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Haitian Women: the Centerposts of Reconstructing Haiti

Summary

- Women are Haiti's *'poto mitan'* (centerposts), playing pivotal roles in matters of family, education, health, commerce and the economy, and agriculture.
- Gender-based violence has been and continues to be a very real threat to the security and well-being of Haitian women and their families.
- Deficient access to education and healthcare, and misguided agricultural policies, have exacerbated women's burdens.
- Improved social, economic and political empowerment of women is vital to rebuilding Haiti.

Haitian Women as the *'Poto Mitan'*

Since Haiti's devastating January 2010 earthquake, women have played a vital role in their country's response to the catastrophe. They have worked tirelessly in leveled communities and within squalid tent camps, treating the wounded, supporting survivors, and reuniting families. They have been caring for children, ensuring that a roof—or a tarpaulin—is over their heads and clothes to wear, finding something to eat, preventing illness, and returning kids to school. They have gone back to work, most critically in their pivotal role as the backbone of the country's vast informal economy that supplies food, clothing, and other essentials to the population. Women also pitched in to clear rubble and rebuild homes. They continued their uphill climb to ensure that their voices would be heard by those who are charged with leading their country into its future.

Far from hanging their heads as victims of the natural disaster, Haiti's women have been busy demonstrating the vaunted resiliency of the country as well as the strength and backbone that is essential to moving it forward. In sum, they have continued to fulfill a role they have always shouldered: being the weight-bearing *'poto mitan,'* or center-post, of Haitian society. The women who comprise 52 percent of Haiti's close to 10 million people play responsible roles in matters of family, education, health, commerce and the economy, and agriculture. Nearly 50 percent of Haitian women are engaged in economic activity outside the home. Women manage more than 40 percent of the country's households. They comprise more than 75 percent of its informal economy. And, as they were busy being the mainstays of their families, they also filled 40 percent of the 300,000 temporary jobs created after the quake by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and other international donors.

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Haitian Women as Victims?

Following the earthquake, most articles about Haitian women written by international journalists depict them as victims, pointing in particular to gender-based violence in the tent cities. Indeed, the World Bank estimates that 70 percent of Haitian women have been affected by some form of violence, much of it domestic. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have recently released investigative reports of violence in the major tent cities in Port-au-Prince.¹

According to Amnesty International, reporting on gender-based violence remains problematic. Factors that pose obstacles to full and accurate reporting include the lack of appropriate and secure places for women to lodge complaints, the social stigma associated with sexual violence, and fear of reprisal attacks. The limited prevention and response mechanisms that existed before January 2010 were undermined by the earthquake. The Ministry of Women's Affairs was destroyed, hampering its ability to develop an adequate response to reports of sexual and gender-based violence. Three of Haiti's most prominent women's advocacy groups were weakened when their leaders were killed in the quake. Thousands of rank-and-file activists were either killed, injured, or displaced. Police stations and courthouses were destroyed or severely damaged, making it more difficult for survivors to report violence and fostering a sense of impunity among the violators. In Port-au-Prince, the earthquake completely flattened the Fort National police station where Haiti's only special unit of police officers trained to respond to victims of sexual violence was located.

Whereas the issue of violence and the diverse obstacles for reporting it are real, the image of Haitian women as passive and helpless victims is inaccurate. This portrayal not only ignores the efforts of Haitian women in post-quake Haiti, but neglects their steadfast travails since the fall of the Duvalier dictatorship in 1986 to work against violence and toward building a more just and inclusive society. Over these past 25 years, women have formed organizations, spoken out, demonstrated for their rights, voted in elections and sought redress against perpetrators of gender-based violence by telling their stories to a Truth Commission in 1997. One high-profile effort of redress occurred in 2006, outside of Haiti in a U.S. Federal Court, when Emmanuel 'Toto' Constant, the founder and leader of a paramilitary organization called FRAPH was sued for damages by three women who were serially raped and beaten by members of his organization between 1992 and 1994. A judge found Constant responsible for the actions of those under his command and control, assessing damages to the sum of \$19 million to be paid by Constant to his victims.² Within a week of the hearing in New York, 150 rape victims wearing white dresses and black masks marched in Port-au-Prince to demand justice and an end to discrimination against them.³

The work of two grassroots organizations is representative of today's unflinching efforts of women seeking justice against violence. The Commission of Women Victims for Victims (KOFSVIV) and Women Victims Arise (FAVILEK), run by survivors of sexual violence, serve as principal contact points for the women who are among the 550,000 displaced persons who inhabit the 802 remaining post-quake tent camps. These organizations are determined to win justice and reparations for survivors, a daunting task considering their difficult access to a largely dysfunctional judicial system. Shortly after the 2011 presidential election, rumors emerged that the new government would eliminate the Ministry of Women's Affairs, thus removing a key vehicle for ensuring a voice for Haitian women in the affairs of state. In response to the rumors, KOFSVIV, FAVILEK and others helped to channel the uproar that swept Port-au-Prince in protest. Today the ministry, led by a Haitian businesswoman, remains intact.

The Broader Context

Among the array of challenges faced by Haitian women is the need for greater access to family planning and to prenatal and obstetric care. Pregnancy rates in displaced persons camps are three times higher than they were in urban areas prior to the quake and rates of maternal mortality rank among the world's highest. Yet, these conditions are by no means entirely new. One in 16 women and girls in Haiti died during pregnancy and childbirth, an alarmingly high rate, even before the earthquake.

Haiti's women face not only crushing poverty in a country where approximately 80 percent of the population live on an average of two dollars a day or less, but also a stark deficiency in access to education. Almost 60 percent of Haitian women cannot read and write. That percentage is higher in rural areas, where more than half of all Haitians reside and where 69 percent of the population must somehow survive on an average daily income of a dollar or less. Nearly a quarter of women in urban areas have completed secondary school, but in rural Haiti that figure is alarmingly less than two percent.

Throughout Haiti, women strive valiantly to be the *poto mitan* of their families, communities, and nation in a context where average life expectancy is only 50 years and more than half of the population depends for its livelihood on small-scale agriculture—a sector that has been largely ignored and underfunded. Trade policies have made Haiti dependent on importing more than half of its food. The rising cost of that food—over the last year, prices have risen an average of 8 percent while purchasing power has declined by 9.5 percent—have left some 4.7 million Haitians in a high state of food insecurity. It also has placed an added burden on Haiti's women to simply to feed their families, particularly in urban areas.⁴

Empowering Women

Almost two years after the quake, living conditions among Haiti's women have hardly improved. Violence is still a daily threat, especially for those trapped in tent cities. Real job creation has not occurred and access to health care and education remains problematic. Access to credit, a critical need for the women who shoulder Haiti's massive informal economy through their micro and small businesses, remains limited despite the efforts of some banks to reach out to the informal sector and the notable work of the Lambi Fund of Haiti and the Fondasyon Kole Zépol (Fonkoze), two organizations that offer microcredit to women entrepreneurs.

Women remain underrepresented in politics and governance. In his inaugural speech to the Haitian parliament in October, Prime Minister Garry Conille acknowledged that women hold only 0.7 percent of elected and appointed positions in government. Indeed, of the 30 elected members of the Haiti Senate, only one is a woman. In early 2011, the Haitian parliament approved a proposed constitutional amendment setting a minimum quota of 30 percent of women in the Haitian legislature. Ratification of that amendment, however, is in question. To some extent, Haiti's parliamentarians were influenced by the success of similar actions taken by counterparts in Rwanda, who approved in 2003 a constitutional requirement that 30 percent of parliamentary and cabinet seats go to women. Today, more than half of the parliamentarians in that African country are women. Similar gains in Haiti would vastly improve the power of Haiti's women to address the issues that constrain them.

International efforts to empower Haitian women have utilized a number of tools including the direct support of prominent women and organizations. The latter include Michaëlle Jean, the U.N. special envoy to Haiti for UNESCO; Michelle Bachelet, Chile's former president and now head of

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

The author of this report, Robert Maguire, is chair of the Haiti Working Group at USIP and associate professor of international affairs at Trinity Washington University.

U.N. Women; Hillary Rodham Clinton, the U.S. secretary of state, and even the Hollywood actress, Maria Bello, who co-founded We Advance, a Haitian nongovernmental organization (NGO). Other innovative efforts underway to empower women include Digital Democracy, an NGO working to use cell phones and other technology to prevent and report crime against women, and the Vital Voices Partnership, which brings together women from around the world. During her visit to Haiti in February 2010, former President Bachelet stated that “Haiti’s reconstruction will be faster if women are an intrinsic part of the process.” And here in Washington, Secretary Clinton reiterates often her in speeches that “the problems we face today are too big and too complex to be solved without the full participation of women.”

A number of policy tools are available in support of Haiti’s women. They include U.N. Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820 that seek increased representation of women in decision-making levels especially to prevent, manage and resolve conflict; and consultation with women to develop effective mechanisms to protect women from violence and insecurity, especially those who have been displaced. The Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence Against Women provides a regional legal framework for the protection and promotion of the human rights of women and girls.

Haiti will not build back better without the social, economic and political empowerment of women. To date, the voices of women largely have been excluded from the reconstruction process. Listening to Haitian women’s voices and including them as full and equal partners in the process of building a better Haiti cannot be postponed. Women play key roles in ensuring the survival of families, rebuilding communities, and providing food and health care. It is not optional to empower Haiti’s *‘poto mitan.’* It is vital.

Endnotes

1. *Annual Report 2011: Haiti*, Amnesty International (accessed on December 8, 2011 at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/haiti/report-2011>) and *Nobody Remembers Us: Failure to Protect Women’s and Girls’ Right to Health and Security in Post-Earthquake Haiti*, Human Rights Watch, August 19, 2011 (accessed at December 12, 2011 at: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2011/08/19/nobody-remembers-us>).
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3. “Rape victims march for justice in Haiti capital,” Associated Press, September 1, 2006.
4. “Haiti Economy: The purchasing power declined by 9.5%, rice production -17%,” Haitilibre, November 28, 2011, accessed on December 7, 2011 at <http://www.haitilibre.com/en/news-4354-haiti-economy-the-purchasing-power-declined-by-95-rice-production17.html>.



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