



Atlantic Council

ADRIENNE ARSHT
LATIN AMERICA CENTER



NOT WITHOUT HER:

A roadmap for gender equality
and Caribbean prosperity



By Wazim Mowla and Valentina Sader



COVER: A woman in shadow. Tammada via Shutterstock

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By Wazim Mowla and Valentina Sader



ADRIENNE ARSHT
LATIN AMERICA CENTER

The **Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center** broadens understanding of regional transformations through high-impact work that shapes the conversation among policymakers, the business community, and civil society. The Center focuses on Latin America's strategic role in a global context with a priority on pressing political, economic, and social issues that will define the trajectory of the region now and in the years ahead. The Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center's Caribbean Initiative seeks to accelerate the region's strategic importance as a key partner for the United States. With work commencing in 2021, this initiative brings increased recognition to the importance of the Caribbean amid vast hemispheric and global challenges. Jason Marczak serves as Center Senior Director.

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UN Women is the UN organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. A global champion for women and girls, UN Women was established to accelerate progress on meeting their needs worldwide. UN Women supports UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to implement these standards. It stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on five priority areas: increasing women's leadership and participation; ending violence against women; engaging women in all aspects of peace and security processes; enhancing women's economic empowerment; and making gender equality central to national development planning and budgeting. UN Women also coordinates and promotes the UN system's work in advancing gender equality.

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INTRODUCTION

The Caribbean is one of the world’s most vulnerable regions, housing open-facing and import-dependent economies that are disproportionately affected by climate change, changing commodity prices, and inflationary pressures.¹ Governments and financial institutions face these constant stresses, but Caribbean citizens bear the brunt of the burden, including vulnerable populations like women and girls. Women and girls require government and financial support to increase their resilience and opportunities across society. Challenges facing women and girls occur across every government sector, the business community, and local organizations, meaning that addressing gender barriers and gaps requires an integrated and whole-of-society approach.

The broader global issues facing the Caribbean amplify the specific challenges facing women and girls, from gender-based violence (GBV) and economic barriers to limited political influence and the disproportionate effects of climate change. More than 30 percent of women in the Caribbean fear sexual assault in their communities, and household pressures and limited access to credit and finance hinder women-owned businesses.² At the same time, while women have high rates of political participation in the Caribbean relative to other regions, influence is atypical. Finally, women and girls do not have the finances and institutional support to protect themselves from climate change’s effects. These four challenges are compounded and interrelated, facilitating further gender inequality across the Caribbean.

This publication compiles the findings of a yearlong consultative effort with Caribbean stakeholders, which finds that the challenges facing women and girls—specifically GBV, limited economic empowerment, limited political influence, and climate change’s effects—are partially a result of perceptions of a woman’s role in society and limited access to tools and resources that can help them overcome these barriers. A restructuring and reshaping of social norms, alongside political and financial

institutions, is needed to achieve greater gender equality and empowerment. Further, more opportunity for women and girls directly ties into the region’s broader ambitions of reaching its United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Incorporating women and girls into the development model for the Caribbean is a surefire method to prosperity. Caribbean countries perennially face issues of limited capacity from small ministries and business chambers to micro populations, which inherently caps their development opportunities. With women and girls accounting for, on average, about half of the total population across each Caribbean country, development opportunities for governments, the private sector, and civil society are lost when the full capacity of human capital is not utilized.³ Simply, gender equality can equate to regional development and long-term prosperity.

With the UN Women Multi-Country Office - Caribbean, the Atlantic Council’s Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center and its Caribbean Initiative have undertaken a year-long partnership to address GBV, challenges to economic empowerment, limited political influence, and the disproportionate effects of climate change facing women and girls in the Caribbean. Over the course of a year, the Atlantic Council—which traveled to Guyana and Jamaica—worked with civil-society organizations (CSOs), public and private-sector officials, and multilateral development banks, and international organizations to assess these challenges and identify solutions across five roundtable discussions, several in-region capacity-building sessions, and numerous one-on-one consultations. As part of the consultative process and in partnership with GBAO, focus groups in Jamaica and Guyana were conducted in 2023 to illustrate the preconceptions of both men and women toward women and girls. The partnership has focused specifically on the social norms that guide perceptions about women and girls and their place in society, meaning that the conversations and discussions informing this publication relied on how women and men think and feel about the challenges discussed below.

1 For this publication, “Caribbean” or “Caribbean countries” refers to Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago.

2 Rebekah Kebede, “A #lifeinleggings: Caribbean Women’s Movement Fights Sex Assaults, Harassment,” Reuters, March 10, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN16H1GV/#:~:text=More%20than%2030%20percent%20of,just%20the%20few%20statistics%20available>.

3 “Population, Total—Latin America & Caribbean,” World Bank, last visited January 12, 2024, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=ZJ>.

PUTTING GENDER CHALLENGES IN THE CARIBBEAN INTO CONTEXT

The nature of the Caribbean economies and political institutions creates conditions that exacerbate gender-based challenges. Most countries are import dependent on petroleum products, food, medical equipment and services, and international currency. This means that citizens pay higher prices for these products and services, as their imports are tied to global pricing and changes. High prices trickle down to vulnerable populations like women and girls, including those tasked with maintaining households and holding employment. The climate crisis also plays a large role in the challenges facing women and girls. Frequent and devastating climate-related events have left Caribbean governments with high debt-to-GDP (gross domestic product) ratios, meaning that political leaders are unable to invest in social services from healthcare to education—two sectors that alleviate some of the burdens of women’s family care responsibilities. Financial resources are instead devoted to recovering lost GDP and rebuilding damaged infrastructure.

Despite these broader, macro challenges that affect women and girls, the four issues discussed in this publication—GBV, limited economic empowerment, limited political influence, and climate change—compound to create complex gender challenges in the region. When designing policy solutions, it is important that each challenge is not addressed in a silo. Each challenge influences each other and creates additional policy and financial barriers. For example, climate change devastates economies and limits economic opportunities for women-owned businesses that need access to credit and concessionary finance to scale their operations and adopt new technologies for resilience. Limited political influence presents a challenge to either passing new legislation that would curb GBV or curtailing policy implementation. And GBV—perhaps the most widespread challenge—prevents women from seeking autonomous economic opportunities and deters participation

in politics. Therefore, solutions and efforts should occur in parallel with each other and require more than just government actions, including those of the private sector and CSOs.

Further, the Caribbean is a heterogenous region. While these countries share similarities in their type and size of economies, culture, and language, global challenges affect them in different ways. The Caribbean stretches from the coast of Florida (The Bahamas) to the tip of South America (Guyana) to the eastern islands (Barbados). Therefore, some countries—like Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, and Suriname—reside outside of the hurricane belt, meaning that women and girls face different climate challenges in these countries than in others. And while some countries—like Jamaica, The Bahamas, and the Eastern Caribbean countries—are tourism dependent, others are commodity based. The labor markets and potential for economic opportunity varies for women and girls seeking employment or to start their own businesses. This means that blanket policy solutions and financial support cannot use a one-size-fits-all approach, but instead must be contextualized to the local realities that women and girls face in each country.

Guyana and Jamaica are two examples. In Jamaica, leaders identified GBV as the predominant challenge facing women and girls, owing in part to the high rates of crime and violence the country experiences. And while GBV was a pertinent issue in Guyana, the effects of climate change and limited economic opportunity play an equally central role. But heterogeneity across local communities should also serve as a blueprint for how best to address the specific challenges facing women and girls, especially across social norms. In countries like Guyana, there are disparities in perception and opportunity across ethnic lines and across rural and urban communities. In Jamaica, GBV and limits on economic opportunity affect most households, but the effects differ based on income classes and parishes.



Jamaicans take part in a demonstration against last Monday's rape of three children and two women, in Kingston September 28, 2012. According to local media, the protesters were urged to wear black during demonstration, which is supported by government officials, opposition political parties and women's rights groups. Source: REUTERS/Gilbert Bellamy.

FINDING SOLUTION TO GENDER CHALLENGES IN THE CARIBBEAN

While the intersection of the four challenges discussed in this publication—GBV, limited economic empowerment, limited political influence, and climate change's effects—requires holistic policy and financial approaches in the long term, there are opportunities to address them in the short to medium term. Creative policymaking is needed but, more importantly, the thoughts and ideas of local actors across civil society should be central to policy design. This is the model this publication takes when dissecting these issues through the lens of civil society—along with insight from the public and private sectors—to help shed light on how each challenge affects the other and the types of actions decision-makers should take.

Some of the challenges discussed below are underlying drivers and others are consequences. GBV is a root-cause issue, influenced directly by social norms and perceptions of women and girls. This leads to consequences of limited economic opportu-

nity and political influence because GBV occurs in tandem with women relegated to traditional family roles. Climate change is another example, as the adverse effects facing women and girls limit their bandwidth and the resources at their disposal to start businesses and enter politics. This is important to comprehend when building policy recommendations or new financial instruments to address these challenges. For example, policies to amplify economic empowerment can be effective, but should be accompanied by additional actions that address root-cause issues like GBV and climate change.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

GBV is a global issue that hinders national and societal development. Globally, one in three women have experienced at least one form of GBV in their lifetime. The United Nations notes that violence against women is “any act of gender-based

violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”⁴ GBV affects more than women and girls, including the overall economy and societal functioning. For example, GBV prevents women from working hours like men and decreases productivity, translating to lower economic growth. During recovery periods after pandemics or natural disasters, lower productivity makes rebounding and demonstrating economic resilience difficult. In regions like the Caribbean, where these exogenous shocks and events have disproportionate effects, GBV’s consequences are amplified. On average, 46 percent of women in Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago have experienced at least one form of violence in their lifetime.⁵ In 2019, five of the top twenty recorded rape rates worldwide were in the Caribbean.⁶

As noted, there is an economic cost to GBV. As of 2018, the direct cost of GBV to Jamaica’s economy represented more than 4 percent of the country’s overall GDP.⁷ This considers the cost of services, healthcare, and the police, among others, responding to reported GBV cases. Factoring in the indirect costs—such as loss of income after GBV incidents—the percentage of Jamaica’s GDP affected rises to more than 6 percent.⁸ Jamaica’s example shows that multiple economic sectors and aspects of society are impacted by GBV, meaning that resources devoted to responses are taken away from other critical areas, such as investing in health and education.

The Atlantic Council and GBAO’s focus groups brought forward three concerns regarding GBV: cases of GBV often go unreported and are unreported despite existing legislation; traditional gender biases toward women vis-à-vis a partner help “justify” domestic violence from both men’s and women’s perspectives; and the fear of sexual harassment in the workplace deters women’s active participation in the labor force.

QUOTE FROM FOCUS GROUP

“But sometimes you go to the police and the police take your statement and look at you and be like if you wear that then you don’t think the man is going to see you.”

Jamaican Woman

GBV’s consequences are systemic, often driving economic barriers, limiting political influence, and exacerbating women’s vulnerability to climate change’s effects. GBV’s widespread impact therefore necessitates not just a whole-of-government approach, but a whole-of-society one. In our conversations with CSOs, a recurring comment was that men need to be part of the solution. Women advocating for women means that only half of the Caribbean’s population buys into a solution. Men should be at the discussion table, listening and becoming active advocates for women and girls, as they have outsized effect on Caribbean politics, the economy, and society relative to women and girls.

While there are no simple solutions to curbing GBV, effective examples across the Caribbean and other regions exist that can be adapted and replicated. Jamaica’s Shelter Program provides a safer space to abused women and their children.⁹ Barbados’ violence against women legislation includes provisions on prevention, protection, and punishment of GBV cases, and establishes new institutions like the National Task Force on Gender-Based Violence and the Domestic Violence Unit to enforce implementation.¹⁰ The Caribbean’s heterogeneity means that these examples do not fit neatly across each country, but sharing best practices—such as engaging with government

4 “Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women,” United Nations General Assembly, December 20, 1993, https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.21_declaration%20elimination%20vaw.pdf.

5 “Caribbean Women Count: Ending Violence against Women and Girls Data Hub,” UN Women, last visited January 15, 2024, <https://caribbean.unwomen.org/>.

6 Martin Cassinelli, “Gender-Based Violence Is a Problem in the Caribbean. Here’s How Local Leaders in Jamaica and Guyana Are Addressing It,” *New Atlanticist*, September 18, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/gender-based-violence-caribbean-jamaica-guyana/>.

7 “First Caribbean Study on National Economic Costs of Violence against Women and Girls Launched in Jamaica,” UN Women Caribbean, March 6, 2023, <https://caribbean.unwomen.org/en/stories/news/2023/03/ecovawg-in-jamaica-report-launch#:~:text=The%20total%20costs%20of%20VAWG,cent%20of%20the%202018%20GDP>.

8 “First Caribbean Study on National Economic Costs of Violence against Women and Girls Launched in Jamaica,” UN Women Caribbean, March 6, 2023, <https://caribbean.unwomen.org/en/stories/news/2023/03/ecovawg-in-jamaica-report-launch#:~:text=The%20total%20costs%20of%20VAWG,cent%20of%20the%202018%20GDP>.

9 Cassinelli, “Gender-Based Violence Is a Problem in the Caribbean.”

10 “Caribbean Gender Portal: Caribbean Gender-Based Violence Laws,” UN Women Caribbean, last visited January 15, 2024, <https://caribbean.unwomen.org/en/caribbean-gender-portal/caribbean-gbv-law-portal/gbv-country-resources/barbados>.

stakeholders and business leaders and securing buy-in from local leaders and influences—are strategies that should spread regionwide. Establishing or strengthening networks of CSOs can be the avenue to facilitate learning and sharing. From our discussions, CSOs show a willingness to do so, but require the government or private-sector financial support to turn these networks into a reality. Travel, logistics, and outreach to other CSOs—particularly those in rural areas—have steep costs.

Therefore, policy changes alone are not sufficient to address GBV. Existing legislation must be accompanied by implementation and metrics supporting accountability. Here, CSOs can work in tandem with governments to be the eyes and ears on the ground. Efficient and secure reporting mechanisms help gather sufficient data to better inform policy decisions—a perennial challenge for small Caribbean countries. A holistic approach that encompasses legislation and social programs that target immediate victims is needed in the short term, but a long-term action plan is also needed to address the root cause of the issue, including shaping and redefining social norms across governments, CSOs, business leaders, and individual households.

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

As noted, GBV contributes to economic challenges and pressures facing women. The unequal financial footing of women relative to men hinders their ability to start and grow businesses, enter the labor market, and drive continued gender discrimination. For a region that faces many economic pressures, fewer women in the workforce is a missed development opportunity. The International Monetary Fund and the Inter-American Development Bank show that when women have the same economic opportunities as men, they drive economic growth. Across Latin America and the Caribbean, extreme poverty is proven to show significant reductions and GDP can be boosted by as much as 15 percent.¹¹ Removing the economic barriers facing women needs to occur in the context of the broader development path for the Caribbean.

These economic barriers are structural. For men, having an education translates to employment. The same cannot be said for women and girls. Caribbean women often outperform men in educational attainment, but female labor-force participation lags that of men (see Figures 1 and 2).

HOW CAN MEN'S ROLES SHIFT FROM CAUSE TO SOLUTION?

By Ivan Cruikshank

Men, through active participation and the promotion of change, can challenge existing norms and address both individual instances and systemic forms of violence within society. To shift the roles of men from cause to solution, policies and programs must address the following.

Overcome negative notions of masculinity: Negative notions of masculinity often deter men from actively participating in efforts to end gender-based violence. However, there is a growing acknowledgment that involving men and boys in challenging patriarchal norms, gender inequality, and gender-based violence is crucial. Addressing toxic masculinity and promoting positive engagement of men can create an environment that encourages them to be allies in the fight against gender-based violence.

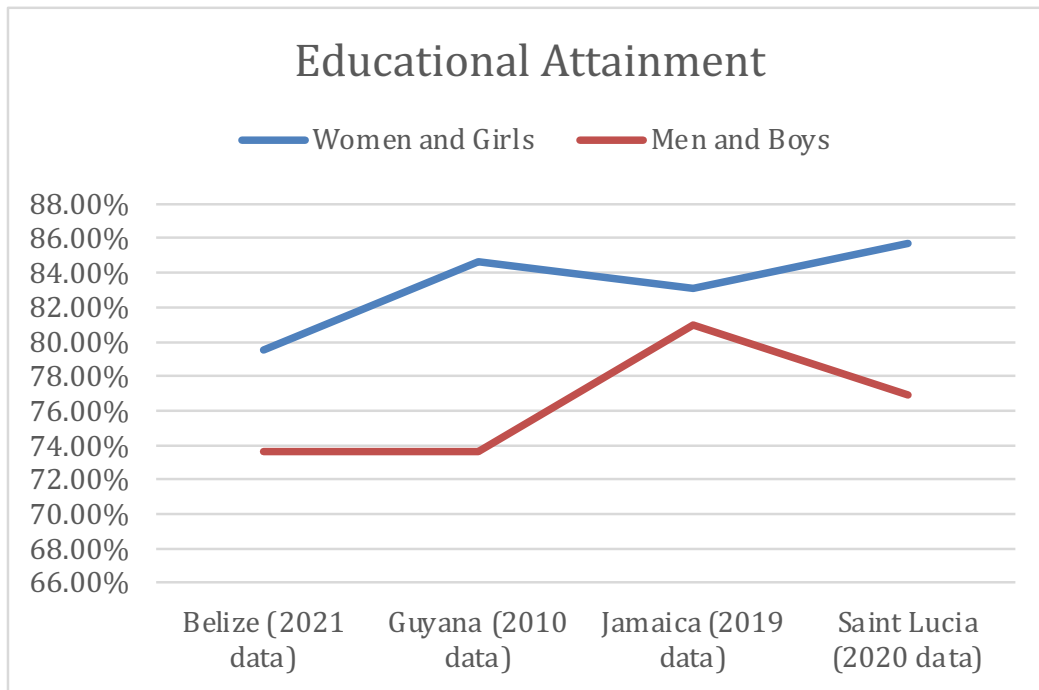
Expanding parenting programs: Research consistently shows that working with men and boys to address toxic masculinity and gender inequality reduces GBV. Programs that prioritize men and boys' involvement in promoting positive parenting and challenging harmful cultural practices have proven successful. These programs aim to reshape attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, fostering a society that rejects violence and promotes equality for all genders.

Promoting positive masculinity: Men actively engaged in preventing GBV can become role models for others. By promoting positive masculinity that encompasses respect, empathy, and equality, men can challenge harmful gender norms and inspire others to do the same. This both contributes to creating a safer environment for women and benefits men by fostering healthier relationships and personal growth.

Ivan Cruikshank is executive director of the Caribbean Vulnerable Communities Coalition (CVC)

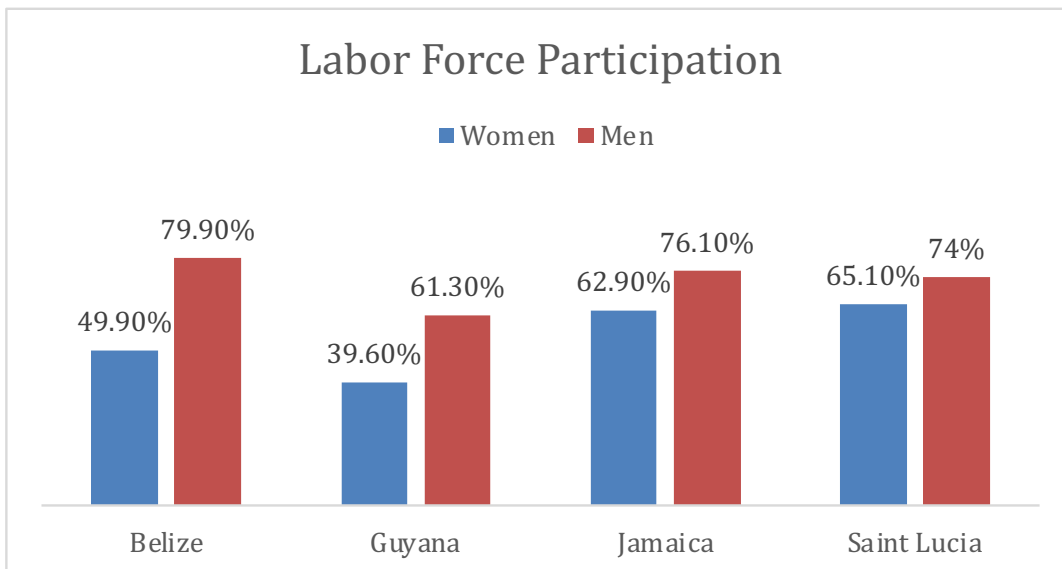
¹¹ Maria Teresa Villanueva, "Gender Parity Accelerators in Latin America: Boosting Opportunities for Women," Inter-American Development Bank, November 6, 2023, <https://blogs.iadb.org/igualdad/en/gender-parity-accelerators-in-latin-america-empowering-opportunities-for-women/#:~:text=According%20to%20estimates%20from%20the,ranging%20from%204%20to%2015%25>.

Figure 1



Source: "Latin America and Caribbean," World Bank, last visited January 29, 2024, <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/regions/latin-america-caribbean>.

Figure 2



Source: "Latin America and Caribbean," World Bank, last visited January 29, 2024, <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/regions/latin-america-caribbean>.

Women also experience discrepancies in pay. Women are estimated to earn 83 percent of men’s income in Jamaica and 88 percent in Barbados.¹²

These structural challenges are explained by two factors. As part of the Atlantic Council interview process, private-sector representatives from Guyana and Jamaica noted that unpaid household and care work and gender-based discrimination counterbalance the opportunities resulting from high educational attainment by women and girls. Lack of access to adequate and affordable childcare strains women, who are often the primary caretakers of children and other dependents. The additional responsibility restricts participation in the labor market, leading to a greater likelihood that more women than men are unemployed or underemployed, and more likely to be employed in low-wage, informal-sector jobs.

QUOTE FROM FOCUS GROUP

“In most companies and businesses, you still have men in the senior executive position as the decision-makers. While women are now more educated because they’re the ones in school, they’re going to work the same job, but be paid less in the position as that of their counterparts. So, it doesn’t matter which way we twist it once they come down to the bottom line. Men always have that upper hand over women.”

Guyanese Man

Figure 3

Participants were asked to select the three proposals most important to promoting gender equality. This chart shows the number of participants in each group who selected the individual items.

	Jamaican Women	Guyanese Women	Guyanese Men	Combined
Flexible Work Arrangements	3	8	6	17
Family and Medical Leave	4	7	4	15
Childcare Subsidies	3	5	4	12
Equal Pay For Equal Work	5	3	4	12
Maternity Leave	2	3	3	8
Legislative Quotas	2	5	0	7
Affirmative Action To Promote More Gender Equality In Hiring	5	1	1	7
Affirmative Action To Promote More Representative Hiring At Senior Levels Of Companies	1	0	2	3
Workforce And Entrepreneurial Training For Women	1	1	1	3
Greater Access To Credit And Loans	1	0	1	2
Parental Leave	0	0	1	1

Figure 3 describes proposals to promote gender equality (according to targeted groups in Jamaica and Guyana). It highlights that flexible work arrangements and family, and medical leave are perceived as the most important measures to promote gender equality. This data also points out that priorities may differ in different countries, such as on proposing affirmative action to promote more gender equality in hiring being more relevant in Jamaica than in Guyana.

Source: Atlantic Council commissioned focus groups, executed by GBAO.

¹² “Global Gender Gap Report 2023,” World Economic Forum, June 2023, https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf.



Smiling middle age Jamaican female vendor sitting in her shop with woven baskets and other hand made items for sale at a craft market in Montego Bay, Jamaica. Source: Debbie Ann Powell via Shutterstock.

Gender-based discrimination manifests as wage discrimination, unequal access to education and training, and workplace harassment. In Jamaica, women have a glass ceiling in their careers, impeding growth despite their educational resumes qualifying them for senior management positions. In Guyana, preconceived notions of male versus female skills and industries are a barrier to women's employment, which is amplified as the country's economy demands more skills in the oil and gas sector. Addressing these two challenges must begin with restructuring women's entry into the labor market to help Caribbean countries take advantage of potential economic growth and social development.

The base objective should be creating a merit-based society that removes restrictive gender norms and provides a financial foundation for women tasked with unpaid work. This is not a government-only responsibility. Governments should work with the private sector to ensure that women are building the skills and obtaining access to the technologies that make them competitive in the labor market. This will differ from country to

country. In Guyana, women require full access to the energy and agriculture sectors, while resilience in the service industry is needed for those in Jamaica. As part of national budgets, governments should look to provide benefits and incentives for women undertaking unpaid work, from childcare options for those at university to meal plans for families.

Public and private sectors should also cooperate to invest in women and incentivize entrepreneurship, financial inclusion, and literacy training, while supporting affordable childcare and other support systems for working women. International organizations and multilateral development banks, such as the International Labor Organization and the World Bank, can double down on existing efforts to promote gender equality in the workplace and fund women entrepreneurs by working together with local CSOs, such as business chambers, to multiply impact and pass the knowledge forward. Simply investing in women—and men—to be educated for the job market can, along with reconfigured social norms, shift the incentives of the system toward equity.

HOW CAN THE PRIVATE SECTOR BE A DRIVING FORCE OF WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN THE CARIBBEAN?

By Rowena Elliot

Strategic collaboration between companies and business support organizations (BSOs) can unlock unprecedented opportunities for women, fostering both individual and societal growth. A fundamental starting point and easily attainable objective in becoming a driving force is the advocacy for, and implementation of, inclusive employment practices. In an environment where human resources are scarce, companies can exert extra effort by applying a gender lens to the hiring process and ensuring an equitable pay scale for equal work. Moreover, prioritizing professional development and mentorship for women across all organizational levels can contribute significantly to their career advancement. Establishing and maintaining a safe and conducive work environment, reinforced by policies addressing workplace sexual harassment, is also crucial.

Another pivotal area of focus is supporting women entrepreneurs. The private sector can actively contribute

by cultivating an inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem. Collaborating with financial institutions, international donors, and BSOs to establish business incubators and Another pivotal area of focus is supporting women entrepreneurs. The private sector can actively contribute by cultivating an inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem. Collaborating with financial institutions, international donors, and BSOs to establish business incubators and offer mentorship to startups, as witnessed in other regions, can markedly enhance the economic landscape for aspiring women entrepreneurs. Supporting women entrepreneurs plays a pivotal role in the expansion of small and medium-sized enterprises, which are crucial drivers of economic growth.

Through engaged and collaborative initiatives, the private sector stands to be the catalyst mentioned earlier for women's economic empowerment in our region. These collective efforts have the potential to propel a future where women and the communities they inhabit experience heightened equity and prosperity.

Rowena Elliot is the president of the Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry Guyana

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Increasing women's involvement in politics can address many of the Caribbean's gender challenges. Passing legislation and designing policies are needed but, for these policies to take a gendered lens, women need to be at the decision-making table. As of 2018, on average, 22 percent of ministerial or cabinet positions across the English-speaking Caribbean are held by women, with notable exceptions in Guyana (due to a quota system) and Trinidad and Tobago, with about 30% each.¹³ Relative to the rest of the world, Caribbean countries have more female cabinet members—including several elected leaders since independence—but ministerial representation has not yet reached the 50-percent mark.¹⁴ Sufficient data for local communities are not readily available, but Atlantic Council conversations with CSOs in Jamaica and Guyana underscored that women's representation at local levels is far lower than at federal levels. With little political participation for women comes fewer avenues for women to have influence across politics, the economy, and society.

There are two drivers of this issue: there are prevalent cultural perceptions in the Caribbean that women and girls should hold traditional roles in the household; and women have limited time or resources to run in elections. Relative to men, women are responsible for most of family care responsibilities, which creates and reinforces ideas about men as decision-makers and women as caregivers. These roles are more pronounced in low-income households, indigenous communities, and rural areas. Women in urban settings are affected, but there are ready-made opportunities for women because of either proximity to political influencers and functions or social services that can alleviate certain family care responsibilities. Women have challenges entering politics because running for elections is not a paid job. If they are elected or selected to be on a party ballot, women have fewer financial resources to sustain their livelihoods or have access to the social network that make their election possible. Here, time is a factor and a commodity for women entering politics. Building networks begins not at the start of an election cycle, but months and years before, often with little to no compensation.

¹³ "Women in Political Leadership in the Caribbean," UN Women, 2018, <https://parlAmericas.org/uploads/documents/WomensPoliticalLeadershipUNWomen.pdf>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

QUOTE FROM FOCUS GROUP

“...it’s not only about putting persons to make a photo, it’s actually about putting the right persons in the right positions, so that they can fulfill the role. We want the right person in the position, and this has nothing to do with gender. If it’s a woman, the woman should be there. If it’s a male, the male should be there.”

Guyanese Man

The perception of this Guyanese man assumes that political participation is, or should be, based on merit. It does not consider the structural challenges and social norms that make women less likely to be fit for these roles—for example, the aforementioned financial and time constraints.

Limited political participation or influence by women adversely affects Caribbean economies and inherently challenges existing narratives about the role of women in politics. Regional development is severely limited by human-capital constraints. Except for Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, country populations amount to less than one million, compared to their neighbors in Latin America that have populations that range from four to 200 million.¹⁵ Across the Caribbean, except for Belize and Saint Vincent and Grenadines, women and girls make up more than half of the total population. Simply, Caribbean governments handicap themselves by not utilizing the full potential of their populations, furthering resource constraints that limit development. This means there are fewer minds at work as countries tackle the twenty-first century’s biggest challenges, from crime and violence to climate change. Limits on political influence also lessen the likelihood that narratives about women in politics and society will change. Perceptions and laws have a cyclical effect. Perceptions inform lawmaking and legislation shapes perceptions. If women are not part of the decision-making and policy implementation, perceptions will persist.

Increasing political participation and influence for women and girls requires a multistakeholder approach. Policymakers may be part of government, but political constituents reside in the broader public, including the business community and civil society. Caribbean countries can make two changes to accelerate women’s influence in politics. Policymakers

HOW CAN CIVIL-SOCIETY ACTORS TURN FROM ACTIVISTS TO POLITICIANS?

By Professor Jennifer M. Piscopo

Women in CSOs are well positioned to run for office. They already have the necessary political skills. They understand the issues facing their communities and they know the solutions. They know how to communicate a message, work in teams, and implement projects. In short, women activists are already leaders.

Making the shift from civil society to politics can seem daunting, however. Researchers find that women often perceive politics as too combative and too hostile, while civil-society work seems more collaborative and collegial. Electoral politics can be particularly inhospitable when marked by high levels of personal insults, harassment, and violence, and when running campaigns requires significant financial costs. Yet the research also shows that women with backgrounds in CSOs count on unique resources through which to overcome these challenges. They have well-established networks of support, which they can activate to campaign, fundraise, and push back on slander and gossip. With support from their colleagues and fellow activists, women activists can translate the issues into campaign platforms and, ultimately, policy change.

The research also shows that, when women focus on the issues, they can find common ground—and even work across party divides. Running for office means joining a political party, and parties often perpetuate the bad behavior that makes politics unappealing to women in the first place. That needs to change. Parties must do more to establish and adhere to codes of conduct, to prevent and sanction harassment, and to create equitable opportunities for women. Even so, party politics and electoral politics remain the only way women can gain access to decision-making power. Decades of research show that the more women are in elected office, the more policies reflect diverse women’s interests. To actually make the changes they seek, women activists will need to stand for office.

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¹⁵ “Population, Total—Latin America & Caribbean.”

should work with CSOs to build avenues that bring more women in politics (see call-out box above). This can take the form of creating more anonymity in political or party selections to mitigate social perceptions for women and incorporate criteria that are merit based rather than network or finance based. Governments and the business community should work together to subsidize women's ability to run for elections or party selection. Government funds are important but, to manage political affiliations, the business community should work with banks to create autonomous funds that women can tap into when building their political profiles. However, writing policy and unlocking funds are just the first step. Implementation is just as crucial. Leaning on the insights of civil society is critical, as policies are more easily implemented when contextualized to the realities of communities, villages, and indigenous tribes. Giving locals the onus for implementation means that the policies will mature and increase in effectiveness as they take the shape of the specific challenges women face at subnational levels.

CLIMATE CHANGE

The Caribbean is the world region most vulnerable to climate change, leaving women and girls extremely vulnerable. Situated in the Caribbean Sea, the region experiences an above-average frequency of climate-related disasters, including hurricanes, strong tropical storms, and rising sea levels and temperatures. In 2017, Hurricane Maria wiped out more than 200 percent of Dominica's GDP and caused an island-wide evacuation of Barbuda.¹⁶ Most Caribbean cities are coastal, meaning that rising sea levels threaten the urban hubs of the region, while increased temperatures further acidify oceans and cause agricultural degradation. Climate-related events disproportionately impact women-led industries, such as the services and informal sectors. The region and its citizens—particularly women and girls—are in a constant cycle of risk where slow-onset events (rising sea levels and temperatures) damage the natural protective barriers from sudden-onset events (hurricanes and flash floods).

Climate change widens gender gaps in the region. Gender norms and family care responsibilities leave women disproportionately affected by climate events. When disasters strike, children are forced to stay home for long periods, putting additional burdens on mothers tasked with taking care of the household. This limits the earning potential of women who are also employed. Further, because women are infrequently consulted in decisions and have low asset or capital ownership relative to men, they are less likely to rebound from disasters. Because their priorities are treated as secondary to those of men, less involvement in decisions means that women and girls' needs come second. Also, because women disproportionately do not possess the capital to ease the financial burdens that come in the aftermath of climate-related events, rebuilding home and work infrastructure and replacing their incomes after job loss are tall tasks.

This is particularly important for women, who make up large shares of the informal and hospitality sectors, both of which are adversely impacted by climate change due to the tourism-dependent nature of most Caribbean economies.¹⁷ Ten of the top twenty tourism-dependent economies globally are Caribbean Community members, meaning that drops in tourism have an outsized effect on the region.¹⁸ For women, this affects the retail industry, which relies heavily on purchases from tourists and source products externally from places like Miami. Hurricanes and strong tropical storms do not need to directly affect their islands to disrupt profits, as storms impacting other islands or the mainland United States can disrupt trade. Outside of the retail industry, tourism shutdowns after climate-related events due to damaged infrastructure and power outages leave many women without jobs and a way to earn their wages. More time at home, especially in a stressful period, has also been linked to increases in GBV, further exacerbating other challenges facing women and girls. Simply, climate change puts a stress on economies and societies, acting as an amplifier to gender inequality. Violence, financial distress, and lost opportunities to enter politics are often underpinned by the effects of climate change.

16 Riyad Insanally and Wazim Mowla, *PACC 2030: Quick Wins for a US-Caribbean Partnership on Climate and Energy Resilience*, Atlantic Council, September 20, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/quick-wins-for-pacc2030/>.

17 Lilia Burunciuc, "Five Trends in Gender (In)equality in the Caribbean," World Bank, March 8, 2023, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/latinamerica/five-trends-gender-inequality-caribbean>.

18 Henry Mooney, et al., "Caribbean Quarterly Bulletin: Volume 10: Issue 2, August 2021," Inter-American Development Bank, August 2021, <https://publications.iadb.org/en/caribbean-quarterly-bulletin-volume-10-issue-2-august-2021>.



Abaco resident Mary Francoise looks on at a damaged church serving as a shelter for people who lost their homes to Hurricane Dorian in Marsh Harbour, Great Abaco, Bahamas, September 8, 2019. Source: REUTERS/Loren Elliott.

Despite the challenges women and girls face due to climate change, their climate resilience is an essential component of the development equation. The Inter-American Development Bank notes that gender parity in the labor force can increase GDP by 7 to 12 percent across Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Jamaica, and Saint Lucia.¹⁹ Decreasing gender inequality translates into economic growth and more inclusive decision-making—both critical for climate resilience. Therefore, governments should work with the business community and civil-society groups to design new, or strengthen existing, financial instruments that support women and girls pre- and post-climate disasters. First, when disasters strike and women lose jobs and income, funds should be set aside to supplement incomes in the short term. This should be done at a regional

level, utilizing institutions such as the Caribbean Development Bank. No one country has the fiscal space to allocate these types of resources, even with private-sector support. Second, climate resilience for women and girls requires them to be part of the decision-making process. Having women help make decisions and design climate-resilient policies will help adhere to the heterogeneous nature of how weather events affect the Caribbean. Climate-change effects differ across countries, such as those in the hurricane belt versus that are not. Even in those countries, effects of climate change differ based on rural versus urban communities or inland versus coastal cities. Civil-society groups can be utilized, as they are on the ground and in tune with the local environment, such as how certain streams, rivers, and mangroves operate.

¹⁹ “Women in Business and Management: Gaining Momentum in the Caribbean,” International Labor Organization, October 2018, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---act_emp/documents/publication/wcms_645810.pdf.

CONCLUSION

Gender gaps and inequality run throughout Caribbean politics, economies, and societies. In this publication, we shed light on the depth of the challenges facing women and girls, including gender-based violence, limited economic opportunities, limited political influence, and the disproportionate effects of climate change. Most importantly, this publication puts forth recommendations that helped reshape preconceived notions of gender roles and break a vicious cycle of violence, exclusion, and vulnerability of women and girls and build one of equity, growth, and prosperity for the Caribbean. Reshaping the social norms that drive gender inequality is a monumental effort, but one that must be prioritized by all of society. To begin, this effort includes building out

support programs and ensuring the enforcement of the law to address the short-term challenges of GBV; investing in education to empower women and girls' participation in the labor market and be leaders in it; and funding women leaders to be decision-makers and shapers of policy, including those related to climate resilience.

Over the last year, one message was clear: cooperation is crucial to success. Governments, the business community, CSOs, and international actors must build new momentum to put equality, resilience, and prosperity for women and girls front and center. Only through unified and concrete efforts to address vulnerabilities of women and girls can the Caribbean unleash its full potential.

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