

# MY VOICE MY CHOICE

Supporting Adolescent Girls  
Empowerment in the Caribbean

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## WHAT IS THE SPOTLIGHT INITIATIVE

**The Spotlight Initiative is a global initiative of the United Nations (UN) which has received generous support from the European Union. Its aim is to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls.**

Launched in 2017 with a seed funding commitment of €500 million from the European Union, the Initiative represents an unprecedented global effort to invest in gender equality and women's empowerment as a precondition and driver for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Within the Caribbean region, it prioritizes the reduction of family violence (FV), working closely with governments, civil society organizations, and regional institutions such as CARICOM Secretariat and the OECS Commission to integrate prevention, protection, and essential services responses to FV survivors into regional plans.

## INTRODUCTION

In the Caribbean, Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) has been on the agenda of many UN Agencies.<sup>1,2,3</sup> There have been several UN reports from the Universal Periodic Review process and the Human Rights Treaty Bodies that assess the rights of women and children in the Commonwealth.<sup>4</sup> Findings from these reports are that the occurrence of Gender - Based Violence GBV is very high, concealed and underreported. It incorporates violence from persons who may not be related and includes rape and sexual harassment, with an increasing number of girls under the age of 25 being sexually assaulted.

The UNICEF Gender Programmatic Review of the Eastern Caribbean States (2019) notes that GBV is a complex social problem which is underpinned by male-female power relations and that there was increasing evidence showing that from a quarter to a third of children experience more than one type of violence. The data found that there is a spectrum of abuse that children experience during childhood. It also highlights that girls experience a broader spectrum of victimization than boys, including caregiver victimization.

**VAWG** – any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.

UNICEF, in partnership with the Nina Young Women's Leadership Programme, and supported by the Spotlight Initiative (SI) Caribbean Regional Programme, sought through active research, to identify and review empowerment strategies for girls as a prevention strategy in GBV.

The purpose of this brief is:

- Document the unique perspective and contributions on adolescent girls' empowerment from across the Caribbean.
- Share recommended change strategies to achieve girls' empowerment as defined by girls based on the Regional Assessment completed across the Caribbean.
- Share the Thematic Analysis, Conceptual Framework used in conducting the Regional Assessment
- Share the organizations doing work throughout the Caribbean with girls and girls' empowerment.

In seeking to realize the objectives, focus groups were conducted with over 100 young women from Jamaica, Sint Maarten, St. Kitts and Nevis and Trinidad and Tobago. They were members of established community groups and the sessions afforded them a valued platform to openly share and discuss their experiences and define for themselves their ideas of empowerment and what would be required for effective and life changing support.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for the project underscored the interconnections of all facets of girls' empowerment in the Caribbean. The Conceptual Map (See *Figure 1*) gives a snapshot of the interconnectivity of the current literature on Gender Based Violence and Empowerment and how this informed the objectives that were set out at the inception of the project around adolescent empowerment.

Based on traditional and historical perspectives of Caribbean society, transgenerational norms were expected to be a central issue with a correlation to female empowerment and positive engagement within communities. However, findings suggested correlations that create a negative impact on girls' empowerment in the region. Literature supporting girls' empowerment references creating strategies and programming that are in line with the region's cultural influences. Therefore, the project Conceptual Map illustrates the connections between GBV and Transgenerational Gender Norms and how with culture specific strategies, girls' empowerment in the Caribbean can be achieved, utilizing a girl led framework for self and community empowerment.

**FIGURE 1: TRANSGENERATIONAL CONCEPTUAL MAP**



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# IDENTIFICATION OF REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

A key component of the project entailed the review, evaluation and assessment of existing programs designed to empower girls and address the issues related to VAWG within countries in the Dutch, French and English-speaking Caribbean. Information was collected by the consulting team through emails and calls to organizations within their wider networks in the region, that worked specifically in the areas of gender, vulnerable populations and at-risk groups. The organizations which were initially contacted are seen in Appendix 1.

The countries selected to conduct in person focus groups were Jamaica, Sint Maarten, St. Kitts and Nevis, and Trinidad and Tobago. The countries that were forwarded questionnaires St Lucia and Barbados. All the participating organizations were community based with membership of women and girls of varying ages benefitting from their ongoing operational programming. The organizations were already involved in girls' empowerment working specifically in the areas of gender, vulnerable populations and at-risk groups.

The leadership of the organizations chosen for the focus groups facilitated each meeting with the young ladies by bringing their membership together to engage in the discussions. These were held at their regular meeting spaces or at community spaces which were made available by the participating organizations. The focus groups sessions were conducted with a total of 116 participants across the four countries as identified above. The questions were targeted towards understanding how the participants defined empowerment, personal power and the intergenerational dynamics and interactions within each community which shape the understanding of VAWG, and the norms that can be used to create strategies for prevention of GBV.

**FIGURE 2: REGIONAL FOCUS GROUPS**

## THEMATIC ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

There were eight stages in the analysis process using a combination of Thematic Analysis and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. Focus group discussions were transcribed and data was examined several times to gain familiarity with content and subsequently coded, and thematic insights were examined, re-examined, revised and refined. By using the discursive approach in the focus groups, it was observed how the young women and teens reconstructed their experiences within the framework of their community and their experiences of gender norms from not only social and familial norms, but also through the learnt expectations from women of different generations within their immediate circles.



**Empowerment** – the ability to make choices and having resources available to make these choices. It requires that people must reach the place where they can be self-governing and act on their own reasoning, beliefs and values.

(<https://www.unicef.org/media/101901/file/Adolescent%20Empowerment%20Technical%20Note.pdf>).

The key themes emerging from the analysis were Resilience and Self-Empowerment. There were also three sub themes which informed the experiences of the girls and their journey towards empowering themselves.

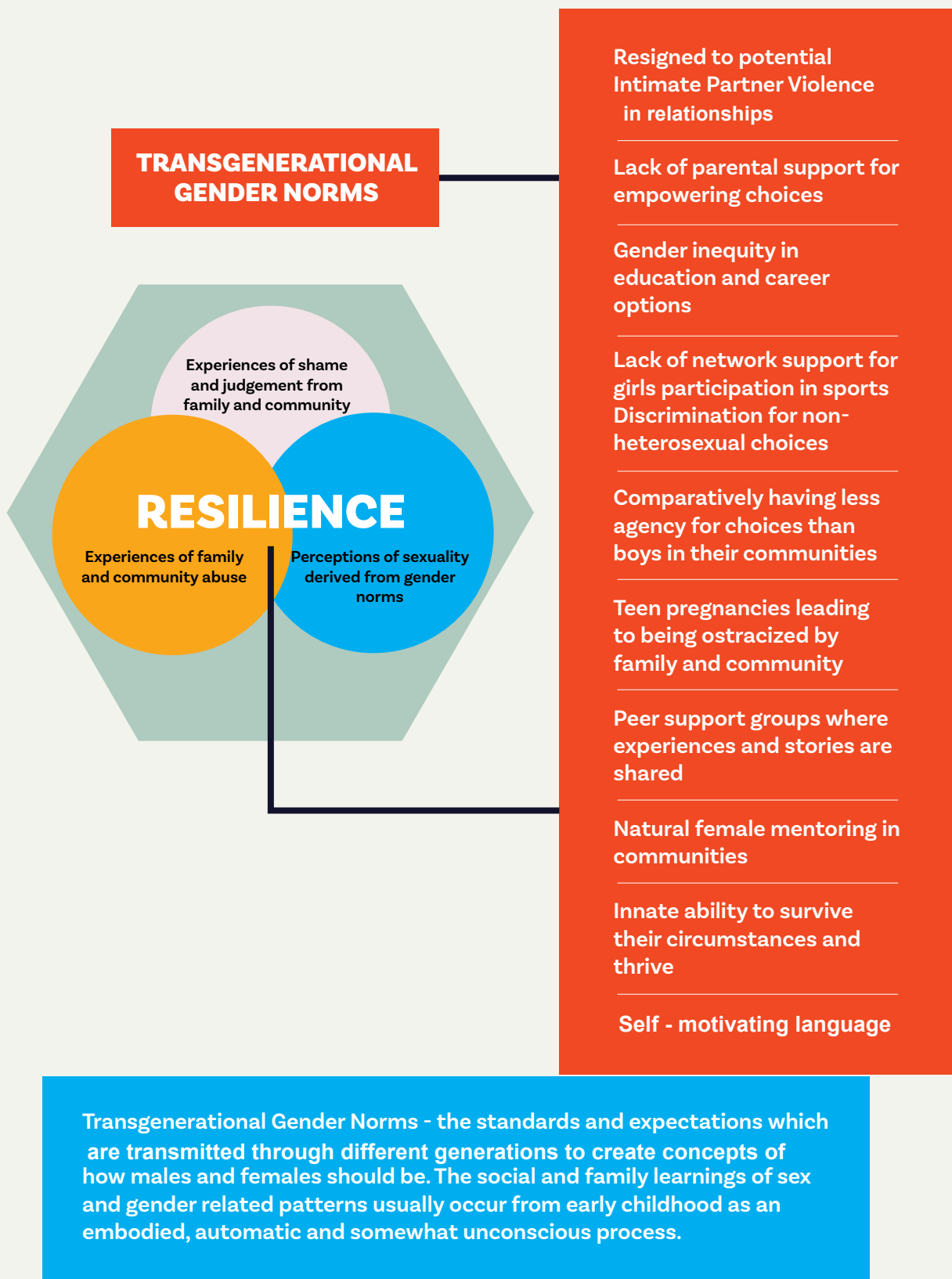
- Experiences of Family and Community Abuse.
- Experiences of Shame and Judgement from Family and Community.
- Perceptions of Sexuality derived from Gender Norms.

These sub-themes were reflective of the experiences of transgenerational gender normative behaviors within the Caribbean communities.

**Gender Norms** - accepted attributes and characteristics of male and female gendered identity at a particular point in time for a specific society or community. They are the standards and expectations to which gender identity generally conforms within a range that defines a particular society, culture and community.

FIGURE 3: REGIONAL FOCUS GROUPS

## SELF EMPOWERMENT



The table below illustrates the Transgenerational Gender Norms compiled from varying resources and which were identified in participants lived experiences.

**TABLE 1: TRANSGENERATIONAL GENDER NORMS DEFINED**

<b>TRANSGENERATIONAL GENDER NORMS</b>	The limiting beliefs as they impact girls and young women
<b>EDUCATIONAL NORMS</b>	Lack of educational and social opportunities for women; Limiting options for further education for teen girls.
<b>FAMILY NORMS</b>	<p>Only men make decisions on resources within the household; Men are the head of the household and have a greater role in income generation for the family; Women access financial rights with the permission of their partner or husband.</p> <p>Violence against women and girls in the home; Expectation of staying at home and taking care of a family; Expectation that the girls within the home would leave school at a specific age and work (either unpaid within the household or bring in an income to the home) until they are married; Sons are seen as a better investment for the family, granting them greater access to resources and opportunities.</p>
<b>CULTURAL AND SOCIAL NORMS ON MASCULINITY</b>	Glorification of masculinity in the community is normalized; Women and girls are criticized, oversexualized and objectified; Women and girls are underrepresented in sporting and cultural groups within the community; Early marriage based on religious and family expectations.
<b>WORK AND PROFESSIONAL NORMS</b>	Expectations of office dress codes and lack of professional development within company leadership frameworks; Normalized sexual harassment in the workplace; Talent is directly related to gendered norms that prohibit young women from pursuing aspirations and developing technical skills.

**Resilience - the ability of the girls to use their innate sense of knowing to thrive and adapt to their taxing and demanding life experiences, and survive their situations and personal challenges.**

FIGURE 4: RESILIENCE

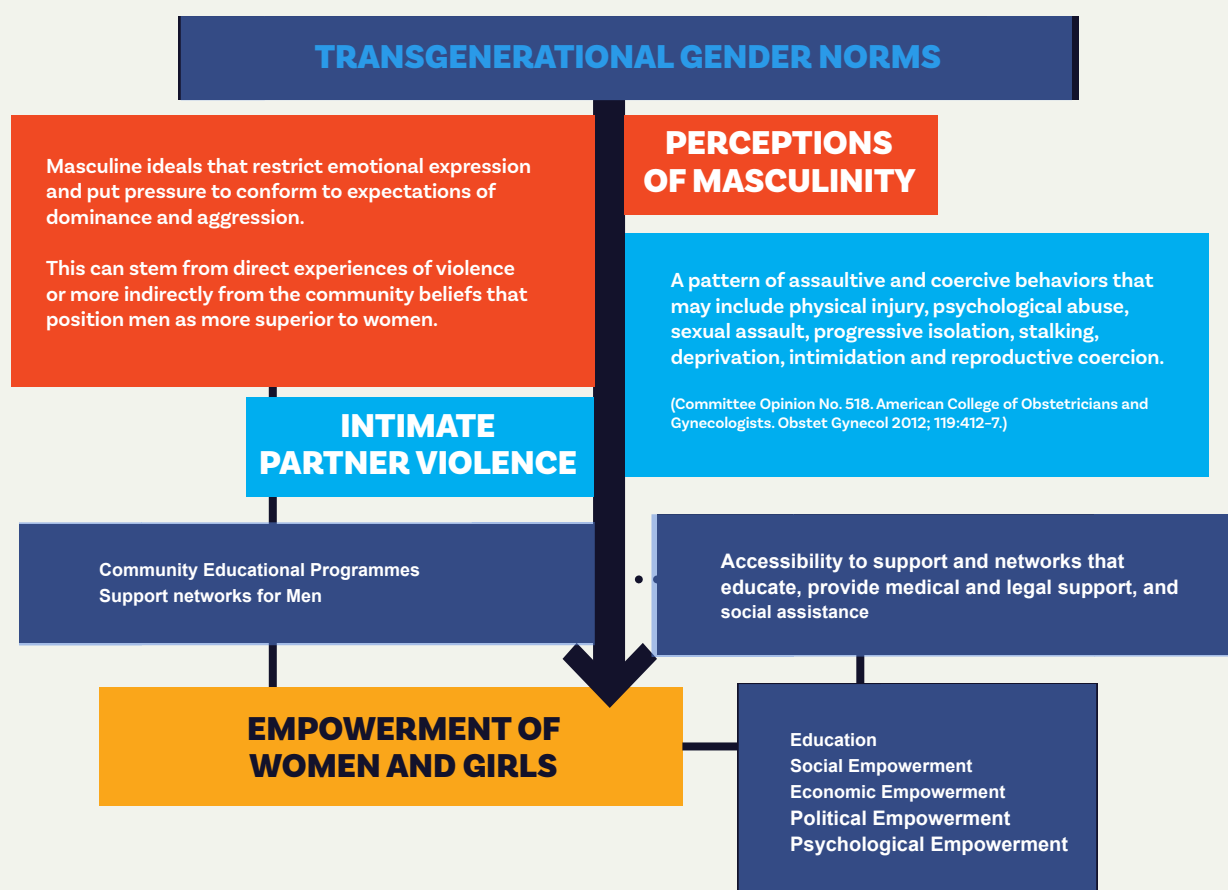


The resilience of the young women was evident throughout all of the focus groups, as in spite of their circumstances and perceived realities, they continued to see themselves and to use language that was self-motivating and self-empowering, thereby displaying their sense of agency. This displayed their own sense of power in wanting to make the difference they envisaged in their lives.

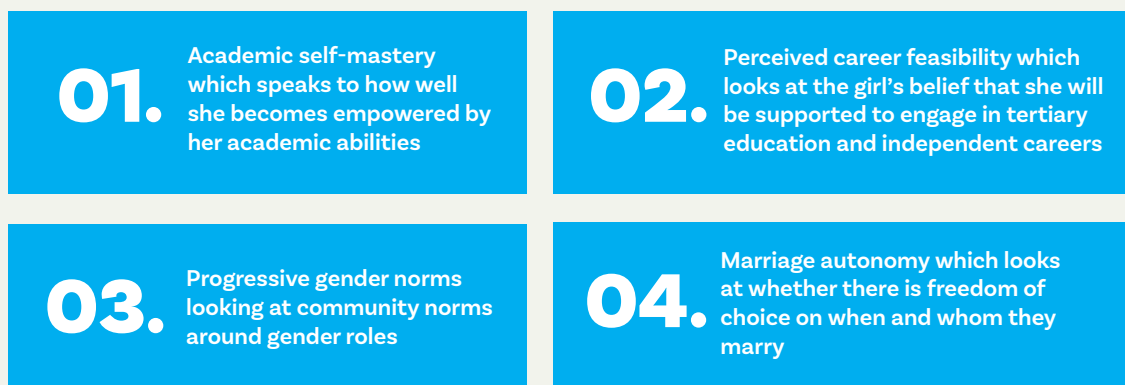
**Agency - the personal capability to act and make free and informed choices to pursue a specific goal. It is seen as an asset which can be used to determine what an individual can do or use to reduce vulnerabilities and expand opportunities.**

Perceptions of masculinity also affected girls' agency and empowerment. Opinions of what represents masculinity for men and women in the community, impacted the young women's experiences of IPV. Their understanding of masculinity informs their own expectations within their romantic relationships and defines their identity and behaviors.

**FIGURE 5: PERCEPTIONS OF MASCULINITY**



Karp et. al. (2020) developed a conceptual framework for women's and girls' empowerment in reproductive health which can be applied in the current context.<sup>5</sup> A key component in having choice is empowerment. The ability to make choices are affected by external factors such as power relations in families, broader community norms about women's roles, and by internal factors such as individual self-esteem and achievements. They identified four indices that represented the dimensions of teen girls' empowerment:



Empowerment can therefore happen at two levels - for the individual where the girl is empowered to pursue her own goals, and for the benefit of their community or social environment. UNICEF's four key components that support the adolescent empowerment journey are: Promoting realization, access and use of assets; Increasing critical awareness; Fostering agency; and Enhancing opportunities for voice and participation.

## SELF-EMPOWERMENT

Self-empowerment came from the ability of each girl within these focus groups to motivate themselves and allocate the resources they needed despite not having the support necessary. In some of the cases, the girls experienced abandonment from family and community, withdrawal of emotional reliance and guidance from authority figures in their lives.

FIGURE 6: SELF-EMPOWERMENT

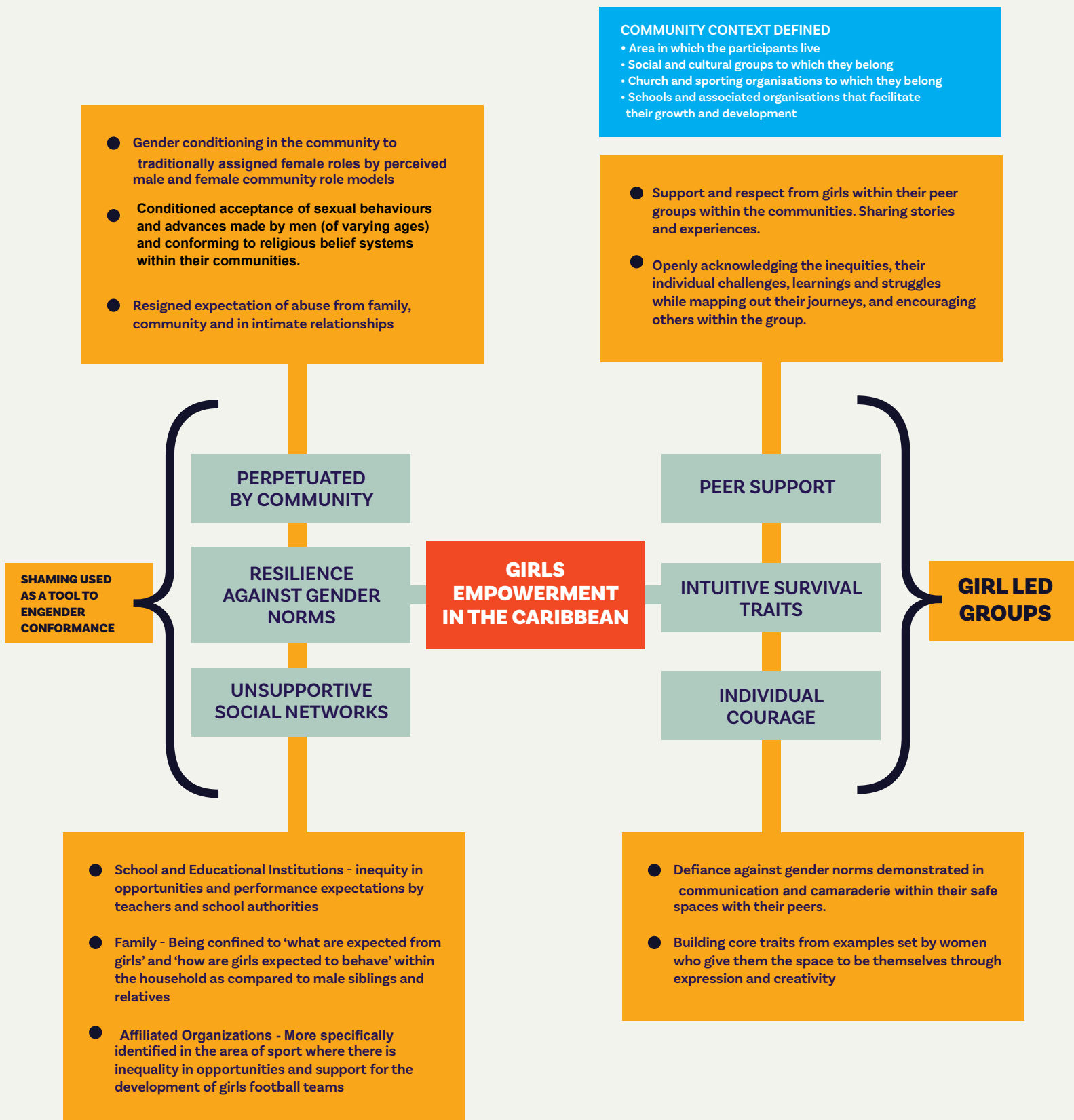


Global findings looking at the intersectionality between gender and empowerment found that social determinants such as ethnicity, religion, social class and economy exacerbate adverse outcomes among women and girls.<sup>6,7</sup> Data continues to support the correlation between women and girls' empowerment and economic growth, poverty reduction and enhanced human well-being.<sup>3</sup>

Girls' empowerment in the Caribbean is a multi-faceted evolving phenomenon that is distinct in how it is exhibited in the actions and the beliefs of the girls who participated in the study. Their empowerment came through their intuitive survival traits, their resistance to social conditioning, and their individual courage and willingness to express themselves as freely as they could within the discussion groups. In this regard, the approach towards female empowerment within Caribbean communities must be multidimensional with core understandings of community culture and dynamics. The two primary feeding factors of resilience and intuitive survival are informed by the unique experiences of how Caribbean communities have developed over centuries. Resilience is shown in the girls' ability to build relationships that encourage each other and help enhance and develop traits that create cohesiveness and loyalty for each other in their respective journeys.

The girls' use of personal creativity as a form of expression, not only for their experiences, but also as a tool for empowering the other girls in their peer groups is recognized. They identify that they have a unique form of agency that allows them to forge new narratives through expression - dance, poetry, spoken word, sport, engagement in nature, among others. The role of creative expression has created an outlet that encourages the formation of safe and healthy relationships with other girls with similar experiences. It gives them an opportunity to be their age without the responsibilities that comes from conforming to family expectations, and it helps in finding other female mentors within their communities who can support their aspirations and growth within a mentally and emotionally secure and available space.

FIGURE 7: GIRLS EMPOWERMENT IN THE CARIBBEAN





## STRATEGIES AND PROGRAMMING

There are different frameworks which seek to understand adolescent development and how learning takes place in a socio-cultural context<sup>9</sup>. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of human development can be used to determine how children and teens acquire cultural values, beliefs and problem-solving skills through community structures and intergenerational dialogue. His framework posits that community plays a central role in the teen's ability to "make meaning".

There is a major intrapersonal component of how youths perceive their relationships to their environments and their ability to make changes. This includes how their self-esteem informs their confidence to make a difference in their communities in positive ways.<sup>10</sup> Transgenerational gender norms had a huge impact on how the girls and young women are perceived by older women in their communities, as they exhibited values and beliefs which did not align with what the girls wanted for themselves.

Research findings have continued to emphasize the importance of youth-adult partnerships in community programmes and the involvement in visioning, programme planning, evaluation and continuous improvements.<sup>11</sup> To shape youth empowerment within the community, three components were identified: 1. Provide opportunities for youth to learn about themselves in relation to their communities; 2. Have an understanding of the resources needed to achieve goals; and 3. Have an understanding of how actions impact outcomes. (Eisman et. al., 2006).

Collaborative intergenerational relationships must be built and fostered where teen girls can interact with adults and gain skills for positive and healthy development, improving overall trust in community initiatives, academic confidence and improved wellbeing. This relationship requires malleable roles that would allow different generations to demonstrate and develop skills and talents while NOT replicating the power imbalance that can easily develop in relationships between adults and teens.<sup>12</sup>

This interwoven relationship between the family and community has historically been influenced by the needs, resources, cultural and traditional histories that have built cohesiveness and togetherness. It recognizes the interrelations between systems and lives and lends to the idea of social

identity which is a key component of girls' empowerment. Communities and community-based groups are an essential element in creating stronger and healthier mentoring relationships, building networks that center girls and enhance their wellbeing and setting foundations for leadership development.

The role of natural mentors within communities has been found to be beneficial for adolescents' overall health - mental, physical and emotional. It is important therefore that empowerment of girls takes <sup>3</sup>into consideration how the social relationships outside the family can impact identity outcomes. Drawing on community resources such as sports clubs, social and cultural clubs, religious institutions, etc., indicate that there is positivity in the interwoven relationships that support girls' psychological, physical and economic wellbeing outcomes.<sup>13</sup>

Community-based girl-led initiatives are therefore imperative in building programs that directly impact girls' empowerment journey. Young women and girls are eager participants in their lives and communities, actively contributing to their own growth and empowerment. The below illustration was adapted from Hart's ladder of young people participation (1992) to give a reference for how children and youth should be consulted and engaged with on projects. Regional Caribbean communities have been encouraging youth participation and with girl-led groups, this model can guide how girls are empowered, how they are valued and involved in creating the lives they envision.

FIGURE 8: GIRLS DEGREES OF PARTICIPATION

**DEGREES OF PARTICIPATION**



<b>GIRL LED</b>	Adolescent initiated shared decisions with adults	<b>8</b>	Adolescent use their ideas to create initiatives and invite adults to participate in the decision making
	Adolescent initiated and directed	<b>7</b>	Adolescent share ideas and make process decisions with option for adult engagement
	Adult-initiated shared decisions	<b>6</b>	Adults have the ideas and plan, but the adolescent is involved at every step including decision making
	Consulted and informed	<b>5</b>	Adults design and carry out projects, but adolescents are consulted, and opinions are seriously considered
<b>NON PARTICIPATION</b>	Assigned but informed	<b>4</b>	Adults make decision on what projects adolescents are participating in. Adolescents are informed and decide if they want to participate
	Tokenism	<b>3</b>	Adolescents are asked to share views but have little choice in the expression of their ideas
	Decoration	<b>2</b>	Adolescents take part in events without an understanding of the project or programme
	Manipulation	<b>1</b>	Adolescents do and say what adults suggest but have no understanding

*Adapted from Hart's (1992) ladder of young people's participation*

Based on the research findings, change strategies and programs will be built around the resilience capacity displayed by the young women and would focus on the possibilities for their lives. These would incorporate developing intentional, sacred spaces for sharing and learning, and practices which will enable them to imagine and create the world/community they want, to develop self-regulation, to mirror what they want to see and hold themselves accountable.

**TABLE 2: PROGRAMMING STRATEGIES**

PURPOSE OF PROGRAMME	DESCRIPTION	EXPECTED OUTCOMES/OUTPUTS
<p><b>Negotiating transformative reflection</b></p>	<p>Girl led Groups informed and supported by women of different generations based in and outside of the community working together to shift perceptions of traditional norms. Creating new narratives to support agency and female empowerment of youth in the community.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Peer mentorship groups led by girls with lived experiences, with guidance from selected women in and outside of the community.</li> <li>● Women's Circles - sharing experiences and learnings.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Intergenerational Community Interventions</b></p>	<p>Social Interventions with males and females to define/re-define cultural engagements; build life skills of empathy, listening, vulnerability, resilience; foster safe regenerative spaces that provide access to learning through the generations within the specific communities; and nurture youth resilience that empowers informed decision making and aligned actions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Grandmother's Bench - an integral and safe spot for individual sharing between generations.</li> <li>● Facilitated men and women's circles - to share experiences and ideas around the intersectionality between gender and violence.</li> <li>● Life skills youth programmes to develop empathy, listening, vulnerability and resilience between the sexes.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Navigating social networks and platforms</b></p>	<p>Entrepreneurship programs geared towards building developmental opportunities; Providing equitable support and access through Community based organizations, national groups and School.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Capacity to earn and maintain empowering and self-sustaining livelihoods.</li> <li>● An equitable relationship between national organizations that facilitate increased presence within these vulnerable, female communities.</li> <li>● Equal educational opportunities that are girl informed and are not informed by limiting social beliefs and norms.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Awareness and Wellbeing</b></p>	<p>Building on their individual survival instincts using tools that are nature based and life affirming. These tools cover mental health and wellness interventions; mind, body and spirit techniques; and creative expressions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Trauma informed workshops targeting girls and their communities.</li> <li>● Mind, body and spirit tools - yoga; meditation; mindfulness; breathing; nature immersion.</li> <li>● Creative expressions - dance; poetry; spoken word; theater.</li> <li>● Accessibility to sexual and health education, inclusive of nutrition and movement techniques.</li> <li>● NiNa App - Journaling and trauma informed resources.</li> </ul>

## CONCLUSION

Girls' empowerment in the region informs much of the current global findings in the intersectionality of Empowerment and Gender- Based Violence. This study generated outstanding concerns of the impact of transgenerational gender norms on opportunities and choices for young women in the region. There is the need for intensive and focused programming in the region which has to incorporate how the communities have fostered traditions and culture in their support systems and more so how girls are transforming themselves in the midst of their own experiences. Peer support groups are positively impacting resilience that leads to empowerment through dance, sporting clubs, theater, spoken work, creative activities and a plethora of creative, nature based and vocational activities. Recognizing their unique agency and transforming strategies to align with the regional culture and community needs, can lead to increasing girls' agency in the Caribbean region.

### PROJECT LIMITATIONS:

1. Shortened project time frame and changing deadline dates. The initial project timeline was given as 31st July to 30th October. This was further changed to 15th November then finally to 31st December.

2. Delayed response and feedback from the sponsoring agency on the submission made by the consultants . Initial feedback given by the sponsoring agency that Caribbean based UN networks were available to support the project and provide information on potential organizations that could be part of the research. Outcomes were limited with the time constraint, the research team facilitated the process through their own professional networks within the Caribbean.

## APPENDIX 1: REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

COUNTRY	NAME OF ORGANIZATION	GF	YF	RES	GBV	MP	MHW
	EVE FOR LIFE	✓			✓		✓
	BLUEFIELDS BAY COMMUNITY ORGANISATION				✓		
	THE ANGELICS LADIES SOCIETY OASIS AND HUB	✓					
<b>JAMAICA</b>	WOMEN'S CENTER OF JAMAICA FEDERATION	✓				✓	✓
	GOVERNMENT OF SKN, NEW HORIZONS REHABILITATION CENTER		✓	✓			✓
	UNICEF ST KITTS AND NEVIS		✓		✓		
<b>ST KITTS AND NEVIS</b>	GENDER DIVISION, NEVIS		✓	✓			✓
	EMPOWERING OUR WOMEN	✓			✓		✓
	THE NEW BEGINNINGS TRANSIT HOME		✓	✓			✓
	UPTON GARDENS GIRLS CENTRE				✓	✓	✓
<b>ST LUCIA</b>	GIRLS OF A FEATHER	✓			✓	✓	
	REDROOTS		✓		✓		✓
	SOROPTIMIST INTERNATIONAL	✓			✓	✓	✓
	CIWIL, ST VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES	✓			✓	✓	
	GIRL GUIDES ASSOCIATION	✓				✓	✓
<b>ST VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES</b>	MARION HOUS						
	FUNTOPIA		✓			✓	✓
<b>SINT MAARTEN</b>	NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ARTS		✓				✓
	CONFLICT WOMEN	✓			✓	✓	✓
	NINA YOUNG WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP PROGRAMME	✓			✓	✓	✓
	WINAD - WOMEN'S INSTITUTE FOR ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
	RYU DAN EMPOWERMENT FOUNDATION	✓			✓	✓	✓
	PRINCES ELIZABETH SPECIAL SCHOOL		✓				✓
<b>TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO</b>	POINT FORTIN PIONEERS GIRLS FOOTBALL TEAM	✓				✓	

## KEY

Gender Focused  
(girls and young women)Youth focused  
(all sexes)

Residential

Focused on GBV

Mentorship  
ProgrammingMental Health  
and Wellness  
Programming

## About Ryu Dan Empowerment Foundation (RDEF)

Formerly known as Ryu Dan Dojo, RDEF is a multicultural, community-based non-governmental organization incorporated as a Non-Profit Organization under the Companies Act (1995) in 2013. It started as a martial arts school in 2012 to fill a void left by the passing of Martial Arts Instructor Shihan Carlyle Thorne in the community of Enterprise, Trinidad and Tobago.

The Foundation is dedicated to supporting the social, educational and physical development of all and is guided by its Seven Pillars of Community Development. RDEF's "holistic development" approach provides valuable life skills and personal development to its community. Its programmes focus not only on youth development through martial arts but also use the sport as a vehicle for change to address many challenges faced by the Trinidad and Tobago community.

The Girls Say Yes programme started in June 2022 with multifaceted training and mindset remodelling, "It was designed to increase our pool of Peace Ambassadors amongst the youths from both sides of the warring divide [in the area of Enterprise, Chaguanas]. After six months, the youth participants understood that a peaceful coexistence is possible, and that their deportment and positive messages can foster community harmony and peace."

The participants, which included mostly girls and women, participated in netball, self-development sessions and art therapy workshops/social media messaging.

*(Information provided by the Foundation)*

## About WINAD

WINAD offers an Inter-generational Leadership Programme which is designed to empower girls through leadership development, to foster lifetime skill sets and strategies of critical analysis and problem solving and to impact girls' personal career trajectories. It provides tools to help girls understand and capitalize on their strengths, to make positive life choices, to achieve academic success, and overcoming the barriers of sexism.

The programme facilitates family involvement and assists girls to negotiate their multiple roles, cultures and contexts. It offers a safe place to build on strengths of family, if needed, mediate family trauma and supports and celebrates girls' responsibilities to herself and her family in a way that will allow girls to be respected by themselves, their parents and families. Central to the programme is the creation of a safe space. This is an environment where girls feel free to express themselves and receive affirmation. It is more than a place without violence, and can include space to resolve conflict productively.

There is a deliberate strategy to build sisterhood among girls and women, with the programs supporting parents and preparing girls to lead and to become change agents and advocates in their communities. Girls are paired with an adult woman whose life work is around social justice. Girls are encouraged to make recommendations around the programme, embracing the awareness that there are no limitations, that they can change things.

*(Information provided by WINAD)*

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Kharas, Homi (2007). *Trends and Issues in Development Aid*. Washington DC: Wolfensohn Center for Development, Brookings Institution.
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