Gender-based violence against women and girls in the Greater Caribbean: recognizing risks to strengthen prevention



By Rayne Affonso

Across the Greater Caribbean, gender-based violence affects women and girls of every age and background, and many never receive the help they need. As the region joins the global 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence (25 November – 10 December), supported by the United Nations through its UNiTE campaign, the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) examines the scale and forms of this violence, and why so many persons experiencing violence remain beyond the reach of assistance

Gender-based violence against women and girls remains one of the most pervasive human rights violations in the Greater Caribbean, and among the least visible. It occurs largely in private, is frequently unreported, and is sustained by social norms that allow it to be tolerated. Its consequences also extend far beyond those directly affected. It undermines women's health, disrupts girls' education, constrains women's economic participation and transmits risk across generations.

Recognizing these risks is the first step toward preventing them. This requires understanding not only the extent of the violence, but also why so many survivors remain beyond the reach of the systems designed to protect them. Drawing on regional data and the work of partner institutions, the ACS is using these 16 Days to raise awareness of these realities and to advocate for stronger prevention and support for people experiencing gender-based violence across the region.

Regional context and scope

Gender-based violence occurs throughout the Greater Caribbean, regardless of language, legal system or level of national development. According to the latest Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO) estimates, one in three women aged 15 and older in the region of the Americas has experienced physical or sexual violence in her lifetime, approximating 123 million women and girls

Most of this violence happens within intimate relationships. One in four women aged 15–49 has experienced physical or sexual violence from a partner, while one in eight has experienced sexual

violence from someone other than a partner. The risk runs across the whole life course. 21% of young women aged 15–19 experience partner violence before the age of 20, and 23% of women aged 65 and above report such violence.

The trend has also changed very little. PAHO notes that rates of intimate partner violence have remained largely unchanged for two decades, and that the region is unlikely to meet Sustainable Development Goal target 5.2 on eliminating violence against women. Progress on laws and public awareness has not yet led to a matching fall in the violence itself.

The Greater Caribbean has invested heavily in producing comparable evidence on violence against women. In 2014, the CARICOM Council for Human and Social Development decided to pilot a CARICOM model of national prevalence surveys, adapting the World Health Organization's global methodology to the Caribbean context. Between 2016 and 2019, Women's Health Surveys were carried out in Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago.

The findings were significant. Between 39% and 55% of women aged 15–64 had experienced at least one form of violence, and between 28% and 38% had experienced physical or sexual violence from a partner in their lifetime. Psychological violence was the most commonly reported form, affecting between 29% and 40% of women surveyed.

The surveys also identified an important warning sign. The more controlling behaviours a partner showed, the higher the prevalence of every form of intimate partner violence. In Trinidad and Tobago, factors associated with intimate partner violence included lower education, cohabitation without marriage, rural residence, younger age, having experienced or witnessed violence in childhood, and a partner's substance abuse or unemployment.

At the most extreme end is femicide. In 2024, at least 3,828 women were victims of femicide or gender-related violent death across 26 countries and territories of Latin America and the Caribbean, an average of at least 11 women each day. In the same year, 14 countries recorded 5,502 attempted femicides. This shows how violence can escalate and why early warning and risk assessment systems are needed.

The data also has clear limits. No CARICOM state produces regular national data on how common violence against women and girls is, what forms it takes, or how services respond. Prevalence surveys are also likely to understate the problem, because some women do not disclose violence, particularly where it is highly stigmatized. The ACS reaffirms that regular, comparable data collection as a foundation for effective prevention across the region.

Major barriers to assistance

All countries and territories in Latin America and the Caribbean have legislation to prevent and eradicate violence against women, and many have also set up hotlines, shelters and specialized units. Nevertheless, the evidence shows that most persons experiencing gender-based violence in the Caribbean do not receive help from formal services. Several factors help explain this gap:

Stigma and confidentiality: A UN Women regional study found that most women who experienced violence never sought help.

Survivors, community members and service providers attributed this to limited knowledge of available services, fear of being blamed or stigmatized once the situation became known in the community, and insufficient protection for survivors after they report to the police. Concerns about confidentiality within the system were identified as a particular obstacle.

Limited recognition of the many forms of violence: Gender-based violence is not limited to physical assault. It takes many forms, many of which leave no visible injury or are widely tolerated. As a result, survivors, families, colleagues and communities may not recognize them as violence, or as grounds for seeking help. These forms include:

Psychological violence: the most commonly reported form in the Caribbean, affecting between 29 and 40 per cent of women surveyed in five countries.

Controlling behaviour, which in Grenada was linked to higher rates of every form of partner violence: the more controlling behaviours a partner showed, the more likely the violence.

Child, early and forced marriage and unions: in 2022, 21.2 per cent of women aged 20–24 in Latin America and the Caribbean had married or entered a union before 18, and those who did reported higher levels of partner violence.

Violence and harassment at work: the Americas report the highest rates in the world, 34 per cent of workers compared with a global average of 23 per cent. Women are particularly exposed to sexual harassment, yet only about half of those affected told anyone.

Violence in crisis settings: in Haiti, an estimated 1.2 million women and girls urgently need protection against gender-based violence.

Digital violence, one of the fastest-growing forms of abuse and the focus of the 2025 UNiTE campaign.

Additional barriers for migrant and displaced women: Refugee and migrant women and girls may face language and information barriers, a lack of support networks, and discrimination. Regional assessments have stressed the need for clear, accessible information on where to find support.

Strengthening prevention and access to help

Governments in the region have renewed their commitments. In August 2025, they adopted the Tlatelolco Commitment at the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, establishing a decade of action for 2025–2035 to accelerate substantive gender equality and the care society. These commitments build on long-standing international and regional frameworks, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women (Convention of Belém do Pará), adopted in 1994 and widely ratified across the Americas.

Regional and international guidance points to several priorities:

- Preventing violence before it occurs by addressing the social norms that tolerate it, drawing on evidence-based approaches such as the RESPECT framework promoted by PAHO and WHO.
- Identifying risk early, including recognizing controlling behaviour and attempted violence as signs of escalating danger.
- Making services confidential, coordinated and survivor-centred across the health, justice, police and social sectors, in line with WHO's call for survivor-centred multisectoral services. As PAHO/WHO has emphasized, survivors must be listened to, believed and supported.
- Making information about services accessible, including in the languages spoken in each community, as regional humanitarian partners have recommended.
- Integrating protection from gender-based violence into disaster preparedness and humanitarian response, so that survivor-centred services are in place from the outset of a crisis.

- Investing in regular, comparable data to monitor progress and guide policy, a priority identified in the WHO regional estimates for the Americas.

Violence against women and girls is preventable, and recognizing its many forms is where prevention begins. By naming violence in all its forms, strengthening the systems that respond to it and ensuring survivors know where to turn, the region can close the gap between harm and help. During these 16 Days, the Association of Caribbean States joins Member States, Associate Members and partners in a shared call: no woman or girl in the Greater Caribbean should face violence, and none should face it alone.