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**Haitian women participation to the Nation building process**

Throughout the history of Haiti, women have played an important role in shaping the country. From the creation of the Haitian flag, to campaigns for the right to vote, labor rights, low income beneficial economic policies and the fight to end dictatorship, Haitian women have historically and often successfully fought for equality and a just society.

Today, nearly two years after the January 12th earthquake, Haitian women's voices have not yet been heard in talks about the reconstruction of Haiti. Haitian women have been rendered silent to date. They are, however, very active and with their limited resources carry out critical activities in the country's under-served, disaster-affected communities and are involved in programs which reunite families, conduct needs assessments, document rape cases, and channel psycho-social and material support to vulnerable women and girls in the devastated neighborhoods and camps.

We have been rendered silent, but we are not invisible. Instead, we are busy under our tents in camps and in our tent offices shared with goats and chickens doing our best to get back on our feet. We do our work while we bury our dead, support our survivors, worry about our traumatized children, and our people under tents in rainy and hurricane seasons.

We are busy surviving. Most earthquake victims still live in tents or dangerously damaged houses. Everyone is a victim of this natural disaster but women are the greatest victims and are disproportionately affected by the increased gender-based violence which inevitably results from desperate times. By all indicators, even before the earthquake, Haitian women were extremely vulnerable to this type of violence. It has only gotten worse in the wake of the disaster. A large number of

Haitian families are lead by female heads of household with limited social safety nets or government protective services. While humanitarian *relief* initiatives are targeting the country's immediate basic needs, few *reconstruction* efforts are targeting the long term redevelopment of the women's livelihood or ability to care for their families in a safe environment.

We are busy trying to resume business operations. We are so busy that we have not yet taken the time to cry or even initiate the healing process. How can we legitimately talk about reconstruction, if our minds, our souls remain under rubble? We, women living in devastated Port-au-Prince, Jacmel, and Leogane remain broken, too vulnerable to be fully part of the so called reconstruction process.

Throughout the country, many women's organizations, groups and capable individual female leaders are working in the shadows to address these issues and advocating for gender equality, and social and economic justice. Many have their own families to support while they work to provide a better life to their community in Haiti. These women not only come out of Port-au-Prince but also from the Diaspora mostly based in the US. They are our strength. They are the backbone of our economy, of our country. They should be the Poto Mitan, the Center Pillar of the building of our Nation on **more** strong and durable **foundation**.

While doing our best to start the healing process, we should rely on these women to think and develop a plan to build the new Haiti. While a majority of our courageous female citizens are illiterate, they are very knowledgeable of the needs and priorities of their communities and the country. Even with their limited resources, they have become the default suppliers of many of the social protections and services that should normally be provided by the state. It is important that these women be supported so that they can enhance their skills and confidence to better join forces to claim their right and be a voice in the reconstruction debate. The women of Haiti should stop acting in the shadows and, instead, have their voices heard at all levels and be invited to sit at the table of what should not be called the reconstruction process but instead Nation building effort.

In this perspective, Femmes en Démocratie has joined forces with other women's networks and federations in combining women throughout the country to launch a

concerted effort and support women's full participation in the Nation building effort..

This effort, under the leadership of the Ministry of Women Affairs and the Caucus of Haitian Women Parliamentarians, is articulated in the slogan « *Fanm se poto mitan rekonstriksyon Ayiti* ». It is financed by the Government of Norway and is supported by the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti, MINUSTAH.

Through this effort, a thorough process of consultation has been initiated at the national level through a convening of 350 focus groups that are bringing together over 4000 women. These focus groups were carried out in November and December of 2011 throughout the country, in over 100 municipalities and rural communities. They facilitated a dialogue about women's concerns and priorities and suggested concrete actions that could resolve many issues,

In the months of January and February of 2012, the results of these focus groups will feed discussions and facilitate settings of women toward resolving key priorities in regional forums organized in the 10<sup>th</sup> geographic department. These regional forums will conduit toward a national discussion in March of 2012, bringing together about forty delegates representing all relevant departments. Results from the local and regional consultations will facilitate the drafting of key points necessary for a Haitian Women Platform for Action for Nation Building.

In order to better refine the resulting platform and to focus the resulting likely request for consultation, the Ministry of Women and the Caucus of Haitian Women Parliamentarians will convene women leaders from countries who have experienced challenging conflicts, and who have successfully achieved peace and overseen difficult processes of reconstruction in other communities. These leaders, from countries such as Rwanda, Northern Ireland, Guatemala, Benin, and Liberia, will share their experiences including best practices and lessons learned, with Haitian women leaders.

This exercise linking local communities to the global world and learning from other's experiences, will facilitate a refinement and adoption of a National Women Platform for Action with ten key points that will serve as a compass for the

participation of Haitian women in the Nation building effort. This Platform will then be translated into a legislative agenda by the Caucus of Haitian Women Parliamentarians for presentation before the government of Haiti. It will also serve as an advocacy tool in favor of developing a national budget that adequately responds to the needs of Haitian women, and those of their communities.

This initiative is supported by international women leaders and celebrities and by the organization Vital Voices Global Partnership; it extends beyond Haiti's borders and is quickly becoming a global movement in favor of Haitian women's full participation in the Nation building effort.

Today, 21 months after the January 12<sup>th</sup> earthquake, there has been an election and a resulting new governmental focus toward change. President Michel Martelly, a singer with no political background, has been elected with 67% of the popular vote because of this platform for change. Rebuilding the country is an enormous challenge which requires transformational leadership. The building of our Nation is not only about buildings, construction code, projects or money. It is about vision, unity of purpose and the power to plan and control the future of Haiti. Only women can be drivers of this change and of this unity of purpose for the renaissance of Haiti. There could not be a more critical moment for women's participation in the government of Haiti. It is time to raise the voices of women on the ground so that they can be heard and identify concrete strategies and ways to tap into their resourcefulness to address community needs throughout the Nation building process.

We, women leaders from the NGO cannot be the women of Haiti's only voices. Their true voice is their elected representatives in local governments and Parliament. Their true voice is Senator Edmonde Beauzile, in this room with us this morning who has been elected by the people of the Centre region. I am proud to introduce to the audience Senator Beauzile the first Haitian women democratically elected as President of a political party.

The voice of Haitian women is the Haitian Women Parliamentarians Caucus which needs the full support of the US Institute of Peace, of Vital Voices, of Digital Democracy and other US public and private institutions involved or

interested in Haiti. This Caucus which will be further reinforced by the capable women from different departments running for senatorial elections next spring. Their voices will be women such as Barbara Guillaume, who is also in this room, and who is running for mayor in the next local elections for the most challenging neighbourhood of Haiti, Cité Soleil. These women candidates will be a voice for the women of Haiti and will campaign under the Women National Platform for Action for Nation building.

The investiture of more women in government will allow them to join forces with our current five Congresswomen and will help the effort to create a critical mass of women in local governments to, in turn, allow them to collectively question the gender-based discriminatory rules of the current political game, to set new rules and to create more transparent procedures, to influence legislative and local agendas in favor of social and economic transformation responsive to women's, children's and community needs. The needs of people at the urban and rural level will be addressed in this new governmental makeup if more women are in public decision-making positions. Women's equal participation in public life will not only facilitate women's direct engagement in public decision-making but ensure that the needs of all segments of the population are taken into account through the implementation of equitable and just policies throughout the Nation building effort.