

CARICOM IMPACS

Securing our Community within the Era of Covid-19 and Beyond

Crisis and Gender Based Violence

Gale T.C. Rigobert PhD, Minister of Education, Innovation, Gender Relations and Sustainable Development, Saint Lucia

One of the most insidious and life-threatening manifestations of gender inequality, and a critical risk to citizen security, is sexual and gender-based violence or gender-based violence (GBV). GBV manifests as intimate partner violence, domestic violence, sexual violence, sexual violence against women, rape, sexual assault and sexual harassment. While everyone is at risk of GBV, research indicates that women and girls are the overwhelming majority of victims.

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and Domestic Violence more broadly, are the forms of gender-based violence (GBV) most prevalent in the Caribbean, and most threaten the very fabric of the society because they are perpetrated in the home, among families, the primary agents of socialization. Like the other forms of gender-based violence, women and children are disproportionately identified as victims, the overwhelming majority of perpetrators are men. Occupational sex segregation is pervasive in the Caribbean and this means that while the majority of the victims/survivors are women, the majority of people in the policing sector, that provide immediate services to victims and survivors are men making it a very gendered issue with high implications for social transformation.

In its June 2020 issue, the Journal of Gender-based Violence published an article entitled ***Domestic Violence, Coronavirus and the media narrative***. The authors brought to the fore the gender inequalities and norms that create and sustain gender-based violence. “Amid such a crisis, it is imperative that we continue to see the dynamics of domestic violence and abuse as both a pattern of abusive behaviours and a product of gendered social and cultural norms, rather than a reaction to a specific factor or event, such as COVID-19”¹.

The COVID-19 crisis, like many other crises bring out an ugly global truth. Gender-based violence is still a global problem, the greatest testament to pervading gender inequality and the greatest challenge to achieving gender equality - an imperative for the achievement of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development.

On May 27, 2020, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, UN Women, launched a public awareness campaign entitled the ***“Shadow Pandemic”***, in an effort to draw attention to the global increase in domestic violence amid the COVID-19 health crisis.

¹ Williamson, Emma; Lombard, Nancy; Brooks-Hay, Oona, Domestic violence and abuse, coronavirus, and the media narrative, Journal of Gender-based Violence Volume 4, Number 2, June 2020

Data collection on GBV is either administrative, incidence based from service providers such as the police, health clinics, hospitals and civil society organisations that provide direct services to victims/survivors; or prevalence based, data that reflects all persons who experience GBV whether they report it or not. Because of the lack of trust many victims and survivors have in services, prevalence data is usually the most accurate data. Prevalence surveys have been implemented in six countries in the Caribbean, thanks to UN Women, IDB and CDB.

Data is still being captured for ongoing COVID impacts assessments to garner a full understanding of how gender-based violence has played out in the COVID crisis. From the reports of the Gender Bureaus in the English-speaking Caribbean, there have been minimal increases in incidence of GBV in crisis calls and reports to the police. In Trinidad and Tobago at least, these increases have been attributed to the recent establishment of a Gender-based Violence unit. In spite of this many civil society organisations are reporting increased calls for support from women who are experiencing intimate partner violence.

This trend is in sync with the rest of the world, where in countries that have strong and established GBV responsive institutions, reflected in effective referral pathways, there has been an increase in formal reports of GBV. However, in countries where the referral pathways are unclear and specific referral protocols are not established for crisis situations, there is an increase in extreme violence including femicide and an increase in crisis calls to civil society organisations that continue to provide GBV services. We are also seeing high rates of Violence against Children, which are in many ways connected to Gender-based violence (GBV).

With the exception of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, the other English speaking Caribbean countries experienced a period of shut down during the months of March and April 2020. During times of confinement when victims are locked in with their perpetrators, calling for help or reporting incidents are near impossible for the victims. With the usual frontline persons like Day Care Center personnel, school staff, and community health personnel out of reach, victims are left without avenues for seeking help and their only hope is often the watchful eye of an empowered, informed, fearless neighbour.

This, therefore, begs the curious question, is the increase in gender-based violence in the COVID crisis as alarming in the Caribbean as it is in other parts of the world, or even higher? How would we know?

In July 2020 the Central Statistical Office of Saint Lucia released the results of the Saint Lucia National Crime Victimization Survey (SLNCVS)². This report is very instructive in understanding the limited formal reports of GBV during the COVID crisis, at least in one such small island in the region. SLNCVS estimates that 10.3% of the population 18 years and over in Saint Lucia experienced at least one type of situation related to sexual harassment in the past 12 months. In the last incident, 81% were women and 17.6% were men and 1.4% were intersex. More importantly 92.5% of the cases were not reported either

² Saint Lucia National Crime Victimization Survey 2020 is based on LACSI, which is a standard methodology which makes use of a regional questionnaire to measure victimization and perception of safety, developed by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) through its Center of Excellence in 2014, together with 13 countries¹ of the Latin America and Caribbean region.

because they did not believe it was serious enough (63.3%) or it happens all the time (42%)³. In other words sexual harassment has been normalized. If these figures relate to the attitudes of people to acts committed against them, it stands to reason that their attitudes to reporting acts of that nature committed against their neighbor would not be vastly different. With the highly documented challenges faced by the region of limited access to information, quantity and quality of services and justice for gender-based violence⁴, the slight increases in formal reports of domestic violence during the COVID crisis may not be an accurate reflection, and the reality may in fact be much more alarming.

What will most certainly be revealed in the ongoing assessments of the impact of COVID on women in the Caribbean, and has been reported by Caribbean gender bureau heads, is the stark increase in the number of calls to crisis lines and the COVID support hotlines from women, in particular, seeking support for basic goods and services for mere survival for themselves and their families, even to the extent that these calls have almost replaced crisis calls for domestic violence. The economic fallout created by the COVID crisis has increased the risk for gender-based violence exponentially in a region where poverty has a feminine face.⁵ Alarming, the extent of need seems to overshadow the experience of violence, even increased violence, which also has a significant economic cost to our already heavily indebted countries!

If this picture seems scary, it is. This is what unchecked harmful gender stereotypes and gendered norms do to a society and this is how it is exposed in a crisis. The COVID pandemic has laid bare a crisis that had already been at the point of explosion for a while in our region and other parts of the world, but had gone unacknowledged, despite the many international and regional efforts at bringing it to the fore⁶. If we continue to ignore the gender inequality crisis and do not deliberately, strategically and systematically tackle the underlying gendered beliefs, norms and attitudes, they will continue to stifle and undermine gender equality strides as much in the region as in the other parts of the world. Gender-based violence is but one of the manifestations of discrimination against women, and one of the many consequences of gender-blind development.

All of the countries of the Caribbean region have gender bureaus, created since acceding to the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in the early eighties and reaffirmed through the Beijing Platform for Action, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year. All Caribbean countries, some more than others, have weak, understaffed, Gender Bureaus with no or very small budgets⁷. It is these bureaus that are the arm of the Government charged with the

³ Saint Lucia National Crime Victimization Survey, <https://www.stats.gov.lc/>

⁴ Regional report on the review of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in Latin American and Caribbean countries, 25 years on; Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2019

⁵ Remarks from Alicia Bárcena ECLAC's Executive Secretary at the meeting, Trends, Options and Strategies in Poverty Eradication Across the World, to mark the inauguration of United Nations' Alliance for Poverty Eradication, June 2020

⁶ Regional Gender Agenda (1976); United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (1979); The Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women (1994); Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 1995; Montevideo Strategy for Implementation of the Regional Gender Agenda within the Sustainable Development Framework by 2030 (2017)

⁷ Regional report on the review of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in Latin American and Caribbean countries, 25 years on; Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2019

responsibility of tackling harmful gender stereotypes, reviewing constitutional and legal provisions to foster non-discrimination and coordinating and monitoring gender mainstreaming in national development. The time has come to consider the pivotal role of these bureaus in national security, in and out of crisis. They must be part of a multi-sectoral approach to dealing with crises such as the COVID crisis that threatens our very survival as a people.

We cannot fight what we do not see, and we cannot see what we do not look for, or have a system to capture, measure, monitor and analyze. Basic instruments such GBV prevalence surveys and time use surveys, the cost of which can be prohibitive to Caribbean countries, are not luxuries, but a basic and critical start to ensuring an understanding of the real problem. At this juncture, Caribbean governments are forced to make impossible decisions, on what to prioritize between basic or even essential services, much like a single mother who is forced to decide whether to purchase food or basic sanitation items for her family, simply because she cannot afford to do both. The predicted economic recession will further deepen this dilemma. I therefore conclude with endorsing one of the five proposals made by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean to Governments of the region,⁸ which is a call to access to financing for middle income countries, because as we have been able to illustrate here, those who are most affected by decreased financing are the most vulnerable and the services meant to protect them. COVID-19 affords us the opportunity to right this wrong. We cannot afford to lose this opportunity.

We must, as Caribbean leaders, commit to ensuring that increased access to financing enables the transformational leadership that we need at this time and to start afresh with what's staring us in the face. To use the words of the regional leader, Alicia Barcena, "chart the future more equal, inclusive and sustainable". I submit that a useful starting point is declaring services for gender-based violence, essential services. Essential services can never and will never be ignored, crisis or no crisis. In that way when faced with a crisis like COVID-19, our most vulnerable will not be left behind, disenfranchised, facing silently an unacknowledged, literally even more deadly, shadow pandemic. Their pain will be validated as our national efforts will agree with what they know in their souls to be true - that gender-based violence and the underlying norms that fuel it, are not okay.

⁸ Five proposals to confront the socioeconomic impacts of the crisis prompted by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) July 2020: An Emergency Basic Income; An Anti-Hunger Grant, Subsidies for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs); Digitalization for all; Access to financing for middle-income countries