

research snapshot

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Domestic Violence Is Widespread in Guyana

What is this research about?

Domestic violence is an issue of increasing global concern. In other words, it does not just cause suffering in the lives of individual women. It blocks women's access to human rights and prevents them from playing a larger role in the development of society. In the early 1990s, domestic violence emerged as probably the most important item on the agenda of many women's organizations in the Global South. And yet a lack of knowledge continues to hamper our understanding of this practice. Despite its wide and damaging influence, geography researchers have not focused much on domestic violence, especially in Guyana and the broader Caribbean.

What did the researcher do?

Working with the women's organization Red Thread, researchers at York University set out to study the violence which Guyanese women experience. The researchers surveyed 360 women in the capital city of Georgetown. They also conducted smaller focus groups. By employing members of the Research Team of the Red Thread Women's Development Programme, this research brought together women from different countries and backgrounds to share skills and develop new approaches to understanding domestic violence.

What you need to know:

Domestic violence is a widespread part of everyday life in Guyana. Although the vast majority of abusers are men, women also engage in violence, especially when they have power over vulnerable people such as children and the elderly. The relationships of power that cause domestic violence are complex.

What did the researcher find?

The researchers found that domestic violence is a widespread part of everyday life in Guyana. One in four women has experienced physical abuse and one in eight has suffered rape or some form of sexual violence. Over 80% of women define 'domestic violence' as everyday, physically violent behaviour (such as fighting, beating, or hitting) while 50% define domestic violence as verbally abusive behaviour (such as curses, threats, and humiliation). Domestic violence seems to be very common in Guyana. Over 80% of women say that they have experienced physical abuse such as licks, slaps, and beating. In 80% of cases of child abuse, the child's mother or other female relative inflicts the abuse. However, the male relatives are almost always responsible for sexual abuse. Four out of five women who have experienced domestic violence have never reported their case to the police. Two thirds have no knowledge of the Domestic Violence Act.

The researchers found that a majority of Guyanese women discipline their children with physical violence. The most common form of discipline consists of hitting, slapping, and/or lashing. In other words, while most domestic violence is caused by men, the power relations involved in violence are complex. Just like men, women are capable of inflicting violence on people over whom they have control, such as children and elderly people.

How can you use this research?

This research will help community groups and policymakers, primarily within the Caribbean, to better understand domestic violence – and to create programs and policies which will help to reduce it. The results have already been widely reported within Guyana by Red Thread. Moreover, Red Thread has used the results to apply for further funding from UNICEF and UNIFEM to do community education on issues of domestic violence. They have also used the results to conduct further historical research on racialised violence in the country.

About the Researcher

Dr. Linda Peake is Director, Centre for Feminist Research (CFR), York University. This Research Snapshot is from her study, "Racialised Bodies and Human Rights: A Study of Domestic Violence in Guyana." The results from this study are published in a variety of scholarly journals as well as contributing to associated publications such as the book *Mapping Gender, Making Politics: Feminist Perspectives on Political Geography*. The book was awarded the Julian Minghi Outstanding Research Award from the Political Geography Study Group of the Association of American Geographers.

lpeake@yorku.ca

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kmbunit@yorku.ca

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