The available domestic violence literature offers few clues on the situation in the Caribbean. General violence indicators support the assumption of high prevalences, but how these may be affected by, for example, gender relations and family structures is unclear. Reliable statistical data on the prevalence, nature, and consequences of domestic violence are not available, the prevalence of domestic violence in Curaçao has never been studied before. The central question of this thesis is: What are the prevalences, risk factors and consequences of domestic violence against men and women on Curaçao?

Curaçao is an autonomous country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, located in the southwestern Caribbean, and has a population of 140,000. The island's population comes from many ethnic backgrounds. For its size, the island has a considerably diverse economy which does not rely mostly on tourism alone as is the case on many other Caribbean islands. International financial services, the harbor and trade are important economic sectors as well. In contrast to the relatively isolated Western-style nuclear family, family structures in the Caribbean are often characterized by matrifocal, (grand)mother-dominated households with several generations living in the same house or in houses built close to each other on a compound, sharing resources and carer’s duties.

Domestic violence is a pattern of abusive behaviors by one or both partners in an intimate relationship such as marriage, dating, family, friends or cohabitation. Domestic violence against adults can be divided into three main categories: psychological, physical and sexual violence. Other relevant aspects of domestic violence are initiation, intention and motivation: ‘common couple violence’ is distinguished from ‘intimate terrorism’. Common couple violence is expressive and characterized by minor forms of violence. Intimate terrorism on the other hand is instrumental, to control, subdue, and reproduce subordination. Compared to common couple violence, it is more rare and serious, tends to escalate over time, and peaks after separation.

When surveying sensitive topics, serious underreporting of the phenomena under study is a grave danger to the validity of the data. Domestic violence is a prime example of a sensitive topic, as it concerns behavior that is socially frowned upon, may be illegal, and concerns the private domain. A special mixed-mode survey was designed to assess the prevalence of domestic violence on Curaçao and its health consequences. Great care was taken to reduce selective non-response and stimulate open and honest responses on this topic. Our study clearly shows that respondents from different demographic segments have different preferences as for type of data collecting mode. Overall, almost a quarter of our respondents chose a face-to-face interview, while for the segment of low educated, elderly people, the interview option was chosen by over half of the respondents. This supports our expectations that a mixed mode approach pulls in those respondents that we would have missed if we restricted ourselves to a single mode approach. The tailored mixed-mode strategy leads to higher number of completed questionnaires, and restores partly the non-response bias by pulling in more lower educated and elderly, groups that are in general underrepresented.

The results of this study indicate that one out of three people (25% of men, 38% of women) in Curaçao have experienced some form of domestic violence as adults, and the lifetime victimization rates are 39% of men, 51% of women. The most significant risk factors for domestic violence in Curaçao are the female gender, a young age, low education and experiencing domestic violence victimization in childhood. Divorce, single parenthood and unemployment increase the risk for women, but not for men. Possible explanations for the high victimization rates of divorced women are the fact that domestic violence rates spike during separation and higher denial rates among couples who are still together: domestic violence victims that are still in a relationship with their abuser are less likely to communicate their experiences in this type of survey than separated victims are.
Domestic violence against women on Curaçao is for the most part (ex-) partner violence. Against men, it is primarily violence from parents, family and friends. Parents are the main perpetrators of domestic violence against children, except for sexual violence, which is primarily perpetrated by family members and friends. The majority of the Curaçao victims of physical domestic violence have experienced more severe forms of abuse, like being hit with objects.

Men and women have similar rates of committing domestic violence; this is consistent with findings in Western countries. The self reports reveal that 25%-33% have committed psychological domestic violence, 11%-17% physical violence and 1%-6% sexual violence. Antecedents of perpetrating domestic violence are similar for both sexes, too. Being a victim of domestic violence increases the probability to become a perpetrator for both genders, especially in case of severe physical violence victimization. Other perpetrator risk factors are a high education for perpetrating psychological violence, and having children in the household for perpetrating physical violence.

Curaçao is a collectivist country, which is associated with higher male perpetration rates, with a matrifocal orientation and high gender empowerment, which is associated with gender similarity in perpetration rates. Since we found gender similarity in the perpetration rates on Curaçao, we conclude that the influence of gender empowerment seems to be more decisive than the collectivistic/individualistic society dimension. Nevertheless we should interpret these results with caution, since we have measured domestic violence perpetration rates and not intimate partner violence perpetration rates. It is still very well possible that intimate partner violence is more often perpetrated by men, and that women direct their aggression more towards other family members, like children.

Consistent with the current international literature, we found a strong association between different forms of abuse and negative healthcare outcomes. Victims of domestic violence have worse self assessed health, more health problems and more health care use than non-victims. All types of violence (psychological, physical and sexual) have specific effects on the victims health and consequently on the medical use and costs.

Further research on the context, nature and severity of domestic violence in the Caribbean is necessary. Studies should preferably combine the strengths of national crime surveys and family conflict studies: nationally representative samples (including men and women), and questionnaires that include all possible experiences of psychological, physical and sexual assaults by current and former partners, family and friends.