COVID-19 has upended many things in our lives, with communities experiencing the pandemic differently. What for me has been most instructive is the fact that women and their families are actually living these experiences now and we are seeing how the pandemic is disrupting their lives throughout the Caribbean. Research will eventually be done to verify the extent and nature of this disruption, but at this time, it is difficult to ignore the current lived experiences of thousands of women and their families.

There are many impacts of COVID-19 that have exposed the different ways in which families now have to survive, especially those headed by single women. We know that in Jamaica, for example, there are more households headed by single women than men - research establishes that it is close to 46 per cent. If we consider, for example, the stay-at-home requirements, and the impact on large numbers of single mothers who were working in the informal sector, in stores, running their own small businesses at the community level, working in gas stations, or primarily in the service sector. They now have to stay at home, and many may have also lost their jobs. Therefore, the gender inequalities that were already associated with the triple burden that women face in their care responsibilities, have significantly increased in this last year.

In addition to that, the digital divide became more evident during the pandemic. We have had to acknowledge that thousands of children and their families do not have access to either electricity or internet. Furthermore, the same mothers are now also expected to find a way to make sure their children are able to access their online schoolwork.

The government of Jamaica did create some care packages and used the social safety net programme, PATH programme, to support poverty-stricken families with direct cash transfers. Nevertheless, the social inequalities that existed in relation to poverty are being exacerbated, because the system itself is not able to respond in the short term in the ways in which these families need. Finally, the inability of governments in the Caribbean Small Island Developing States to respond to the worsening socio-economic situation is shaped by how indebted the countries are: the increase in unemployment in many sectors of both women and men means less revenue for governments, but we are still servicing the debt. This is the regional context, in which efforts to address these worsening conditions that women and their families face, have to be understood.

Based on your experience, how can we best address negative gender norms in the Caribbean?

In Jamaica, over several years, there is an increasing number of young men who are marginalized by the system itself. The challenge is that the patriarchy still dictates that the main role and responsibility of a man is to provide and lead. When the men are no longer able to provide, the dominant male stereotypical role which says the father’s most important contribution is to "bring in the money" minimizes the other ways in which he could contribute. Furthermore, those other ways of contributing beyond the financial support are often not culturally accepted, for example taking care of the children while the mother goes out to work. In some spaces, we are experiencing a shift in this culture, but the shift is very minimal, because the pressure is still on young men to behave in ways that society expects them to behave, ways which are toxic expressions of masculinity and which affect women, children and men themselves, negatively.
Based on your experience, what do you think are post-COVID-19 recovery policies that are needed to address the impact on women?

Right now, COVID-19 short-term recovery policies have to focus on sheer survival. I would like to refer to Professor Fitzroy Henry’s (2020) study called Towards a Liveable Minimum Wage in Jamaica. When analysing whether the minimum wage is adequate, Prof. Henry created a hunger index, which helps us understand families’ vulnerability for the need to have food. The study reveals that 7.1 per cent of Jamaicans experience severe hunger. Among the poor, this figure increases to 23.9 per cent. Therefore, one of the most critical survival issues for women and their families, is access to affordable, healthy food, as well as to effective public health care. These should lie at the centre of COVID-19 recovery policies.

While many Caribbean countries have experimented with care packages, we have to bear in mind that most CARICOM countries are indebted. What can international development partners arrange to do to make sure that the most impoverished in our countries can access additional critical recovery packages, in the medium terms as well? Beyond that, how does a government seek to correct the gross inequalities that exist, in the way that the majority of our people now experience healthcare and education?

We know in Jamaica that elements of the healthcare system work, but some do not provide ready access to families living in poverty in many rural and urban communities. That would require additional expenditure and re-allocation of resources by the government, a process in which international development partners can provide not only financial support, but actual guidance and technical support for how to improve access to healthcare over time. In Jamaica, COVID-19 brutally exposed the digital divide, demonstrating that we have one set of children who will be left behind. These are the children whose families cannot ensure online education or whose parents are not able to give the required at-home support. With the support of international development partners, COVID-response measures have to provide support for both families and for the education sector, so that thousands of children who are already behind do not fall off the edge completely.

If we do not move in this direction, we will end up reproducing or perpetuating the same social and gender inequalities that we are now so worried about. Any recovery strategy must assume that the end-game is not to go back to where we were, but over time, strategically, move towards reducing inequalities and not settling for where we were before. This is just not good enough!

One of the **most critical survival issues** for women and their families, is **access to affordable, healthy food, as well as to effective public health care.** These should lie at the centre of COVID-19 recovery policies.

Mrs. Judith Wedderburn is the recently retired Director of Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, (FES) Jamaica and the Eastern Caribbean, and for over 30 years, has been an advocate in the field of gender and development in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean. Ms. Wedderburn was responsible for the conceptual development of education and training programmes, and the design and implementation of diverse “learning experiences”, which involved the use of conventional as well as participatory methodologies. These programmes were developed in collaboration with a diverse range of partners in civil society, the public sector, trade unions and the academic community, nationally and regionally.

The interview was conducted in follow-up to Judith Wedderburn’s participation in the Latin America and the Caribbean edition of UNESCO Series of Regional Expert Consultations against Gender Stereotypes, which took place on 25 January 2021.