

Family relationships, domestic violence and child maltreatment in the Caribbean Netherlands

Summary

Bonaire

Saba

Sint Eustatius

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Foreword

The results of the research project focused on *family relationships, domestic violence and child maltreatment in the Caribbean Netherlands* are presented in three reports specifically describing and analysing the results for each of the three islands of the Caribbean Netherlands, Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius. This summary presents background information and the key findings of the overall project. It should be read together with the three separate reports, as the findings as well as the recommendations are tailored to the specific context of each individual island. In addition, there are some conclusions and recommendations that are relevant for all three islands and would ideally be addressed by the Public Entities and other stakeholders together.

The research team would like to thank Carmen Grefte and Jantine Homan of the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports for their trust and support during the research project. In addition the team expresses its gratitude to all the professionals, community members and colleagues who participates in the research in one or the other way (full lists are provided in the separate reports). A special thank you goes to the members of the sounding boards of Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius.

The research team hopes that the study's findings will assist the three islands to improve their strategies and programmes to prevent domestic violence and child maltreatment and effectively protect its citizens, while building on the various strengths of the communities of Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius. The team was impressed by the commitment and dedication of professionals and community members who were met during their visits to the islands and the insights of participants in the interviews and focus groups. The team would like to encourage the Dutch government to support the Public Entities, professionals and communities in their efforts to fully respect, protect and fulfil the rights of its community members in accordance with international human and children's rights in a way that connects to and respects local realities, cultures and customs.

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Background

On 11 May 2011, the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) was passed. The Istanbul Convention is a human rights treaty of the Council of Europe opposing violence against women and domestic violence. It aims to prevent violence, foster victim protection and end the impunity of perpetrators. For the European Netherlands, the Convention has come into effect on March 1, 2016. At that time, the Convention was not put into effect for the Caribbean Netherlands because the approach to violence against women, domestic violence and child maltreatment did not meet the requirements set out in the Convention. Currently, the Dutch government aims to the Istanbul Convention put it into effect in the Caribbean Netherlands in the near future (State Secretary for Health, Welfare and Sports 2022a). This goal is closely related to the ambition to implement the rights of the child in the Caribbean Netherlands, as laid down in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which is applicable to Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius, as special municipalities of the Netherlands.



To further develop policies regarding domestic violence and child maltreatment in the Caribbean Netherlands, the program directorate *Zorg en Jeugd Caribisch Nederland (ZJCN)* of the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport commissioned a baseline assessment of the attitudes of residents of the Caribbean Netherlands regarding the use of violence in parenting and in family and partner relationships. The Ministry expected this baseline study to deliver tangible suggestions for policy reform and professional practice concerning domestic violence and child maltreatment on Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius. In addition, the Ministry's overarching goal in commissioning this research is to provide a basis for follow up measurements every five years. This research is a response to the absence of structural and periodic collection of disaggregated data on domestic violence and child maltreatment, one of the obligations under the Istanbul Convention and the CRC (State Secretary for Health, Welfare and Sports 2022a, p. 2 and 3 with reference to art. 11 of the Istanbul Convention; see also UNICEF 2019).

The main research question of this study was:

**What are the attitudes
of residents of the Caribbean
Netherlands regarding parenting
children and in particular the
use of violence in childrearing
or in family and partner
relationships?**

The research was conducted by Leiden University, in collaboration with the University of Curaçao and UNICEF the Netherlands. The research team emphasized the importance of:

1. investigating not just problems in family relationships, but also strengths and sources of resilience; and
2. including the perspective of young people; and
3. connecting the Istanbul Convention with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; and
4. conducting the research in a culturally sensitive manner; and
5. taking into account gender-related issues; and
6. applying a mixed-methods approach that will yield for both quantitative and qualitative insights.

Throughout the study, the research team was supported by sounding boards on each of the islands with local stakeholders (i.e. professionals and members of the community).

Methods

The project started with a visit of members of the research team to each of the islands in February 2023 (Saba and Sint Eustatius) and March 2023 (Bonaire). More information on the details of these visits can be found in the separate research reports. Although these visits were not originally envisioned as sources of data, they turned out to be immensely helpful in understanding the local context, designing culturally sensitive measures, and interpreting the data.

In addition to the information obtained during the team visits to the islands, the central data for this research were collected through four methods:

1. desk research; and
2. a quantitative online survey; and
3. qualitative phone interviews; and
4. qualitative focus group interviews.



1. Desk research:

Analysis of the legal and policy context of family relationships and parenting in the Caribbean Netherlands and on each of the respective islands, as well as relevant academic literature on the topics of family and partner relations, parenting and parenting styles, domestic violence and child maltreatment, and human rights, with a special focus on women's and children's rights.

2. Quantitative online survey:

This survey was conducted among the adult population on the islands, in the period 1 June and 1 October 2023. The survey was available in English, Dutch and Papiamentu and advertised through Facebook, radio. In addition, flyers were distributed with a QR code at various locations on the islands (such as local supermarkets). The survey consisted of three parts as described below.

- **Part 1: What is your impression of parents/ caregivers in your surroundings on <island>?**

You can answer the questions below on a scale from 0 to 10. 0 = not at all true for parents on <island>; 10 = very true for (almost) all parents on <island>.

- » Do parents: give love, do fun things, spend quality time, hit children (with bruises), yell/scream, have enough money, spend money on children, protect against sexual abuse, listen to feelings, involve in decisions, argue in front of, provide physical care?

- **Part 2: Are there differences in how fathers/ mothers parent boys/girls, younger/older children?**

If yes: please explain.

- **Part 3: What is your impression of men and women in family and partner relationships in your surroundings on <island>?**

You can answer the questions below on a scale from 0 to 10. 0 = not at all true for men/women on <island>; 10 = very true for (almost) all men/women on <island>.

- » Do men/women do the following with family: spend quality time, give advice, help financially, take seriously, abuse financially, scream/yell, show physical violence?
- » Do men/women do the following with their partners: spend quality time, give advice, help financially, take seriously, abuse financially, scream/yell, show physical violence?

- **Part 4: Report card grades for family relationships, partner relationships, and parenting on <island>.**

- **Part 5: Background information:**

gender, age, education, income, place of birth, residence on <eiland>, people in household.

3. Qualitative phone interviews:

Individual interviews by telephone with adults, young people aged 16-19 years, and professionals were conducted by Merel Griffith-Lendering, Judi Mesman, Elly Hellings, Erel Everits and Naphtaly Boerleider in Dutch, English, or Papiamentu in the period between 1 April and 1 September 2023. Participants were recruited through local stakeholders of the sounding boards on each of the islands.

The interviews consisted of six parts:

- **Part 1:** What do you find important in parenting and family relationships?
- **Part 2:** What is going well in parenting and family relationships on <island>?
- **Part 3:** What is going less well in parenting and family relationships on <island>?
- **Part 4:** How would you define domestic violence? How would you define child maltreatment?
- **Part 5:** Do families on <island> have financial problems? If yes: why? And how does this influence family relationships and parenting?
- **Part 6:** What do you know about support services on <island>? Would you recommend those services? Do you use them yourself?

4. Qualitative focus group interviews:

On each of the islands focus groups interviews with adults, young people aged 16-19 years, and professionals were held by Merel Griffith-Lendering and Tamara Salsbach in Dutch, English, or Papiamentu, between 1 August and 1 October 2023. Participants were recruited through local stakeholders of the sounding boards. The focus group interviews consisted of four parts:

- **Part 1:** Children on <island> are often left alone at home when parents work. What could be a solution to this situation?
- **Part 2:** Family networks are important, but there are sometimes issues with boundaries. How to clearly divide responsibilities?
- **Part 3:** Domestic violence and child maltreatment: what is needed to prevent these things on < island>?
- **Part 4:** There are support services on <island>. How to make them known, accessible, and trustworthy?

The study has been approved by the Committee Ethics and Data of Leiden Law School, Leiden University, the Netherlands.

Sample and strengths of research

	Bonaire	Sint Eustatius	Saba
Survey	263	94	47
Interviews Adults	13	14	6
Interviews Youth	4	5	4
Interviews Professionals	10	10	9
Focus group Adults	6	7	3
Focus group Youth	4	2	9
Focus group Professionals	3	5	3
Total	303	137	81

The study managed to engage more than 500 residents of the Caribbean Netherlands, with around 2-3% of the total adult population of each of the islands participating in the survey. For comparison: such a response rate would amount to between 300 and 500 thousand participants in the Netherlands.

Another strength of the study is the inclusion of various groups in the Caribbean Netherlands, engaging professionals, adults and youth (16+) in all stages of the project. The focus on not just problems, but also strengths of family life on the three islands is also a strong aspect of the study, because it contextualizes the results and provides starting points for suggesting improvements that fit with the local context. The specific attention for gender issues was also valuable, as can be seen in the results regarding differences between the roles of men and women in families that were found in many of the areas covered in this study.

Limitations of the study

There are also some limitations to the study, primarily to do with the nature of the samples. As can be seen in the separate reports for the three islands, the participants were primarily female and were generally socio-economically better off than the general population of the islands. The stark overrepresentation of women in each of the project phases does mirror the general picture from the online survey and the interviews that women are the ones who take on the lion share of family care responsibilities. Interestingly though, the men who did participate in the survey agreed that it is the women who bear most of the responsibilities in families.

The underrepresentation of people from more challenging socio-economic backgrounds is a common theme in the majority of this type of research. It is notoriously difficult to engage these groups in research. However, the individual interviews and focus groups did make up for this to some extent, as these included more socio-economically diverse samples than the survey. Nevertheless, any future studies, as well as plans to develop and implement policies would be well advised to specifically engage men and people from lower income and education groups to make sure their voices are represented.

Although the sample size of the survey on the three islands constitutes a very good response rate for a relatively small-island population, the numbers on Saba and Sint Eustatius were sometimes too small for statistical analyses. This lack of statistical power meant that it was not possible to test whether men and women gave different answers. This was especially relevant when looking at the questions concerning gender. Although the general answer patterns were the same for male and female participants, this comparison could not be tested statistically.

Finally, the study has not specifically focused on the issue of sexual abuse. This issue does, however, deserve attention in future studies.



Legal and policy context

Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius are 'special municipalities' of the country the Netherlands, with its capital in The Hague. The three islands forms part of the 'Caribbean Netherlands' (Art. 132a of the Dutch Constitution).

The Public Entities of Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius govern the islands and report to the Dutch government in the capital. Some of the governmental tasks are carried out by the National Office of the Caribbean Netherlands ('Rijksdienst Caribisch Nederland') including taxation, policing, immigration, health, education and social security (see e.g. <https://bonairegov.com/bestuur-organisatie>). As part of the Caribbean Netherlands, all three islands fall under Dutch law. Yet, some laws have been or are in the process of being adjusted to the Caribbean context (Van Rijn 2022, p. 518). This for example concerns the Civil Code for Caribbean Netherlands ('Burgerlijk Wetboek BES') and the Criminal Code for the Caribbean Netherlands ('Wetboek van Strafrecht BES'). The Dutch Constitution contains a 'differentiation clause', which allows for differentiation between the European part and the Caribbean parts of the country,

because of significant geographical, cultural and economic differences (art. 132a (4) of the Dutch Constitution). The practical implications of this clause are not clear and it has been argued that it has not been favorable to the Caribbean Netherlands, for example in the context of social security and an adequate standard of living (Van Rijn 2022, p. 519-521; Oostindie & Veenendaal, 2022, p. 165).

With respect to domestic violence and child maltreatment, the Civil Code for the Caribbean Netherlands was changed on the 1st of January 2022, in order to include a prohibition of violence against children in the upbringing (art. 1:247 (2) BW BES). Domestic violence and violence against women is protected under article 313ff of the Criminal Code for the Caribbean Netherlands. Moreover, there is a policy basis concerning family relationships (incl. partner relationships), domestic violence and child maltreatment, which recognizes international legal requirements flowing from the CRC, the Istanbul Convention and related international standards (e.g. European Convention of Human Rights). Local policies and professional practices on Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius find their basis in domestic legislation and the Policy Agreement concerning Domestic Violence and Child Maltreatment for the Caribbean Netherlands 2021-2024 ('Bestuursakkoord').



The Policy Agreement sets the following priorities (State Secretary for Health, Welfare and Sports 2022a):

- Prevention focused on awareness and information on the theme of domestic violence and child maltreatment;
- Professional development of the professionals involved on the islands;
- Strengthening assistance and cooperation in support services, including safe shelter for victims of domestic violence and child maltreatment and cooperation between healthcare, police and justice partners to break the cycle of violence for victims and perpetrators;
- A well-functioning, accessible reporting structure for professionals and citizens to obtain advice about and report (suspected) situations of domestic violence and child maltreatment;
- A legal framework in which existing legislation and regulations in the Caribbean Netherlands regarding the approach to domestic violence and child abuse are supplemented where necessary to promote and support the above priorities.

As mentioned earlier the CRC is applicable to Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius, and the Istanbul Convention is likely to take effect for the Caribbean Netherlands in the near future (State Secretary for Health, Welfare and Sports 2022a). The priorities set in the Policy Agreement resonate with the most recent concluding observations and recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC Committee¹).

In response to the most recent periodic report of the Kingdom of the Netherlands on the implementation of the CRC, the CRC Committee expressed its concerns regarding:

- The existing disparities within the Kingdom of the Netherlands between the countries and the Caribbean Netherlands regarding children's access to health and youth services, education, social assistance and support in response to child abuse and neglect (CRC Committee 2022, para. 15 (a));
- The lack of legislative measures to protect children from abuse, domestic violence and corporal punishment in Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius, bearing in mind the 'high prevalence of violence against children (...) in the State party' (CRC Committee 2022, para. 21).

¹ *The CRC Committee monitors the implementation of the CRC in the Kingdom of the Netherlands and all other States Parties, periodically (see art. 43 CRC).*

The CRC Committee subsequently recommended the Dutch government:

- To set up a child protection infrastructure (legislative and administrative matters) to better protect the rights and interests of children (CRC Committee 2022, para. 22(b));
- To provide for 'explicit prohibition of corporal punishment by law in alternative care settings, day care and schools' in the Caribbean Netherlands (CRC Committee 2022, para. 22(g));

- To 'strengthen awareness-raising campaigns aimed at promoting positive, non-violent and participatory forms of child-rearing and discipline and underscoring the adverse consequences of corporal punishment' (CRC Committee 2022, para. 22(g)).

In response to the CRC Committee's recommendations, the Dutch government has confirmed its commitment to promote positive, non-violent and participatory forms of child rearing in the Caribbean Netherlands. More specifically it announced further legislative guidance on the matter, the promotion of accessible support services for children and the implementation of a protection code, as part of the strategy concerning the prevention of violence against children (State Secretary of Health, Welfare and Sports, 2022b, p. 15-16). In addition, UNICEF has developed a new policy plan '*Kinderen in hun kracht. Kinderrechten in Caribisch Nederland*', in partnership with the Public Entities of Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius and the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, to support the Islands in this regard.

This program runs from 2023 until 2025 and focuses on:

- Positive parenting;
- Social, emotional resilience and youth skills;
- Participation;
- Child protection: signaling, reporting and follow up ('signaleren, melden en opvolgen');
- Child poverty;
- Linking and learning.

What does the CRC stand for?

- The rights and freedoms of the child must be respected, protected and fulfilled;
- A child is defined as 'every human being below the age of eighteen years' (art. 1 CRC);
- Each child has to be protected against discrimination or exclusion (art. 2 CRC);
- The best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children (art. 3 (1) CRC);
- The right to life, survival and development of every child must be safeguarded (art. 6 CRC);
- A child has the right to be heard in all matters affecting the child and the child's views must be taken seriously, which has implications for the development of laws and policies and for decision-making at an individual level (art. 12 CRC).

What about the CRC and family relationships?

- Each child should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding, which is considered essential for the child's full and harmonious development (preamble of the CRC);
- The state should support parents in their role as primary caregivers (art. 18 (1) CRC), which includes the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children (art. 18 (2) CRC; see also art. 3 (3) CRC), and material assistance and support programs, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing (art. 27 (3) CRC);
- Every child has the right to be protected against all forms of violence and the state must take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures (art. 19 CRC).

What does the Istanbul Convention stand for?

- Official name: Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence
- The Istanbul Convention aims to eliminate violence against women and the protection of women against all forms of violence (art. 1(a)).
- It expects States Parties 'take the necessary legislative and other measures to promote and protect the right for everyone, particularly women, to live free from violence in both the public and the private sphere' (art. 4 (1)).

More specifically the Istanbul Convention aims to:

- Ensure prevention of domestic violence and violence against women by:
 - Changing 'social and cultural patterns of behavior of women and men with a view to eradicating prejudices, customs, traditions and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority of women or on stereotyped roles for women and men' (art. 12 (1) and
 - By taking legislative and other measures to prevent all forms of violence (art. 13 (2)).
 - Other measures include (art. 13-17):
 - Awareness raising;
 - Education;
 - Training of professionals;
 - Preventive interventions and treatment programs;
 - Participation of the private sector and the media.
- Ensure the protection of victims from further acts of violence through legislation and other measures, including information, support and specialist services, individual remedies, support to child witnesses and victims of sexual violence (see also art. 56), reporting mechanisms, and protective measures, including telephone helplines and shelters (art. 18ff);
- Ensure adequate and speedy investigation and prosecution of all forms of violence through legislative and other measures (art. 49ff); and
- Ensure comprehensive and coordinated policies and data collection (art. 7ff; Niemi et al. 2020, p. 8-9).

Findings and Recommendations

The study's findings and recommendations are divided into six specific areas of strengths and challenges concerning families on Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius.

- **Part 1:** The overall evaluation and strengths of family life on the islands;
- **Part 2:** The financial context of family life on the islands;
- **Part 3:** Maltreatment in family life on the islands;
- **Part 4:** Gender inequalities on the islands;
- **Part 5:** Changing times on the islands;
- **Part 6:** Support services on the islands.

Parts 1 to 5 concern the substantive strengths and challenges concerning families (including partner relationships, parent-child relationships, and relationships of adults with the older generation), whereas part 6 focuses on the role of support services in addressing the strengths and challenges. Although many findings were very similar across the three islands, the three separate reports include voices of local participants (through citations) and take note of local circumstances that are important to acknowledge. The separate reports are intended to do justice to such local nuances, which is crucial for local buy-in regarding implementation of the recommendations. The current summary includes the recommendations that are applicable to Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius, while noting differences between islands where necessary.



Part 1 – Overall evaluation and strengths of family life on the islands

Survey participants were asked to give a 'report card grade' to the quality of family relationships, partner relationships and parenting. Overall the respondents' average grades for the quality of family relationships, partner relationships, and parenting on the islands is very close to 6 out of 10 (just sufficient). Very few participants were (very) negative (grade 4 or lower) about the quality of family relationships, partner relationships, and parenting. A notable group of about a third of participants was (very) positive (grade 7 and higher) about the quality of family relationships, partner relationships, and parenting. Most participants chose a grade 5 or 6 for the three different domains of family life. This means that most of them see a mix of positive and negative aspects. There were no significant differences between the three islands in these grades, although it has to be noted that the relatively small samples on Saba and Sint Eustatius limited the statistical power of such comparisons.

Strengths of family life

Families in the Caribbean Netherlands are seen as warm and loving and can rely on a network of close (extended) family who take care of each other in a context of a safe small island community. Parents show love to their children and provide them with the necessary physical care. Yet, participants noticed some challenges in family life on the islands as well. They note that women are more involved than men in family life and raising children, and that parents often do not have enough time to spend it with their children and have a listening ear.

The research team noticed during its visit to the islands that parents were criticized by professionals for being absent, difficult to reach, not engaged, passive (i.e. waiting for the government or schools to provide (financial) help instead of feeling empowered to address challenges themselves) or even irresponsible. The researchers also met professionals who portrayed parents differently. Although the small-island context also comes with challenges, the strength of the island community is clearly something to build on.

Recommendation 1:
Make use of the strong warm bonds within families on the islands and the strength of the island communities to address the challenges in family life identified in this study.

It is important to invest in community engagement as a means to empower communities, community leaders and community organizations to play a role in improving family life and protecting family member against domestic violence and child maltreatment (UNICEF 2020). This starts with emphasizing that children, parents, the elderly and other community members essentially care about good family relationships and deserve to be respected in their role within families and within the wider community.

More specifically, it is recommended to:

1. Recognize communities as meaningful stakeholders in policy reform and make sure that community members know and claim their rights;
2. Ensure participation without exclusion or discrimination, bearing in mind power inequalities;
3. Align policies, programs and projects with community needs, values and cultures, while recognizing national and international laws and policies;
4. Involve communities in the monitoring and evaluation of policies, programs and projects that impact them;
5. Make sure that local communities are in the lead concerning the development of policies, programs and projects, while the Government of the Netherlands plays a supportive role and local values and cultures are respected.

Target group: Public Entity of each island, in close collaboration with community stakeholders (e.g. schools).

Part 2 – The financial context of family life on the islands

Many families on the islands struggle financially. Overall, there seems to be an imbalance between wages and the cost of living for families. Although helping family members financially is very common on each of the islands, there are also concerns about people taking advantage of family members when it comes to finances. It therefore seems that the financial struggles on the islands can lead to both supportive actions (helping) and abusive actions (taking advantage).

The literature shows that financial worries and poverty are strong predictors of many different problems in families, including violence in general and violence against women in particular (Stephenson, 2021). When it comes to raising children, most families on each of the island do not always have enough money to give their children what they need, including healthy food.

There are also concerns about budgeting skills. People do not always spend the money they have wisely, which impacts their financial room for providing basic needs to their children. Previous studies and reports concerning the Caribbean Netherlands have also pointed at the impact of financial concerns and poverty on family relationships (Nationale Ombudsman 2020), and more specifically on the prevalence of domestic violence and/or child maltreatment (Kloosterboer, 2013; De Bruijn, Kriek & De Vaan, 2014; UNICEF, 2019; Kinderombudsman, 2021; CRC Committee 2022). All policies that contribute to poverty relief will improve the general quality of life, which in turn will benefit overall family functioning (Jones et al., 2017). Unconditional cash transfers can be beneficial to poverty reduction, development of community and autonomy and dignity of community members (Peterman, Yablonski & Daidone, 2017). The recently announced increase of the social minimum in the Caribbean Netherlands could have a positive impact on the financial situation and wellbeing of families on the islands.

Recommendation 2: Invest in the financial health of the islands, including attention to education and employment opportunities, and promoting budgeting skills.

It is recommended to closely monitor the impact of the recently announced increase of the social minimum. Moreover, the Public Entity of each island should consider implementing additional measures (e.g. specific cash transfer programs) where needed to provide relief for families with persistent financial struggles. It is important to continue to invest in employment and appropriate wages, also in light of the imbalance between income and cost of living. It is also recommended to invest in training for local people in order for them to qualify for work on the islands. Because of the small scale of the island, online international options might be helpful. More generally, budgeting skills training should be provided in schools and community centers. Finally, special attention should be paid to the issue of financial abuse of the older generation within families; increasing financial security and financial skills may be significant first steps.

Target group: Public Entity of each island, in close collaboration with community groups and key stakeholders.

Part 3 – Maltreatment in family life on the islands

Legal context

This part concerns maltreatment in family relations (incl. partner relations), which is relevant to consider in addition to the strengths of the community and the precarious financial context of family life on each of the islands. The Istanbul Convention, the CRC and legislation in the Caribbean Netherlands reject domestic violence and violence against children. This finds support in the case law of the European Court of Human Rights and related standards from the Council of Europe (see preamble of the Istanbul Convention; Niemi et al. 2020, p. 4-5). Under international law, *domestic violence* includes 'all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence that occur within the family or domestic unit or between former or current spouses or partners, whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim' (art. 3 (b) Istanbul Convention). It enshrines violence against women and girls (art. 3 (a), (d) and (f) Istanbul Convention). *Violence against children* includes 'all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse' (art. 19 CRC) and also encompasses exposure to domestic violence (CRC Committee, 2011).

These international definitions resonates with the relevant legal definitions under Dutch law. Child maltreatment (*kindermishandeling*) is 'elke vorm van voor een minderjarige bedreigende of gewelddadige interactie van fysieke, psychische of seksuele aard, die de ouders of andere personen ten opzichte van wie de minderjarige in een relatie van afhankelijkheid of van onvrijheid staat, actief of passief opdringen, waardoor ernstige schade wordt berokkend of dreigt te worden berokkend aan de minderjarige in de vorm van fysiek of psychisch letsel' (art. 1.1.1 (1) Wet maatschappelijke ondersteuning 2015). Domestic violence (*huiselijk geweld*) concerns 'lichamelijk, geestelijk of seksueel geweld of bedreiging daarmee door iemand uit de huiselijke kring' (art. 1.1.1 (1) Wet maatschappelijke ondersteuning 2015), and the term 'domestic' (*huiselijke kring*) encompasses 'een familielid, een huisgenoot, de echtgenoot of voormalig echtgenoot of een mantelzorger' (Ibid.).

According to the State Secretary of Health, Welfare and Sports the term 'domestic violence' does not really fit the Caribbean context, where 'domestic' includes a much wider range of community members, in addition to immediate family members (State Secretary for Health, Welfare and Sports 2022a, p. 2). The recently adopted special Governmental Decree (*Algemene Maatregel van Bestuur*) provide rules concerning domestic violence and child maltreatment in the context of the Caribbean Netherlands (*Besluit maatschappelijke ondersteuning en bestrijding huiselijk geweld en kindermishandeling* BES;

State Secretary of Health, Welfare and Sports 2023). It is expected to enter into force on the 1 July 2024 and as far as domestic violence and child maltreatment is concerned, it provide a broader definition of domestic (*huiselijke kring*): 'de partner of voormalige partner, een familielid, een huisgenoot of een persoon die regelmatig de woning bezoekt'.

This study refers to violence and maltreatment interchangeably. It also uses the terms domestic violence, violence against children or child maltreatment. Unless specified, these terms refer to all kinds of forms of violence, including physical, emotional and sexual maltreatment or abuse, neglect and witnessing violence, among others. In the interviews, participants were invited to define 'maltreatment' and reflect on it, also in light of the local, cultural context of the different islands. In both the survey and the interviews, participants were asked about their perceptions concerning maltreatment and violence. A wide range of forms of maltreatment were identified: between partners, against the elderly and between parents and children. This also includes forms of emotional and physical violence. In the interviews participants generally defined domestic violence and child maltreatment according to international legal norms, including physical and emotional abuse and neglect in their descriptions. This shows general awareness of international definitions, which are incorporated in domestic laws and policies, even if the local reality is different.

Findings

According to this study, domestic violence in the form of verbal abuse is seen as quite common on the islands. Physical abuse seems far less common, but is still a concern, especially in partner relationships. Child maltreatment in the form of verbal abuse or hitting is seen as quite common. Hitting children is a culturally accepted part of regular discipline. The pattern of quite harsh parenting and not so much room for children to express their opinions points towards a generally authoritarian parenting style as opposed to a more authoritative parenting style that favors non-violent communication with room for children's voices (Roopnarine & Jin, 2016). This finding is consistent with research showing that authoritarian parenting and domestic violence are widespread in the Caribbean region (Bissessar & Huggins, 2022; Fry et al., 2021). Scholars have noted that the historical background of the wider region can explain some of these patterns (e.g., Brereton, 2010).

Participants to this study did show that they are aware of other parenting norms in the Netherlands and elsewhere, in relation to international children's rights and legislation in the Caribbean Netherlands. They are also generally able to describe domestic violence and child maltreatment in those terms. Regarding Bonaire, there have been discussions about the most appropriate terms to use when referring to issues of abuse and maltreatment in Papiamentu (see the report on Bonaire).

There appears to be growing support for non-violent alternatives and better parent-child and family communication with more room for children to voice their opinions. However, it is seen as a challenge to put this development into practice because it contrasts with traditional and more authoritarian Caribbean parenting. Previous reports on domestic violence and/or child maltreatment have underscored the importance of awareness raising as part of a comprehensive strategy to address and prevent violence in family relations (Kloosterboer, 2013; De Bruijn, Kriek & De Vaan, 2014; UNICEF, 2019).

Although the survey and interviews did not explicitly address alcohol and drug abuse, this topic did come up during the conversations with professionals and adults, specifically on Saba and Bonaire, as an important factor in problematic communication in the family context. Professionals and adults suggested to pay more attention to raising awareness about the dangers of alcohol and drugs for both adults and youth, and to more consistently enforce the alcohol ban for youth. Although this topic was not prominent in conversations with people on Sint Eustatius, it is quite possible that these concerns are relevant there as well.

“All parents want what’s best for their children but they don’t know how to get there.

They need guidance.”

(professional)

Recommendation 3: **Confirm norms concerning non-violent parenting and family communication on the islands.**

Based on the study's findings on all three islands as well as the relevant legal framework and literature, it is recommended to confirm the norm that all forms of violence against women, children and anyone else in the domestic environment and wider community are unjustifiable and need to be prevented.

More specifically, it is recommended to:

- Carry out this norm in culturally appropriate public awareness campaigns on the islands in offline and online form;
- Repeat and reconfirm this norm in all relevant policies, protocols, working methods, trainings and other measures to implement laws and policies;
- Invite community role models and influencers from each of the islands to support the norm confirmation and public campaigning around it;
- Invest in comprehensive education about children's rights, women rights and related issues around human dignity, (gender) equality and intergenerational social justice (primary and secondary schools);
- Organize local professionally mediated broadcasts of roundtable dialogues with participants from different age groups, including young people, to create better intergenerational understanding in general and constructive discussions about changing norms favoring non-violent parenting and family relationships, and lifting the taboo on discussing these topics;
- Pay specific attention to the ambivalence concerning the transition to non-violent forms of child-rearing and family communication in light of the still widely present more traditional Caribbean authoritarian parenting style;
- Develop preventive training programs to foster non-violent parenting and communication norms;
- Make use of lessons learned from previous initiatives taken by the Public Entities, the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports (ZJCN) and UNICEF to address violence against children and to provide comprehensive family support;
- Invite UNICEF and other stakeholders to support these initiatives.

Target group: Public Entity of each island, in close collaboration with community groups and key stakeholders, and with the assistance of the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports and UNICEF.

Part 4 – Gender inequalities on the islands

In the conversations during the research team's visits to the islands, it was clear that there are several concerns regarding gender roles on the islands. In both the survey and the interviews, participants were asked about differences in family involvement between men and women, and about differences in how boys and girls are raised. The general observation by participants is that women take on the lion share of caring tasks in family life, both in relation to family members in general and when it comes to raising children. In addition, children often do not spend much time with their fathers. Statistics from the islands show that about a third of young people (aged 0-25 years) live in a single-parent home (CBS, 2018/2021), mostly headed by mothers according to locals.

These findings are consistent with results from many other studies in the Caribbean region. It has been shown by various scholars that current gender norms and roles in the region are strongly related to the history of the region (e.g., Blank, 2013). The fact that there are clear indications that boys and girls are being raised differently suggests that these patterns are transferred from one generation to the next, with girls learning to take family responsibility and boys being encouraged to have freedom. This is consistent with previous research findings (Endendijk et al., 2018). Research also shows that the gender roles in the Caribbean context are learned from a young age and that parents play an important role in how boys and girls learn about what is and is not expected of them in family life (Roopnarine & Jin, 2016).

Studies furthermore show that fathers in the Caribbean are more likely to take on caring family roles when relationships are stable and socioeconomic conditions are favorable (Roopnarine, 2012), suggesting that contextual factors need to be taken into account in policy making. A related concern is that poverty rates are particularly high in single-mother families (Nationale Ombudsman, 2022), so that the absence of fathers also has an indirect negative influence on children through financial struggles of the mothers. Although the participants did not specifically formulate suggestions for improvement in this area, many expressed frustration with the current gendered division of tasks in families.

The promotion of gender equality (in law and practice) and the prevention of stereotyped roles for women and men are considered key elements in the prevention of domestic violence and violence against women, including girls (see preamble and art. 12 Istanbul Convention; CRC Committee 2011, para. 72 (b)).

Recommendation 4: Promotion of gender equality.

It is recommended to Invest in culturally appropriate awareness campaigns about gender stereotypes and how they perpetuate the gendered division of labor in families that puts the burden mostly on women. In relation to this it is important to provide support to women specifically,

given their primary role as caregivers in families, and to acknowledge and support men who do want to be more involved but do not know how. In general, men should be encouraged to reflect on their role as fathers. The roundtable discussion with fathers on Bonaire that was broadcasted in 2022 (*and can still be viewed on Youtube – Tei p'abo – ròl di hende hòmber den un famia*) is a great example of such reflection. On Saba it was suggested to use local role models for children, which could be applied specifically to male role models for more involved fathering.

The Public Entities are furthermore recommended to invest in policies that promote gender equality, among others with regard to parental leave, custodial arrangements after separation and assumed parental responsibilities, building on the guidance provided by international legal provisions laid down in the Istanbul Convention, and related Council of Europe recommendations, and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This can best be done in close collaboration with community groups and key stakeholders, and where relevant with the assistance of the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports (ZJCN).

Target group: Public Entity of each island, in close collaboration with community groups and key stakeholders – where relevant with the assistance of the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports (ZJCN).

Part 5 – Changing times on the islands

Although the study did not collect survey data on generational differences or changing times, these topics were mentioned quite frequently in the interviews, as well as during the research team's visits to the islands. Local professionals often referred to the experience of a generation gap. Children and adolescents in the current younger generation were described as being difficult and disobedient and parents were described as incompetent to deal with those challenges. In addition, there was a sense of nostalgia about the olden days in which families seemed to have been closer and children more respectful. On Bonaire, for example, people felt that the island used to be safer and the community used to show more coherence and solidarity. Another theme that came up during these conversations is the fact that the culture on the islands is also changing because of the high migration rates. On Saba, it was reported that many local inhabitants leave the islands to study and work elsewhere, and new people come in from other countries, in recent years mostly from Latin America and from the European Netherlands. This seems to be an issue on Sint Eustatius as well. On Bonaire increased tourism was mentioned as impactful in this regard (see also Oostindie & Veenendaal 2022).

It is clear that the generation gap and culture change that are experienced on the islands can be challenges to community cohesion. This is important to address in the design and implementation of support services for families and community members. The generation gap is also reflected in the finding that older generations

feel they need to be strict and clear to young people who in their eyes misbehave or do not show respect. Strict discipline is often considered an essential element in this regard, which may not be conducive to inclusive and non-violent family and community communication that is also deemed important.

These observations also speak to the finding that youth do not feel taken seriously. It is important to note that not giving children a voice in decisions that are important to their lives conflicts with their right to be heard (art. 12 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child). The generation gap that is experienced by both the older and the younger generations could jeopardize the strength of the island's community and its families that was highlighted before. It could also hamper attempts to effectively address domestic violence and child maltreatment.

The influence of migration and tourism is also a theme that is related to feelings of nostalgia when there were less influences from outside, and a stronger mainstream island culture. In addition, there are concerns about the instability of the community with so many people leaving and arriving. On the one hand there is mixing of cultures which can bring different groups together in a family bond, but can also cause tensions when the cultural divides between the two merging families is difficult to bridge. The general feeling during the research team's visit to Saba was that there was uncertainty on how to engage and reach some of the more recent migrant groups.

Recommendation 5:

Give voice to different generations, including children, in all family-related policies and practices, and in community engagement.

As part of the investment in community engagement (see recommendation 1), it is important to engage and empower community members from different generations at the same time. This can be done through local roundtable dialogues (town hall meetings) with participants from different age groups, including young people, to create better intergenerational understanding on family life on Bonaire (see also recommendation 3). Moreover, all recommendations should be translated into concrete policy and practice in close collaboration with various generations of community members, and in particular also young people by giving them opportunities to express their views and by giving due weight to their views in accordance with article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Age should not be a limiting factor in this regard; younger children (e.g. primary school age) should be invited as well (CRC Committee, 2009, para. 20; see e.g. Kinderombudsman, 2021).

The involvement of representatives of specific migrant groups in the different societies in the above-mentioned actions should also be ensured.

Target group: Public Entity of each island, in close collaboration with community groups and key stakeholders.

Part 6 – Support services on the islands

The previous parts have shown that there are both strengths and challenges concerning family life on the islands that ought to be addressed. Support services play a critical role in this regard. Support services are vital for the support of families and are considered part of the implementation of the obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to support parents and others responsible for the upbringing of children (see art. 18 (2) and 27 (3) CRC; see also art. 3 (3) CRC). Support services are also key for the prevention of and protection against domestic violence (art. 16 Istanbul Convention) and child maltreatment (art. 19 CRC). In order to effectively promote non-violent alternatives for child-rearing and better parent-child and family communication with more room for children to voice their opinions, support services should provide concrete examples to parents and other family members that will foster the growing support for non-violence family interactions.

Each of the islands have support services available to offer help, care, assistance and protection to families and community members. These services are generally very much appreciated. There are, however, also some concerns that require attention.

These include:

- People's lack of familiarity with services, not knowing where to find them;
- Lack of trust in the available support services;
- Lack of information available in Papiamentu (specifically relevant for Bonaire);
- The lack of confidentiality when using support services was explicitly mentioned by the participants on Saba and Sint Eustatius, but not on Bonaire. It is related to the small island community.
- On Saba and Sint Eustatius, two additional concerns were voiced, the lack of continuity in support relationships because of high migration rates and the lack of specialized services because of the small scale of the islands.

Earlier research and reports pointed to the importance of accessible and anonymous support services for both adults and children (Kloosterboer, 2013; De Bruijn, Kriek & De Vaan, 2014; UNICEF, 2019; Kinderombudsman, 2021; CRC Committee 2022; see also Zijlstra et al., 2021). The same is true for specific groups on the islands, including migrant communities. The sometimes negative perceptions towards parents among professionals may stand in the way of the effectiveness of the services provided to families, parents and children.

“Here on the island, there are many organisations that can give care and aid to people, but they don't know about it.”

(professional)

Recommendation 6: **Strengthen support services for youth and adults.**

It is recommended to continue to invest in the strengthening of support services for youth and adults. The following specific points require the attention of the Public Entities, the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports and other stakeholders.

- The role and functioning of support services should be clearly defined in legislation and policies. The recently developed Government Decree (*Besluit maatschappelijke ondersteuning en bestrijding huiselijk geweld en kindermishandeling BES*) providing a legal basis for the 'Advies- en meldpunt huiselijk geweld en kindermishandeling' and the compulsory 'beschermingscode huiselijk geweld en kindermishandeling' can make an important contribution.
- Intensive and 'hands on' (possibly door to door) personalized support services should be developed within the islands' communities. The small size of the population provides opportunities for highly individualized support and care. Such an approach also fosters sustainable job opportunities on the islands for social services and mental health professionals, benefitting both youth and adults.
- Training for professionals in the social domain regarding confidentiality should be developed and the islands should invest in anonymous off-shore support services for youth and adults alike, where confidentiality is guaranteed. *Guana Chat* seems quite successful and is a good example. This could be a blueprint for a similar service for adults.
- All community members of the islands should know about the existence of support services and understand how to effectively and privately access these. The earlier recommendation about fostering openness about family problems (part 3 of the results) would hopefully also increase the use of the appropriate services.
- It is also important to invest in sustainability of services, for example through more training and job opportunities in the social domain, among others in light of the high migration rates of professionals specifically on Saba and Sint Eustatius.

Moreover, it is important to:

- Invest in more opportunities for leisure activities for young people to prevent them being home or on the streets unsupervised after school, especially in the context of many parents working multiple jobs to make ends meet.
- Make sure that support services work within a comprehensive framework of family support and collaborate where appropriate and relevant. And invest in education and training concerning the role and responsibilities of each service provider and other key stakeholders (government, judiciary, police, among others) and the prevention of feeling unequipped to act.
- Ensure that support services offer concrete ways to parents and families for non-violent child-rearing and better parent-child and family communication with more room for children to voice their opinions, while building on previous initiatives taken by the Public Entities, different Ministries and UNICEF.
- Invest in comprehensive education about children's rights, women rights and related issues around human dignity, (gender) equality and intergenerational social justice on the islands for professionals.
- Invite representatives of various generations, including young people, and migrant communities within the community of each island to provide input for the process of continuous learning and improvement of services.
- Make use of lessons learned from previous initiatives taken by the Public Entities, the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports (ZJCN) and UNICEF to provide comprehensive family support and invite UNICEF and other stakeholders to support these initiatives.

Target group: Public Entity of each island, in close collaboration with community groups and key stakeholders, and with the assistance of the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports (ZJCN), Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations and UNICEF.

Overarching reflections and recommendations

As mentioned before, the study's findings were very similar across the three islands. Yet, the three separate reports include voices of local participants (through citations) and take note of local circumstances that are important to acknowledge. It is critical to do justice to local nuances, also for the implementation of the recommendations, which cannot do without local support, while noting differences between islands where necessary.

This study concludes with a number of general points of attention, which bear relevance for all three islands in the Caribbean Netherlands, as well as two overarching recommendations. Because of the strong overlap in the identified areas for improvement across the Caribbean Netherlands, sharing best practices and co-developing new initiatives across the three islands is recommended to strengthen systematic changes. The newly developed strategy for the Intercountry Taskforce on Children's Rights (*Interlandelijke Taskforce Kinderrechten*) comes with an opportunity to exchange knowledge, experiences and good practices to promote the protection of children against all forms of violence. A similar strategy could be developed in the future concerning domestic violence and violence against women, under the realm of the Istanbul Convention.

Moreover, all recommendations need to be integrated in the overarching, comprehensive strategy for the Caribbean Netherlands on family relationships, domestic violence and child maltreatment. More specifically, the renewal of the *Bestuursakkoord* in 2024 provides an opportunity in this regard.

All actions taken by the Public Entities, the Ministries and other stakeholders should be guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Istanbul Convention and related international standards. And all actions should be supported – financially and otherwise – by the Dutch government in ways that acknowledge and respect local needs and wishes, also considering the sensitivities between the Caribbean Netherlands and the European part of the Netherlands. As the research team was told during the visit to Saba: “Certain things that fit in the European Netherlands just simply do not fit here and then they fail, which is not good for local motivation.” To aid efficiency, the practical implementation of the recommendations would ideally build on structures, plans and policies already present, formalizing and putting into practice what might already be there informally or just on paper, and, thus, consolidating and furthering local strength.

“Certain things that fit in the European Netherlands just simply do not fit here and then they fail, which is not good for local motivation.”

The study concludes with two overarching recommendations.

Recommendation 7: Periodic collection of disaggregated data.

As this study is intended to serve as a baseline study, it is highly recommended to repeat this study every five years. In addition, it is recommended to assess how this periodic data collection can be connected to existing or future data collection and monitoring instruments, including the Youth Monitor for the Caribbean Netherlands (Netherlands Statistics), the reports of the National Ombudsman and Children's Ombudsman, UNICEF and the Interagency Taskforce on Children's Rights. In addition, it is recommended to conduct smaller and more specific measurements, tailored to the islands' needs, in the interim, for example on the impact of the recently announced increase of the social minimum, or on the issue of sexual abuse.

Target audience: the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports (ZJCN) and other relevant Ministries (Interior and Kingdom Relations; Social Affairs; and Justice and Security), together with the Public Entities.

Recommendation 8: Entry into force of the Istanbul Convention for the Caribbean Netherlands.

While the State Secretary of Health, Welfare and Sports has indicated that it remains too early for the Istanbul Convention to enter into force in the Caribbean Netherlands (State Secretary of Health, Welfare and Sports, 2022a), the findings in this research suggest that there is no imperative to delay the entry into force of the convention any longer. There obviously are challenges concerning the obligations under the Convention. That is, however, also true, for other human rights conventions that have entered into force, such as the CRC. The Dutch Government as well as the Public Entities of Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius do address the issues of domestic violence and violence against women in law, policy and practice in the Caribbean Netherlands. This study found that there is a solid policy basis in the Caribbean Netherlands concerning family relationships, domestic violence and child maltreatment, which recognizes international legal requirements flowing from the CRC and the Istanbul Convention. The aim to develop a structured data-collection mechanism, with the current base line study as its zero measurement, forms part of the government's strategy to promote an adequate protection system concerning domestic violence and child maltreatment which is grounded in international and domestic law.

In light of this, it is recommended not to wait any longer, but to set a specific date for the entry into force of the Istanbul Convention, in the near future, and to continue to prepare its implementation. In addition, it is recommended to continue to invest in the required general measures of implementation of this and other relevant international legal instruments. The entry into force of the Istanbul Convention for the Caribbean Netherlands would allow the islands to benefit from the guidance provided through the Convention's infrastructure and by institutions like GREVIO. It would furthermore send out a clear and unequivocal message, similar to article 19 of the CRC, that violence against women, children and anyone else in the domestic environment and wider community is preventable and unjustifiable.

Target audience: Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports (ZJCN) together with other relevant Ministries of the Dutch Government.

Concluding remarks

The promotion of positive family relationships and the protection of all family members against any form of violence is an admirable objective and a legal requirement for each island of the Caribbean Netherlands. For strategies to be effective, however, a good understanding of and a genuine interest in the local context of Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius respectively is key. This is why the islands of the Caribbean Netherlands as well as the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports (ZJCN) should be commended for commissioning this research, which will contribute to a scientific knowledge base for effective preventive, supportive and protective violence strategies targeted at families and their family members. The research team is impressed by the commitment of the many politicians and government officials, as well as the professionals and community members (adults and children) on the islands who have contributed to the research. This commitment shows that it is feasible to have the ambition to promote non-violent family and community relationships, as part of an intergenerational endeavour, in accordance with international legal standards to protect women's and children's rights, and human rights more generally.



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