

**From Law and Policy Reform to Lived Reality:
Transforming Access to Justice and Support for
Women and Girls in Antigua and Barbuda**

Written by: Samantha N. Marshall

5th September, 2025

1. Abstract

Aligned with the 70th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW70) priority theme of strengthening access to justice for all women and girls, this paper examines Antigua and Barbuda's journey from law and policy reform to the lived realities of women and girls navigating the justice system. As a Small Island Developing State (SIDS), Antigua and Barbuda faces unique challenges, including resource constraints and the persistent legacy of colonial-era laws and attitudes, which have historically impeded gender equality and the achievement of the SDGs. As such, this paper provides a critical examination of the systemic barriers that have limited women's and girls' access to justice and support services, framing the urgent need for comprehensive reform.

Particularly, the core focus of this paper is an evaluative assessment of recent key interventions. It assesses the impact of significant judicial reforms under the JURIST Project, including the establishment of a Sexual Offences Model Court and related procedures. It examines landmark legislative advances, such as the Child Justice Act, and institutional innovations like the nation's first Family Court, the Antigua and Barbuda Support and Referral Centre (SARC), and the Sexual Offences Court. The indispensable role of civil society in advocacy and support delivery is also emphasised.

Despite these notable strides, the paper highlights ongoing gaps, such as societal stigma, rural access disparities, and the persistent challenges of operating within a SIDS context. Consequently, it proposes a series of forward-looking recommendations. These include strengthening survivor-centered and youth-specific approaches, institutionalising multi-stakeholder collaboration, innovating sustainable financing for support services, and leveraging technology and regional partnerships. The conclusion emphasises that sustained political will, dedicated funding, and

community engagement are vital to ensuring that progressive laws and policies result in tangible justice and support for every woman and girl in Antigua and Barbuda, potentially serving as a model for other SIDS undertaking similar post-colonial reforms.

2. Historical and Contextual Overview

The legal and justice system of Antigua and Barbuda is fundamentally a product of its British colonial history. Upon independence in 1981, the nation inherited the English common law tradition, along with a body of statutes and a judicial structure established during centuries of colonial rule. This system was not designed to empower the colonised populace but to maintain order and control, often reinforcing patriarchal and discriminatory norms¹. Laws concerning property rights, inheritance, and family matters frequently disadvantaged women, cementing their status as legal dependents of men rather than as autonomous individuals with equal rights². The administration of justice was centralised, formal, and often inaccessible to large segments of the population, particularly poor women and those in rural areas.

Despite independence, the eventual reform of this inherited legal architecture has been incremental. Certain colonial-era statutes, though perhaps not actively enforced, have remained on the books, symbolising a state's tacit endorsement of outdated social orders³. More persistent than the laws themselves, however, are the structures and cultural attitudes they engendered. A deeply entrenched patriarchal mindset continues to influence the application of justice, manifesting in victim-blaming, the trivialisation of domestic violence as a 'private matter', and scepticism towards women's testimony in court.⁴ These attitudes can permeate every institution, from the police station to the courtroom, creating a chilling effect that deters women and girls from seeking redress.

This historic reality underscores a critical truth: access to justice and support for

¹ See David Farquhar, *Missions and Society in the Leeward Islands, 1810–1850* (Boston: Mount Prospect Press, 1999).

² Natasha Lightfoot, *Troubling Freedom: Antigua and the Aftermath of British Emancipation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), p. 9-10.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See Antigua News, 'National Youth Volunteer Corps Says Gender-Based Violence Has "No Place in Our Communities"' (Antigua News, 28 February 2025) <<https://antigua.news/2025/02/28/national-youth-volunteer-corps-says-gender-based-violence-has-no-place-in-our-communities/>> accessed 4 September 2025.

women and girls is not a single event, but a fragile and interconnected process. It relies on a chain of quality services, including healthcare as it relates to forensic exams and trauma care; law enforcement as it relates to responsive and respectful investigation; the judiciary as it relates to fair and timely adjudication; and support services as it relates to psychosocial and economic empowerment. As such, if one link in this chain is broken, whether there is a dismissive or biased police officer, a lack of shelter space, or an unaffordable legal fee, then the entire process fails. For a woman survivor of violence, this failure is not merely bureaucratic; it can compound trauma, force one back into a dangerous situation, and have devastating lifelong consequences for safety, health, and economic stability.

Against the above backdrop, Antigua and Barbuda's pursuit of gender justice must be understood within its socio-economic and demographic reality. With a population of approximately over 100,000⁵, the country faces the classic constraints of Small Island Developing States (SIDS): limited human resources, economic vulnerability, and a lack of economies of scale.⁶ As such, the small talent pool creates challenges in staffing specialised roles within the justice and support sectors, such as sexual offence prosecutors, forensic psychologists, or shelter managers. Government budgets are perpetually stretched between competing priorities, such as climate resilience, economic development, and debt servicing, often leaving social services under-resourced⁷. This scarcity intensifies the competition for funding between critical areas like health, education, and justice, making sustained investment in robust, survivor-centred services a significant challenge.

⁵ Statistics Division, Ministry of Finance and Corporate Governance, *Population projections by age group, Annual 1991–2026*, (Statistics Division, Ministry of Finance and Corporate Governance, Government of Antigua and Barbuda) <www.statistics.gov.ag/subjects/population-and-demography/population-projections-by-age-group-annual-1991-2026> accessed 1 September 2025.

⁶ See Government of Canada, *Improving Development Impact in Small Island Developing States: Implementing effectiveness principles*, (Canada.ca (online), 13 December 2022) <www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/priorities-priorites/SIDS-PEID.aspx> accessed 3 September 2025.

⁷ Prof. C. Justin Robinson, *Antigua and Barbuda Prepares 2025 Budget Amidst Slowing Growth*, (UWI Five Islands Campus) <<https://fiveislands.uwi.edu/news/antigua-and-barbuda-prepares-2025-budget-amidst-slowing-growth>> accessed 1 September 2025.

In light of these constraints, the government's priorities have increasingly been shaped and galvanised by regional and international engagements.⁸ Commitments to bodies like the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), CARICOM, the Commonwealth, and the United Nations have created external accountability mechanisms and provided vital frameworks for action. Reporting for the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)⁹ and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR)¹⁰ has consistently highlighted gaps in protecting our women and girls, thereby pushing these issues onto the national agenda.¹¹ Furthermore, the existential threat of climate change and broader geopolitical challenges have underscored the link between environmental resilience, economic stability, and social justice, prompting a more holistic view of development that includes gender equality as a core component.

3. Pre-Reform Justice and Policy Landscape

Antigua and Barbuda's legal system has its roots in English common law and is underpinned by a statutory framework. Core structures include the Royal Police Force, Magistrates' Courts, the High Court (organised under the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court), and the Privy Council as the final appellate court. The Constitution of Antigua and Barbuda enshrines and guarantees, among other rights, protections, and designations, the rights to life, liberty, fair trial, and protection from inhumane treatment.¹² However, prior to reforms like the 2019 launch of the Sexual Offences Model Court (SOMC), survivors of gender-based violence contended with fragmented judicial and support services that lacked specialised sensitivity and coordination.¹³

⁸ Government of Antigua and Barbuda, Excellency Sir Rodney Williams, *From Strength to Strength Amid Global Gains: 2025 Speech from the Throne*, Parliament Building, St. John's, Antigua and Barbuda (delivered 28 November 2024) (*Antigua and Barbuda Government Printing Office*, 2025) <https://ab.gov.ag/pdf/2025_Throne_Speech.pdf> accessed 4 September 2025.

⁹ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 'Concluding observations on the combined fourth to seventh periodic reports of Antigua and Barbuda' (*UN Digital Library (online)*), <<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3801129?ln=en&v=pdf>> accessed 3 September 2025.

¹⁰ United Nations, 'Antigua and Barbuda (A/HRC/19/5)', Human Rights Council, Nineteenth Session, General Assembly', (*UN Library: 14 December 2011*) <<https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g11/173/87/pdf/g1117387.pdf>> retrieved 2 September 2025.

¹¹ *Ibid*, pp. 4-5.

¹² The Constitution of Antigua and Barbuda, 1981.

¹³ See Government of Antigua and Barbuda, 'National Report of Antigua and Barbuda on the Advances made at the National Level in the Promotion and Protection of Women's Rights and the Achievement of Gender Equality', (Organization of American States: 2021), <<https://scm.oas.org/pdfs/2013/CIM03429.pdf>> accessed 1 September 2025.

Gender equality legislation remains underdeveloped: as of 2024, only 44.4% of legal frameworks promoting and monitoring gender equality were in place, signifying sizeable gaps in legislative protection for women.¹⁴ Although discrimination based on sex is constitutionally prohibited, women remain underrepresented politically, holding just 5.6% of seats in the House of Representatives as of early 2024.¹⁵ These legal and institutional deficiencies impeded women and girls from accessing equitable justice.

Regarding other gaps in protection and support services for women and girls, the establishment of Antigua and Barbuda's Sexual Offences Model Court (SOMC) was preceded by a 2016 Baseline Study commissioned by the JURIST Project and undertaken by UN Women.¹⁶ This study highlighted several critical shortcomings within the justice system. These included: protracted delays in the resolution of cases; inadequate data collection mechanisms to support effective monitoring, accountability, and assessment of the courts' performance in handling sexual offence matters; weak coordination between the judiciary and the various agencies responsible for providing services to survivors of sexual assault; and the reluctance of complainants to pursue cases, largely out of fear of re-victimisation and re-traumatisation during the very process intended to secure justice.¹⁷

For young women and girls, obstacles were multilayered. Though universal access to primary and secondary education has been achieved, teenage mothers face persistent structural vulnerabilities, including stigma, interrupted schooling, and weak institutional support.¹⁸ Also, youth-specific restorative and rehabilitative frameworks remained nascent. Concurrently, youth consultations and awareness-raising programmes organised and supported by the Directorate of Gender Affairs

¹⁴ UN Women, 'Country Fact Sheet: Antigua and Barbuda' (data.unwomen.org, February 2024 data accessed) <<https://data.unwomen.org/country/antigua-and-barbuda>>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Jorge Vivar Mariscal (Leitmotiv Consultoría Social), *Case Study: The Anglophone Caribbean: A Regional Approach to a Regional Phenomenon: Regional Evaluation on Access to Justice as a Preventive Mechanism to End Violence Against Women 2011–2015*, (UN Women, 2016).

¹⁷ JURIST Project, 'SOMC to Fast-Track the Delivery of Justice in Antigua and Barbuda', (*JURIST Project website: 21 January 2019*) <<https://jurist.cj.org/news-stories/somc-to-fast-track-the-delivery-of-justice-in-antigua-and-barbuda/>> accessed 3 September 2025.

¹⁸ Ibid (13); See also World Bank, 'Antigua and Barbuda Country Gender Scorecard' (*World Bank Poverty and Equity: December 2021*) <<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/822421645769028203/pdf/Antigua-and-Barbuda-Country-Gender-Scorecard.pdf>> accessed 1 September 2025.

sought to give young people, especially young women, more agency in discussions around sexual offences and social justice.

4. Key Reforms and Initiatives

This section examines the transformative reforms undertaken in Antigua and Barbuda to expand access to justice and support for women and girls. It explores judicial, legislative, institutional, and civil society initiatives, offering evaluative insights into their intentions, implementation, and emerging outcomes

4.1 Judicial Reform and Institutional Strengthening (JURIST) Project

The JURIST (Judicial Reform and Institutional Strengthening) Project, a five-year regional initiative funded by Global Affairs Canada (approximately CAN \$19 million) and implemented by the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ), aims to modernise court systems across the Caribbean with an emphasis on efficiency and gender responsiveness.¹⁹ Under this initiative, Antigua and Barbuda launched the Sexual Offences Model Court (SOMC) in January 2019, which is the first such court in the Eastern Caribbean region.²⁰ The SOMC was conceived to tackle systemic deficiencies like protracted case delays, inadequate data systems, poor coordination, and women and girls withdrawing from cases due to fear of re-traumatisation.

In response, the SOMC incorporates several innovative features designed to transform the delivery of justice in sexual offence cases.²¹ Central among these are comprehensive case-management reforms aimed at tightening pre-trial processes and fast-tracking matters to reduce delays.²² The court also integrates advanced technology, including audio and video links that facilitate remote testimony, alongside specialised courtrooms and private waiting areas to

¹⁹ Global Affairs Canada, 'Summative Evaluation of the JURIST and IMPACT Justice Projects – Executive Summary', (*Government of Canada, 25 June 2025*) <www.international.gc.ca/gac-amc/publications/evaluation/impact-justice-projects-jurist-impact-justice.aspx?lang=eng> accessed 3 September 2025.

²⁰ Antigua Observer, 'Gov't lauded for establishment of Sexual Offences Model Court', (*Antigua Observer, 23 January 2019*) <<https://antiguaobserver.com/govt-lauded-for-establishment-of-sexual-offences-model-court>> accessed 3 September 2025.

²¹ Jurist-Caribbean Court of Justice, 'The Sexual Offences Model Court in Antigua and Barbuda: Frequently Asked Questions', (*JURIST Project-Caribbean Court of Justice: August 2019*) <https://jurist.ccj.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Final_Booklet-ilovepdf-compressed.pdf> accessed 3 September 2025.

²² Ibid.

ensure greater protection and dignity for complainants.²³ Complementing these procedural and infrastructural changes is extensive training provided to judges, court staff, police, prosecutors, lawyers, and victim support workers, equipping them to deliver gender-sensitive and survivor-centred justice²⁴. Finally, the SOMC is supported by a robust monitoring and evaluation framework, underpinned by systematic data collection protocols to assess court performance, enhance accountability, and build trust in the judicial process.²⁵

At the SOMC launch, then Chief Justice Dame Janice Pereira emphasised its role in creating a fair, efficient, and compassionate judicial environment. Also, then High Court Judge Ian Morley announced ambitious targets: completing cases within eighteen (18) months, compared to historic durations of four years or more.²⁶ The Government further backed the initiative with budget allocations, forensic lab planning, and expansion of the Criminal Prosecution Service.²⁷ The SOMC represents a structural leap toward survivor-centered justice, combining expedited procedures, technological innovation, and improved cross-agency coordination. Its early successes in reducing delays and promoting gender sensitivity signal positive momentum, although detailed monitoring and evaluation data are not yet available. Nevertheless, such data will be essential to sustain trust and inform further reforms.

4.2 Legislative Reforms

Several legislative actions have complemented judicial reforms in Antigua and Barbuda, embedding access to justice within a strengthened statutory framework. Notably, in September 2019, the IMPACT Justice Project worked alongside the Ministry of Legal Affairs to revise the *Sexual Offences Act, No. 9 of 1995*, introducing significant updates such as the establishment of a ‘National Sex Offender Register’. This initiative was designed to enhance accountability, deter repeat offences, and improve public safety, marking an important step toward modernising laws governing sexual violence.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Jurist-Caribbean Court of Justice Project, ‘Antigua launches Sexual Offences Model Court, JURIST Project’, (*JURIST Project-Caribbean Court of Justice: August 2019*) <https://jurist.ccj.org/external-media/antigua-launches-sexual-offences-model-court/?utm_source=chatgpt.com> accessed 3 September 2025.

²⁷ Ibid.

Further statutory change came through the *Evidence (Special Provisions) (Amendment) Act No. 9 of 2016*, which allows vulnerable witnesses, including survivors of sexual assault, to provide testimony without being required to face the accused in court.²⁸ By permitting alternative arrangements for giving evidence, such as via video link, this amendment directly addresses the risks of re-traumatisation, making the trial process less intimidating and more responsive to the needs of survivors.

Child-centered reform was advanced with the *Child Justice Act, No. 23 of 2015* and the *Child Care and Adoption Act, No. 24 of 2015*, both of which introduced youth justice measures that emphasise diversionary protocols and protective care frameworks. These laws aim to reduce punitive approaches to young offenders, provide avenues for rehabilitation, and ensure that children are treated in accordance with international human rights standards. However, implementation challenges remain, particularly the absence of sufficient shelters and dedicated child-friendly facilities for housing and supporting minors within the justice system.²⁹ To reduce this gap further, the government, along with civil society partners, have come forward to assist in building such facilities in an effort to bring about sustainable implementation and solutions.

Taken together, these legislative reforms illustrate Antigua and Barbuda's commitment to developing survivor-protective and youth-sensitive legal systems. They reflect an acknowledgment of structural trauma within traditional processes and an effort to replace them with frameworks that prioritise dignity, protection, and rehabilitation. Nonetheless, their effectiveness ultimately depends on consistent enforcement, judicial uptake of protective provisions, and parallel investment in the infrastructure needed to support these reforms.

4.3 Institutional and Support Services Reforms

A series of institutional reforms strengthened Antigua and Barbuda's justice architecture and expanded access to support services for women and girls. One landmark achievement was the establishment of the first *Family Court* in the Eastern Caribbean, which signalled a formal

²⁸ See s52A, *Evidence (Special Provisions) (Amendment) Act No. 9 of 2016, Antigua and Barbuda*.

²⁹ UNICEF Eastern Caribbean, "Effects of 2017 hurricanes still a reality for some families in the Caribbean," (*UNICEF Eastern Caribbean*) <<https://www.unicef.org/easterncaribbean/stories/effects-2017-hurricanes-still-reality-some-families-caribbean>> accessed 3 September 2025.

prioritisation of family and gender-related judicial matters. Although specific operational details remain limited, the creation of this specialised court has enhanced procedural sensitivity and judicial focus on cases involving domestic violence, child custody, and related issues. Its very existence demonstrates a recognition of the need for a justice system tailored to the realities of family life and gender relations.

Complementing the Family Court is the *Support and Referral Centre (SARC)*, managed by the Directorate of Gender Affairs, which has emerged as a cornerstone of survivor-centered justice. SARC provides case management, psychosocial support, advocacy, and referrals, and its integration with the Sexual Offences Model Court (SOMC) through video-conferencing capabilities allows vulnerable complainants to give testimony in a protected environment. This innovative linkage between judicial and support services reduces the risk of re-traumatisation and strengthens trust in the justice process.

At the institutional level, the *Directorate of Gender Affairs* has expanded its mandate and programming to address a wider spectrum of gender equality issues. As the national gender machinery, it plays a central role in coordinating inter-agency collaboration, targeted community programmes and campaigns, raising awareness, and implementing policies aimed at improving the lives of women and girls. Enhanced visibility and engagement have positioned the Directorate as a critical partner in both policy design and service delivery.

Taken together, these reforms reflect a comprehensive framework designed to deliver survivor-centred justice by connecting judicial, support, and administrative mechanisms. The interconnectivity between SOMC and SARC, particularly the use of remote testimony, exemplifies effective institutional synergy. However, the effectiveness of these reforms is tempered by persistent challenges. Implementation deficits remain, with many initiatives hampered by limited human and financial resources. Staffing shortages, inadequate infrastructure, and underfunded programming reduce the capacity of institutions to deliver on their mandates. Moreover, gender justice and support services are often not placed high enough on the government's list of competing priorities, leaving critical reforms vulnerable to neglect or underinvestment.

Nonetheless, for these reforms to achieve their full potential, they must be backed by sustained political will, stronger budgetary allocations, and strategic investment in capacity-building. Without these, institutional innovations risk being symbolic rather than transformative, leaving gaps that undermine both access to justice and the lived realities of survivors.

4.4 Civil Society Contributions

Civil society actors have played an indispensable role in reinforcing justice sector reform and expanding support for women and girls in Antigua and Barbuda. Foremost among these is *Women Against Rape (WAR)*, which has contributed significantly to advocacy, survivor services, and public education. WAR has been especially active in litigation and rights-based advocacy, supporting constitutional challenges that led to the decriminalisation of consensual same-sex relations. This work has not only dismantled colonial-era discriminatory laws but also demonstrated how civil society can drive transformative legal reform in partnership with state and international actors.

Alongside WAR, a limited number of other civil society organisations (CSOs), including community-based organisations, contribute through awareness campaigns, service delivery, and efforts to hold institutions accountable. However, public-facing civil society partners remain relatively few, which constrains the breadth and sustainability of grassroots engagement. To bridge this gap, it is crucial to involve a broader spectrum of community-based actors, including faith-based organisations, sports clubs, and cultural groups such as steel band yards, where young women and girls are already active and engaged. These spaces provide valuable entry points for education, rights-awareness, and empowerment, especially in situations where survivors might be hesitant to approach formal institutions.

Moreover, civil society's effectiveness also depends on the strength of its collaboration with government agencies. The Directorate of Gender Affairs has increasingly partnered with CSOs to deliver survivor-centred services and public education, but these efforts should be expanded and institutionalised. In particular, the Royal Police Force of Antigua and Barbuda should also deepen its partnerships with civil society groups, working in tandem with the Directorate of Gender Affairs to build trust, strengthen referral networks, and ensure survivor-sensitive policing

practices. Such collaboration could also help bridge the persistent gaps between law enforcement, support services, and community networks.

Civil society has played a vital role in Antigua and Barbuda's progress towards gender justice; however, its potential remains largely underutilised. The absence of a comprehensive and well-resourced civil society ecosystem means that a significant share of advocacy and service delivery burdens are mainly borne by a resource-strapped government and a limited number of actors. Therefore, expanding partnerships to include community, faith, and cultural institutions, along with targeted training and resources, should amplify the impact of reform initiatives and foster a stronger culture of rights awareness and empowerment among women and girls. Ultimately, collaboration between civil society and government institutions is essential, not just supplementary, to ensure that reforms extend beyond legislation and policy to deliver real results of safety, dignity, and justice.

5. Recommendations

Antigua and Barbuda must continue to prioritise survivor-centered justice approaches by strengthening legal, procedural, and psychosocial frameworks across the justice system. This involves guaranteeing that survivors have access to specialised legal assistance, counselling, and trauma-informed judicial processes. Equally important is the establishment of a dedicated monitoring and evaluation programme to track progress, identify gaps, and ensure that these approaches and frameworks are both effective and sustainable. At present, the persistent lack of comprehensive data collection, coupled with limited publication of outcomes and assessments, undermines transparency, weakens accountability, and hampers the ability to measure real impact. Without systematic documentation, valuable lessons remain unshared, and opportunities for learning and policy innovation are lost. By addressing these shortcomings, Antigua and Barbuda would be in a stronger position to share and compare experiences with regional and international counterparts, thereby contributing to a collective knowledge base on best practices in gender justice.

Collaborations with countries within the Caribbean region, as well as with leading initiatives and policies, and international partners, including those in North America, South America, Europe,

Africa, and Asia can provide both comparative insights and opportunities for new synergies. Building on the learned and shared experiences of models elsewhere, Antigua and Barbuda could enhance the Family Court, Sexual Offence Court, and the Support and Referral Centre (SARC) with additional staffing, specialised training, and stronger interagency referral systems. These reforms would reinforce a justice model that recognises survivors not merely as complainants, but as rights-holders entitled to comprehensive protection, dignity, and equal access to justice

The expansion of outreach and education programmes, especially within vulnerable communities and demographics, is also equally critical to dismantling stigma and building public trust. Innovative platforms such as mobile apps used in Jamaica³⁰ for sensitisation and gender-based violence support and, or theatre-based awareness campaigns in Trinidad and Tobago³¹, highlight the importance of creative, culturally grounded approaches. Theatre groups like the *HoneyBee Theatre Group* in Antigua and Barbuda could collaborate with other groups and media houses on youth-led digital storytelling, community radio campaigns, and interactive school-based programmes to reach diverse audiences. Importantly, these initiatives should target both prevention and attitude change, engaging men and boys as allies in challenging harmful gender norms.

Addressing the needs of young women and girls requires deepening youth-specific interventions. Evidence from across the Caribbean underscores that adolescents face unique barriers in reporting violence and accessing justice.³² As such, consideration should be given to establishing youth-friendly reporting mechanisms, peer mentorship networks, and better-supported confidential counselling services within schools and community centres could bridge this gap. Other interventions and programmes led by the Directorate of Gender Affairs must continue to

³⁰ Elizabeth Talbert, 'Protecting Caribbean Women in Digital Spaces', (*Jamaica Gleaner*, 7 March 2023) <<https://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/commentary/20230307/elizabeth-talbert-protecting-caribbean-women-digital-spaces>> accessed 4 September 2025.

³¹ 'Girl Be Heard - T&T (@girlbeheardtt)', (*Facebook*) <<https://www.facebook.com/girlbeheardtt/>> accessed 4 September 2025.

³² UNFPA Caribbean, 'Empowering Young People by Eliminating the Legal Barriers that Limit Access to SRH Information and Services', (*United Nations Population Fund*, 2021) <https://caribbean.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/policy_brief_2023_empowering_young_people_eliminating_legal_barriers_that_limit_access.pdf> accessed 4 September 2025.

encompass youth empowerment initiatives, such as skills training and scholarship programmes, to ensure that interventions are holistic and address structural vulnerabilities.³³

Securing sustainable financing for support services is also essential, particularly for underserved communities such as Barbuda and rural villages. Innovative financing models could include ring-fenced funds within the national budget, a modest levy on luxury tourism services, or the creation of a public-private ‘Women and Girls Empowerment Fund’ (WGEF). Similar to the Caribbean Development Bank’s (CDB) Basic Needs Trust Fund (BNTF)³⁴ but at the level of the member state, a WGEF would combine donor funding with government allocations, offer empowerment pathways to vulnerable women and girls, and also provide support to expanding shelters, mobile support units, and counselling services, ensuring that survivors across the islands are not excluded from lifesaving assistance.

Recognising its vulnerabilities as a Small Island Developing State, Antigua and Barbuda should actively leverage regional and international platforms for resources, expertise, and capacity-building. Targeted cooperation agreements with bilateral partners can deliver technical assistance, specialised training for police and judiciary, and sustained programme funding. At the same time, partnerships with international organisation and agencies should be broadened to ensure more strategic engagement. Such collaborations would help bridge domestic resource gaps while positioning Antigua and Barbuda as a leading advocate for gender justice across regional and global arenas.

Embedding gender-sensitive and human rights-based approaches into all law enforcement and justice sector policies is imperative. This requires mainstreaming gender perspectives across legislation, judicial training, policing protocols, and correctional services. It also means better alignment of policies with international human rights obligations, including *CEDAW*, the *Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women*, and International Labor Organization Convention No. 190 on Violence and Harassment.

³³ Directorate of Gender Affairs (Antigua and Barbuda), ‘Projects and Programmes’, (*Government of Antigua and Barbuda*, 2024) <<https://genderaffairs.gov.ag/projects-and-programmes/>> accessed 4 September 2025.

³⁴ Caribbean Development Bank, ‘Basic Needs Trust Fund’, (*Caribbean Development Bank*, 2024) <<https://www.caribank.org/our-work/programmes/basic-needs-trust-fund>> accessed 4 September 2025.

Embedding these principles within everyday justice practices and even beyond would institutionalise a culture of rights and equality.

Finally, emerging technologies offer new opportunities. The application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in justice monitoring could enhance efficiency and transparency.³⁵ AI-powered dashboards could track case progress, analyse anonymised data on survivor pathways, and identify systemic bottlenecks in service delivery. For example, Spain³⁶ already employs AI in monitoring GBV cases.

However, such systems present inherent challenges with regard to implementation, protections, transparency, and accountability. A carefully scaled and rights-compliant AI pilot, developed with technical support from UN Women³⁷ or bilateral partners, could help Antigua and Barbuda overcome human and financial resource constraints while providing real-time evidence for policymaking.

Nevertheless, implementation will face considerable challenges. Climate change and recurring natural disasters place constant fiscal pressure on national budgets, while broader economic uncertainty limits predictable financing for social programmes.³⁸ Human and financial resource constraints within ministries, the judiciary, and civil society may slow progress. Persistent insular and archaic views among some faith-based organisations can obstruct reforms, particularly those related to sexual and reproductive health rights.³⁹ The absence of gender-sensitive policing, coupled with cultural stigma, may also deter survivors from reporting violence.⁴⁰ Overcoming these barriers

³⁵ UN Women, 'Explainer: How Artificial Intelligence is Shaping Gender Equality', (*UN Women*, 2024) <<https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/artificial-intelligence-and-gender-equality>> accessed 4 September 2025.

³⁶ Eticas, 'The Adversarial Audit of Viogen, Three Years Later', (*Eticas*, 9 May 2024) <<https://eticas.ai/the-adversarial-audit-of-viogen-three-years-later/>> accessed 4 September 2025.

³⁷ UN Women, 'Explainer: Artificial Intelligence and Gender Equality', (*UN Women*, 2024) <<https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/artificial-intelligence-and-gender-equality>> accessed 4 September 2025.

³⁸ Lisa Benjamin and Adelle Thomas, "Gender and Climate Justice - Implications for Policy Formation in the Caribbean Region" (2020) 66 *Loy L Rev* 329.

³⁹ See UN Women Caribbean, 'Faith-Based Community Convenes on Human Rights Day to Address GBV', (*UN Women*, 11 January 2024) <<https://caribbean.unwomen.org/en/stories/news/2024/01/faith-based-community-convene-on-human-rights-day-to-address-gbv>> accessed 4 September 2025.

⁴⁰ Makeida Antonio, 'LGBTQ+ Activist Says Police Officers Need GBV Training', (*Antigua Observer*, 27 November 2023) <<https://antiguaobserver.com/lgbtq-activist-says-police-officers-need-gbv-training/>> accessed 4 September 2025.

requires not only financial investment but also sustained political will, broad-based public engagement, and strong partnerships with civil society and international agencies.

By combining innovative financing mechanisms, youth-led prevention, survivor-centered reforms, institutionalised coordination, regional and international collaboration, and responsible use of technology, the country can significantly advance its gender justice agenda. Despite the constraints inherent to a SIDS context, these recommendations offer a roadmap toward a more inclusive, resilient, and survivor-focused justice system.

6. Conclusion

The journey from law and policy reform to the lived reality for women and girls in Antigua and Barbuda is a testament to the significant strides made in transforming the justice system. However, the gap between policy and lived experience remains, underscoring the need for continued commitment and action. This paper reinforces the connection between legal and policy reforms and their impact on the daily lives of women and girls, highlighting the importance of sustained political will, adequate funding, and active community engagement to ensure effective and sustainable reforms.

Antigua and Barbuda's experience offers valuable lessons for other Small Island Developing States (SIDS) within the UN system navigating post-colonial legal reforms and striving for gender justice. The nation's adoption of survivor-centered approaches, comprehensive support services, and collaboration with civil society and international partners serves as a model for addressing systemic barriers and fostering a more equitable justice system.

In conclusion, the sustained efforts of Antigua and Barbuda demonstrate the potential for meaningful change in achieving gender justice. By sharing its experiences and best practices, the nation can inspire and guide other countries in their pursuit of legal reform and gender equality, contributing to broader global efforts in this critical area.

-The End-