

NUMBER 7

# CMI BRIEF

JUNE 2020



Photo: Marianne Tøraasen

## Women's status in Haiti ten years after the earthquake

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Ten years ago, on January 12, at 16:53 in the afternoon, a magnitude 7.0 earthquake struck Haiti. The country was left in shambles. So was the women's movement. Three of its most prominent leaders lost their lives in the earthquake, and the implementation of gender policies came to a halt. This CMI Brief explores the challenges facing the women's cause in Haiti after the earthquake and provides recommendations for how to get it back on track.

## Rebuilding a fragile state

The epicenter of the earthquake on January 12, 2010, was only about ten miles southwest of the overcrowded capital Port-au-Prince, causing catastrophic damage. The earthquake reportedly killed over 230 000 people, though estimates vary greatly. More than 300 000 people were injured and 1.3 million became homeless (Haiti Equality Collective, 2010). Around 1300 internally displaced person (IDP) camps were set up as a temporary solution. The earthquake devastated Haiti's frail infrastructure and worsened already inadequate access to basic social services and security. As much as one-third of Haiti's civil servants died – the earthquake happened in the afternoon as many were preparing to leave work – and several government buildings collapsed, including the presidential palace and the parliament. Schools, hospitals, offices, and the UN mission headquarters also disappeared in the rubble (Duramy, 2011).

The Haitian state was poorly prepared for handling the consequences of the earthquake, and the international community stepped in providing around 9 billion USD in relief and rebuilding efforts. However, much of the money was never delivered. Millions of dollars were actual debt relief, and millions more were given to the UN or NGOs. The Haitian government received less than 1 per cent of the money spent. Foreign governments deemed it “too corrupt” for direct budget support, which could have helped rebuild strong, well-funded institutions (Katz, 2013).

Furthermore, the post-disaster needs assessment (PDNA), which defined the actions needed for the reconstruction of Haiti after the earthquake, have also been heavily criticized. Haitian civil society was completely excluded from the process, including women's rights organizations (Lamour, 2020).

## Not a gender-neutral disaster

The Haitian women's movement lost a generation when three of its most prominent leaders, Myriam Merlet, Magalie Marcelin and Anne Marie Coriolan, were killed in the earthquake in January 2010. These three women had been central in the rebuilding of the women's movement after the fall of the father and son duo Francois “Papa Doc” and Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier's dictatorship in 1986 (Nasaw, 2010), and founded three of the most important women's rights organizations in Haiti (Enfofamn<sup>1</sup>, Kay Fanm<sup>2</sup> and SOFA<sup>3</sup>). Merlet and Coriolan were top advisors to the Ministry of Women's Rights. All three women and their organizations were instrumental in developing the first law to criminalize rape in 2005, which until then had been considered “an offense against morals” (Jagannath, 2011, p. 10).

What was left of the women's movement was excluded from participating in the assessment process following the earthquake. Both the international community and the Haitian government have been criticized for failing to take the gendered effects of natural disasters into account when responding to the earthquake, and for ignoring Haitian women's particular needs post-disaster (Alam, Applebaum and Mawby, 2016). Research shows that disasters tend to exacerbate existing social preconditions. Since women are more often socioeconomically disadvantaged than men, they become more vulnerable to the consequences of such disasters (Wiest, Mocellin

and Motsisi, 1994). Women were already struggling in Haiti before the earthquake, being subject to systemic gender discrimination and higher rates of poverty and violence. For instance, 60% of female-headed households had been living in extreme poverty before the earthquake (IMF, 2008), and most women work in the informal sector. Income disparities are striking, and women earn less than half of men's wages (Haiti Equality Collective, 2010). The period following the earthquake also saw a dramatic increase in gender-based violence, especially in the internally displaced person (IDP) camps that were set up (Jagannath, 2011, p. 5).

As a response to the lack of gender perspective in the reconstruction framework, international and Haitian women's organisations created their own Gender Shadow Report of the post-disaster needs assessment (PDNA). It is likely that the expertise and experience of the Haitian women's movement could have helped taking a more holistic approach to the women's cause in Haiti. In fact, Haitian feminists have criticized the international community for sidelining the national women's movement's long-term work and rather overfund short-term projects under the pretext of urgency in post-earthquake Haiti (Lamour, 2020).

## Gender-based violence on the agenda

On the rare occasions that gender was addressed after the earthquake, most of the focus was on responding to

sexual and gender-based violence. Gender-based violence (GBV) is not a new phenomenon in Haiti. Many Haitian women and girls were sexually assaulted by American soldiers during the US occupation (Renda, 2001), and rape was later used as a political tool during the Duvalier dictatorship and in the unstable political climate that followed (Duramy, 2014). However, after the earthquake gender-based violence increased dramatically. Women and girls became targets of sexual violence and exploitations in the chaotic and unsafe internally displaced person (IDP) camps. Overcrowded camps that lacked safe accommodation and sanitary facilities for women and girls, combined with poor lighting at night and a lack of police forces that patrolled the camps, made women extra vulnerable for rape. Reports also show that girls often had to trade sex to secure food and refuge (Duramy, 2011).

Advocacy on both the international and national level have drawn attention to the issue of gender-based violence, and Haitian grassroots organizations have raised awareness among women about their rights and encouraged reporting of cases of sexual violence in IDP camps. Some positive developments have come out of this, as “cases of gender-based violence, and rape specifically, are increasingly making their way onto the courts’ dockets, and the demand for legal recourse has risen among women survivors of sexual violence” (Jagannath, 2011, 29). Still, such initiatives have been criticized for being mostly reactive, rather than focusing on preventing gender-based violence in Haiti. Further, an inadequate justice system and widespread impunity still hampers the fight against gender-based violence in Haiti (Alam, Applebaum and Mawby, 2016).

### Underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles

The Gender Shadow report states that in the post-disaster needs assessment (PDNA) women have been “left out of the equation when it comes to rebuilding the country’s judicial, administrative, legislative and democratic systems” (Haiti Equality Collective, 2010, p. 3). The numbers are telling: Just 11,5 per cent of the judiciary and 3 per cent of the parliament are currently filled by women. This places Haiti at a disappointing 187th position out of 190 countries in terms of women’s political representation (IPU, 2020), and well below its Latin-American and Caribbean neighbors in terms of women’s judicial representation. The Haitian women’s movement has long pushed for better representation of women in decision-making roles. This led to the adoption of a constitutional amendment from 2012 which stipulates that 30 per cent of all public positions are reserved for women. However, implementation legislation is still



One of Haiti’s few women judges in front of the appeal’s court in Port-au-Prince. The court building was destroyed in the earthquake, and ten years later, the court is still located on temporary premises. Photo: Marianne Tøraasen

lacking. There is no penalty for non-compliance and the gender quota remains largely ineffective.

Some positive developments have taken place recently on a local level. An electoral decree in 2015 helped fully implement the 30 per cent gender quota for voting lists for municipal and local elections in 2015-2016, boosting women’s local representation. This event is however a tempered success. It shows that there is a substantial pool of women politicians who are willing and ready to contribute to the development of Haiti, and who may challenge the patriarchal party structure in Haiti if only given the chance. However, since the local quota was mandated through decree, it will not be applied to future elections without legislative action (Bardall, 2018).

In today’s political climate, such legislative action may take a while. Even though the Haitian state has adopted several gender equality policies since the earthquake, it has proved hard to actually implement such policies. Legal reform is known to be extremely slow in Haiti, as bills go through a complex process involving the executive, the legislature and the judiciary, often leading to complications. Many gender-related laws have been initiated by the severely underfunded Ministry of the Status of Women and Women’s Rights (MCFDF) but are still pending (UN, 2014). Furthermore, the 2010 earthquake disrupted ongoing State programs and projects related to gender equality as the earthquake diverted all energy to emergency assistance. Weak political institutions and numerous government changes can also help explain why gender policy initiatives have been delayed (UN, 2014). Furthermore, during the past couple of years, Haiti has been facing skyrocketing inflation, fuel and food shortages, paralyzing political protests and corruption allegations against the sitting president. Unfortunately, we can expect this to further hamper initiatives to create a more gender equal society.

## Conclusion

Haiti is still recovering ten years after the devastating earthquake on January 12, 2010. Haitian women have long been politically, socially and economically marginalized, and were disproportionately affected by this natural disaster. Still, the international community and the Haitian government largely failed to include a gender perspective in the reconstruction work, and Haitian women's organizations were excluded from the process. The focus was mainly on combatting the upsurge in gender-based violence witnessed in the internally displaced person (IDP) camps. Despite the formal adoption of some women-friendly policies like gender quotas, Haiti remains among the poorest-performing countries in the world in terms of women's representation. Weak institutions and an unstable political climate complicate real implementation of women-friendly policies. Haiti's neglect of gender equality may have serious consequences for the development of the country: "...gender inequality in educational, health and labor outcomes can undermine economic development (particularly by stifling human capital formation and affecting fertility) and certainly undermines human development by disempowering women and minimizing women's roles within society" (Padgett and Warnecke, 2011, p. 529). Although the Haitian women's movement lost three of its most prominent leaders in the earthquake, Haitian women are continuing their fight to improve their living and working conditions. However, as stated by Haitian feminist Marie Franz Joachim: "Feminists necessarily need legitimate interlocutors and operational institutions to advance their cause and formulate related proposals", which is currently missing in Haiti. In order to improve women's conditions in Haiti, donors must cooperate closely with Haitian women's groups. Acknowledging and building on the long-term work of Haitian feminist voices may help take a more holistic approach to the women's cause. When it comes to combatting gender-based violence, the focus should be both preventive and reactive. It is also important to strengthen the capacity of Haitian state institutions. A well-functioning judiciary is vital in the fight against gender-based violence. Solid state institutions are also important for the actual implementation of women-friendly policies, such as the 30% gender quota.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Merlet established Enfofam, an organization that "raises awareness about women through media, collects stories and works to honor their names" (Ravitz, 2010). Among their work are efforts to name streets after important Haitian women.

<sup>2</sup> Marcelin established Kay Fanm which deals with domestic violence and offers services and shelter to women. They also work with microcredit loans to women working in markets.

<sup>3</sup> Coriolan established SOFA (Solidarite Fanm Ayisyen), an advocacy and services organization focusing on women's health, women's political participation, women's poverty and violence against women.

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