

Violence Against Guyanese Women – The Survey



Reporting period: 2018



GEPAN

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Preface

Guyana's development is still highly marked by gender inequalities, in particular gender-based violence (GBV) and violence against women and girls (VAWG). Femicide is prevalent, with 2017 recording 13 murders of which 9 were committed by intimate partners. Domestic violence saw 1787 reported cases with Georgetown and Berbice (Regions 4, 5 and 6) accounting for 1245. By December 2018 there were at least 20 reported cases of femicide, representing a steep increase in comparison to the same period of the previous year.

Police registered a 7% increase in sexual abuse by the end of October 2018, with 202 reported cases of rape in comparison to 187 for 2017 (entire year). Minors are even more vulnerable to sexual abuse than adult women with 841 cases of child sexual abuse recorded for 2017, of which 722 of the victims were girls. From January to May 2018, the Child Protection Agency (CPA) registered 481 cases of child sexual abuse, of which 393 were girls. The number of reported cases had risen to 604 by the end of September 2018 (*"Femicide, benevolent sexism and Guyana", The Thinker Vol. 2, 2019*).

These numbers concern only reported cases. The perception of gender roles which still relegates women to traditional and positions of inferiority, combined with taboos, fear and shame, continue to form barriers when trying to address violence against women and girls. Corporal punishment is still highly approved by a wide cross-section of the Guyanese society, women and men included. In some instances, there are attempts to attenuate the gravity of femicide and sexual abuse, in the belief that the victim provoked her demise due to her attitude or dress.

The State's response mechanisms and protection services still fall short of expected standards. Though the police and CPA provide reports which reveal the rate of abuse, obtaining justice remains a challenge for many survivors who are barred from legal aid due to lack of financial resources. Magistrates Courts, police prosecutors and the legal and law enforcement systems in general, are not yet fully sensitized, informed and equipped on how to deal with cases of abuse and discrimination against women and gender bias in general. In some instances, abuse victims express frustration at being neglected or having their ordeals ridiculed or judged by members of law enforcement, thereby dissuading them from seeking legal justice. Supporting the notion that the legal and law enforcement frameworks contain major gaps when it comes to seriously addressing GBV, is the fact that in 2015 only 36 individuals were charged for rape though there were 233 reported cases.

Except for police reports and publications issued occasionally by the Social Protection Ministry, the CPA and to a lesser extent the civil society, substantial information and

reliable prevalence data on GBV are not widely available in Guyana. As part of GEPAN's mandate to report on the social and human rights conditions in Guyana, a six-week survey to assess the magnitude of violence against women was conducted from August to mid-September 2018. The survey was extended from November 25th to December 10th, during the 16 Days of Activism against GBV. The method used to collect information anonymously allowed to gather data from survivors without compromising their identity. Many survivors of domestic, sexual or other forms of VAWG are generally uncomfortable or fearful to speak of their ordeals. Yet, GBV constitutes a human rights violation for which the root causes, nature and extent must be understood if the right approaches are to be taken to counter its impact on human development.

A total of 141 Guyanese women participated in the survey *Violence Against Guyanese Women – Take the Survey*. 103 currently reside in Guyana while the remaining 38 now live abroad. The survey comprised of questions which were careful to avoid compromising the identity of survivors. The objective of the survey was primarily to provide a numerical insight into what Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) looks like for the average Guyanese woman.

The nature of **abuse**

Cat-calling

Of 141 women who participated in the survey, 126 said they considered cat-calling to be harassment while the other 15 were undecided.

Cyber-bullying

65 (46.1%) of all participants indicated that they had been survivors of cyber-abuse, 28 (19.9%) said that private images or content of them (including videos) were taken without their consent, 21 (14.9%), indicated that the content was used to degrade, demean or humiliate them (including on social media and 20 (14.2%) participants said that the content was used to blackmail them.

The first question of the survey sought to determine the nature of abuse to which victims were subjected. Participants were allowed to select one or more responses to the question, as it is believed that Guyanese women are vulnerable to different forms of abuse simultaneously or at different stages of their lives. 141 participants provided 248 responses, thereby indicating that some survivors had

suffered multiple forms of abuse.

A flagrant majority of 115 (82%) participants said they were verbally abused, while 76 (54%) participants indicated that they were victims of domestic violence. 34 (24%) of all participants indicated that they were raped and rapists included their intimate partners and/or husbands. Another 9 (12.6%) participants were victims of incest.

The age of abuse **victims**

141 participants provided 217 responses regarding the age at which they were abused, suggesting that they were repeatedly assaulted either at different periods of their lives or over a stretch of time.

72 (51%) of all participants said they were abused

between the ages of 18 and 25, 60 (42%) of all participants indicated being abused between the ages of 10 and 18, 55 (39%) of all participants were abused between the ages of 25 and 35, while 28 (20%) were abused between the ages of 0 and 10.

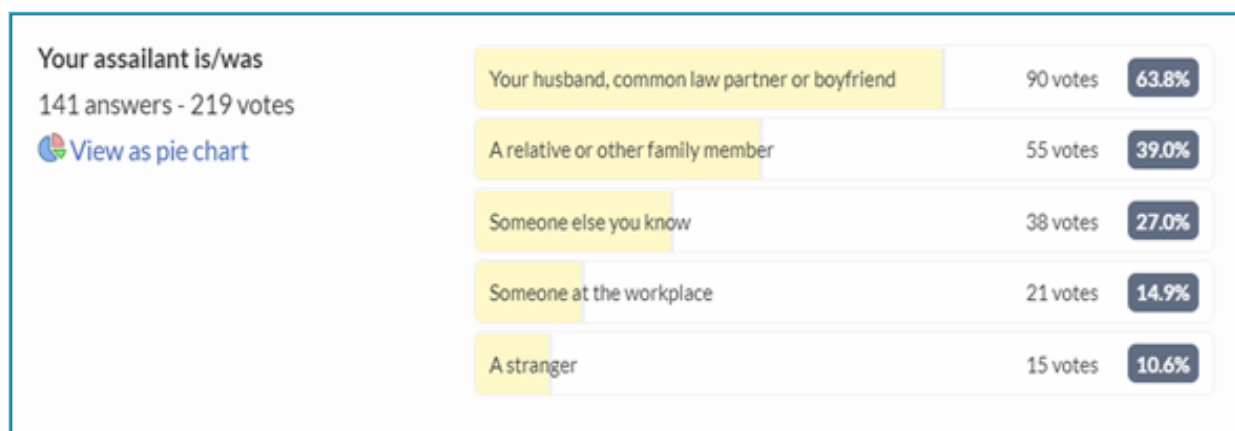
The face of the abuser

To the question of who their abuser was, 141 participants provided 219 responses, indicating that some women were abused by more than one individual. Results also showed that the majority of abusers were part of the victim's immediate family.

90 women (63.9%) were abused by their husbands or intimate partners, 55 participants (39%) were abused by a relative or family member, 39 women (27%) were abused by someone else they know and 21 (14.9%) women were abused at work. Only 14 women (10.6%) were abused by a stranger.

The place of abuse

Concerning where they were abused, 194 responses were provided by the participants, indicating that some victims were abused at more than 1 location. 89 women (63.1% of all participants) were abused in their homes, 42 women (29.8% of all participants) were abused in the homes of someone they know, and 23 (16.3% of all participants) were abused at the workplace. 14 women (9.9%) were abused at school while 26 (18.4% of all participants) were abused somewhere other than those listed above.



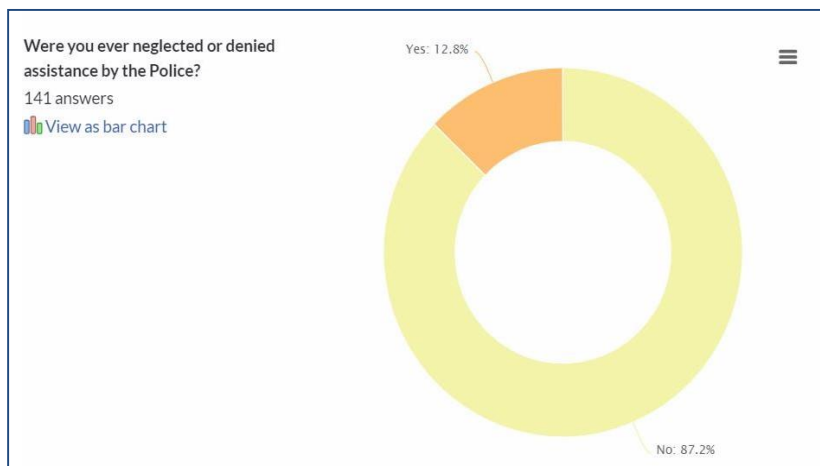
Speaking about their ordeals

When asked if they spoke to anyone about their ordeals, 141 participants provided 141 responses. 87 women (61.7%) indicated said they spoke about their ordeals while 45 said they did not. Those who did not cited the following reasons:

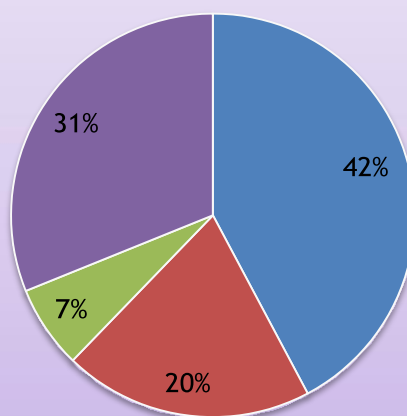
- They were **ashamed** about what happened to them
- They were **afraid** of what might happen to them if they spoke about it
- They were uncertain about their **family's reaction**
- They were afraid that someone might **hurt** them.

Obtaining help

When asked who they turned to for assistance, 141 participants provided 175 responses, suggesting that several outlets were used to obtain help. However, 79 (56%) participants said they turned to no one for help. Of the remaining 62 participants (44%), 58 turned to their family, relatives and/or friends, 22 turned to the police, 5 sought out the intervention of social protection services and another 5 turned to NGOs. 6 participants sought other means.



Why victims did not speak of their abuse



- You are ashamed of what happened to you
- You are uncertain about your family's reaction
- You fear someone might hurt you
- You fear people might blame you for what happened

Post **trauma** and health consequences

90 women (63.8% of all participants) indicated that their ordeals had a negative impact on their performance at work or in school, while 73 (51.8%) said that they believe they suffer from post-traumatic effects of abuse.

4 participants became **pregnant** as a result of sexual abuse while another 7 contracted Sexually Transmitted Infections (**STIs**).

5 participants became physically incapacitated or **disabled** due to abuse.

The impact on **children**

Of the 141 participants, 69 are mothers. 33 mothers (47.8%) indicated that their **children witnessed their abuse**. 16 mothers said that their children were used as a means to trap them.

Studies have supported the fact that children who witness domestic violence suffer from psychological distress which can result in depression, anxiety or other emotional disorders.

Children who witness domestic violence and abuse can also exhibit suicidal, violent or aggressive behaviour. Further analysis also shows that children who witness domestic violence are prone to abusive relationships, whether being abused or abusive, if they do not receive the necessary post traumatic care and support.

Relying on **law enforcement** for **assistance**

Guyana's law enforcement system, in particular the police force, has often come under severe criticism for what is perceived as **complacency** when handling cases of domestic violence and sexual abuse. This can be partly attributed to personal bias which stems from the **perception of gender roles** in Guyanese society. It is therefore not a surprise that 18 women who participated in the survey indicated they were **denied assistance** or **neglected** by the police when seeking help in situations of abuse.

Conclusion

The findings of this survey revealed evidence to support that GBV and VAWG constitute a major social and public health problem in Guyana, taking on multiple forms, including verbal, sexual and domestic abuse, and present in all spheres of life, be it within the family circle, at school, at the workplace, or in public spaces.

Survey results further revealed that it is a recurrent problem, experienced by many at different moments throughout their lives or over a period of time, often at the hands of relatives, intimate partners, colleagues and acquaintances, and affecting both adults and minors¹.

The resulting social and health consequences for survivors, their families and communities can have a long lasting negative impact. Public health effects include exposure to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), unwanted pregnancies, psychosocial trauma and physical disability. Subsequently, the physical and emotional effects endured by survivors may also hinder their ability to earn a living, attend school or participate fully in and contribute actively to society. For children, exposure to such violence may significantly affect mental health and wellbeing.

The magnitude of GBV in Guyana, however, is still to be substantiated by reliable prevalence data which is drastically lacking. Evidence suggests that a majority of incidents are not reported as only few survivors chose to disclose information on their abuse and share their experiences, as can attest this survey. Yet, building evidence on violence against women is crucial to understanding the scope of the problem in view of providing appropriate and effective solutions. There is therefore a pressing need for increased efforts in documenting and measuring the nature, prevalence and root causes of GBV and its consequences on women and children in Guyana.

Survivors should be encouraged to support victims experiencing GBV and VAWG, to help diminish the number of cases that go unreported. It is important to note that the fact that so many incidents go unreported means that offenders can continue to act with impunity. Barriers to reporting abuse or seeking help typically include shame, fear of

¹ 42% of survivors reported being assaulted between the ages of 10 and 18 and 20% between the ages of 0 and 10.

being stigmatized, fearing for one's safety, limited or deficient response mechanisms and protective and support services.

Recommendations

GEPAN calls on the government of Guyana to address the issue of GBV and VAWG as a major social and public health concern. As such, efforts should be taken to:

- strengthen national research and data collection initiatives by including VAWG and GBV in population-based, demographic and health surveys at the national and local levels;
- enhance the delivery of comprehensive health care, counselling and legal support services for survivors;
- sensitize and train public health care providers in responding to the individual needs of survivors;
- develop professional reintegration mechanisms for survivors to increase economic empowerment and financial independence which in turn can help victims to leave abusive relationships and households²;
- prevent the recurrence of violence, by developing early identification, referral, protection and support mechanisms for women and children affected by different forms of GBV;
- promote egalitarian gender norms at all levels of society through public awareness-raising and sensitization on the link between gender stereotyping and violence against women, and by including topics on human rights and sexuality in school curricula;
- develop formal reporting mechanisms for survivors ;
- provide adequate information on how to report incidents of GBV and where to seek support, while encouraging women to do so;
- ensure full enforcement of the Sexual Offences Act and the National Domestic Violence Act;

² This survey found that the number of survivors who were employed increased from 59.6% during period of abuse to 75.2% after period of abuse.

- provide employees from the law enforcement and health sectors with adequate training on the provisions of the Sexual Offences Act and the Domestic Violence Act;
- Implement a National Gender Policy geared towards upholding Guyana's commitment to achieving the SDGs;
- Ensure that national policies incorporate a gender equality approach to development;

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