survivor-centred approach. The International Classification on Violence against Children and the new module on sexual violence in the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys programme demonstrates an effort to address some of these gaps. Policies and programmes on VAW and VAC should be informed by evidence, such as gender audits, rapid gender assessments or baseline surveys. Programmes should also be monitored and evaluated, generating high quality data that can be shared safely with other key stakeholders to inform further VAW and VAC strategies. Creating or strengthening data systems, including data collection techniques, storage and management protocols, and sharing practices is vital.