

Violence against women and children in Jamaica

There is a [lot of concern](#) about increasing violence against women and children during the COVID-19 pandemic. [UN Women estimates](#) that 28% of women in Jamaica have suffered intimate partner violence during their lifetime and that 23% of women in Jamaica have suffered sexual violence from a non-partner. Globally, the [World Health Organization estimates](#) that 1 in 3 women has been subjected to physical and (or) sexual intimate partner violence.

This trend is why UN Women has called for [16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence](#) that kicked off on 25 November with a range of worldwide initiatives, such as the lighting of monuments and buildings orange, the colour of action. This initiative follows this year's theme: "Paint the World Orange: Finance, Respond, Prevent, Collect Data!" urging governments to take concrete action to prevent violence against women and children, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

[The Spotlight Initiative](#) is a global initiative that seeks to eliminate violence against women and girls funded by the European Union. It works to promote legislative improvements for women and girls, seek gender-equitable societal norms, improve access to survivors of violence services, and the availability and accessibility of relevant information. In Jamaica, the Spotlight Initiative involves UNDP, UNICEF, UNDFPA and UN Women, and it has a budget of 8 million euros.

Violence against children

Violence against children is a challenge in Jamaica that is closely related to gender-based violence. UNICEF has concluded that 80% of Jamaican children experience violence at home and 65% undergo bullying at school. Prevailing social norms, cultural practices and the normalization of violence contribute to some of this violence, including domestic violence and violent discipline - which Jamaica only outlaws in early childhood institutions and residential childcare facilities.

These statistics suggest that children are exposed to violence through violent disciplining, but also through domestic violence. However, some consider (violent) disciplining children to be justified and acceptable. While the data is older, a [UNICEF study from 2011](#) found that 85% of Jamaica children come into contact with violent discipline (either physical or psychological), but also that 27% of mothers/caretakers believed that children need physical punishment.

When asked whether children's exposure to violent discipline or domestic violence affected the tendency towards gender-based violence later in life, the great majority of JEP panellists agreed that this was the case for both forms of violence. Other respondents were not necessarily convinced of the link with gender-based violence while arguing that violent discipline can undoubtedly contribute to the prevalence of a culture of violence as seen in Jamaica today.

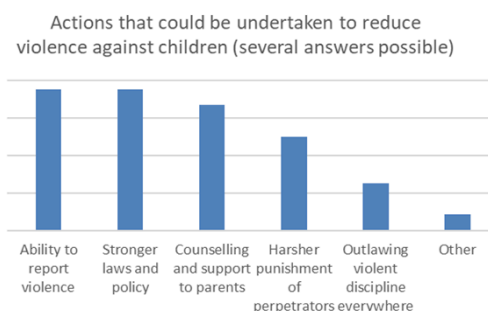
“...international studies have shown that children exposed to any violence during childhood are prone to grow up more violently as well. Exposure to toxic masculinity through domestic violence or even though more violent disciplinary measures, which are both more associated with male parents and male children, having long-lasting and negative effects on children.

- **Dr. Olaf J. de Groot**,
Economist, Office of the United Nations
Resident Coordinator

The 20 May 2021 saw the launch of [SafeSpot](#) - a free and confidential 24/7 helpline for children and youth. The Private Sector of Jamaica (PSOJ), UNICEF and the Office of the Children's Advocate support this initiative. SafeSpot is accessible both online and through its telephone number. This initiative is especially timely to assist children and teenagers experiencing challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. While SafeSpot is an important step forward, the JEP panellists gave their views on whether there were additional actions that the Government could take to combat the risk of violence to which children are exposed.

Several of the proposed actions received majority support. The most significant action is stronger laws and policies that protect children from violence and abuse and improved ability to report violence and abuse. The latter is a common challenge for children and teenagers, not knowing how and to whom they can report the occurrence of abuse. Hopefully, SafeSpot may be a way for children to discover how to access justice. Two other measures receive substantial support: harsher punishment of perpetrators of violence received 50% support from the panellists, whereas improved access to counselling and parental support of almost two-thirds of respondents. These two slightly opposite responses are high representative of the types of solutions put forward by experts. While counselling may help avoid some violence and abuse, many believe that abusers should receive harsher punishment.

Several respondents suggested that one of the challenges to fighting family violence take place in this area. Dr. Patrice Whitely, Lecturer in the Department of Economics at The University of the West Indies, summarized the argument neatly: "I don't think we need different laws. We need more and better enforcement of existing laws."



Violence against women

One of the drivers of violence against women is intra-household inequality: differences in household members' activities (paid labour, unpaid labour, family care, etc.) can lead to unequal relationships. This is a reason to be worried about unequal labour participation rates. In Jamaica, in July 2021, the overall labour participation rate was 13.6 percentage points higher for men than for women (70.3% of men aged 15 or over are in the labour market compared to 56.7% of women).

The unemployment rate is also vastly different, with an 11.1% of women out-of-work, compared to 6.3% of men (in July 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact, especially on women. Whereas male unemployment is only marginally higher than the 5.9% observed in January 2020, women's unemployment is substantially above the 8.9% observed at that time.

When asked whether such differences in employment rates impact the rate of intra-household violence, the respondents achieved an almost even split. Dr Patrice Whitely highlighted one of the primary mechanisms through which inequality can breed violence, by stating:

“ When a woman is financially dependent on a man, she is more likely to stay in an abusive situation because she cannot afford to support herself.”

– Dr. Patrice Whitely
Lecturer, UWI, Mona

This view reiterates the importance of safe houses and other way through which women may be able to extricate themselves from a violent situation. The Spotlight Initiative is working on several such initiatives.

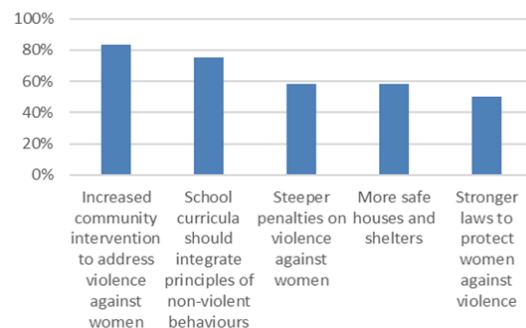
Of course, the panelists subsequently mulled over possible policies that the Government of Jamaica could pursue to reduce the scourge of violence against women. Every single one of the suggested solutions received majority support. Still, the two more essential areas focus on interventions that should preempt such violence. Specifically, the panellists support increased community intervention, recognising an essential role for school curricula to integrate non-violent behaviours.

As one participant who chose to remain anonymous mentions, “Credit must be given where credit is due. We have come a far way but more is still needed”. While this is true, it is also important to remember that Jamaica continues to be a relatively violent society with one of the highest rates of intentional homicide. This worrying trend is also one of the likely reasons for Dr. Nadine McCloud, Head of the Economic Department at UWI Mona to comment:

“ There are many things that our country needs to do to reduce violence. In the end, it is all about the cultural acceptance of violence, which our country can address through safe ecosystems that use, for example, school curricula and community interventions focused on rewarding more peaceful behaviour, and to reject all forms of violence in our society.

– Dr. Nadine McCloud
Head of the Department of Economics, UWI, Mona

Different approaches to addressing violence against women (several answers possible)



Conclusions

The spectre of violence against women and children in Jamaica continues to be challenging. Despite several recent initiatives, including the Spotlight Initiative and SafeSpot, violence continues to be the norm.

Looking at some of the behavioral aspects behind the violence, in many cases, the JEP panellists support community-based peacebuilding mechanisms as the most fruitful for addressing such violence. The role of education is critical, as this can encourage a structural change in the relationship society has with violence. Unfortunately, such initiatives will only bear fruit in the long run, but this should not be a reason not to pursue them.