



HUAIROU COMMISSION

Women, Homes & Community

Women in Haiti after the January 12, 2010 Earthquake

An assessment of women's current conditions, their priorities for reconstruction, the recovery efforts of women's organizations, and identification of potential grassroots partners

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“Investing in women is the best investment we can make in any country. And investing in the Haitian women will fuel the long-term economic recovery and progress, not only for them, but for their families.”

—Hillary Clinton, March 31st Haiti Donor’s conference, United Nations, New York

On January 12, 2010 an earthquake registering 7.3 on the Richter scale struck Haiti for 35 seconds, the most powerful quake to have hit the country in 200 years. With the epicentre near the town of Léogâne, 17 km southwest of the capital, the impacts were greatest in the capital of Port au Prince and the towns Léogâne, Jacmel and Petit Goave. 80% of Léogâne was destroyed. The destruction in metropolitan Port-au-Prince, (which includes the municipalities Port-au-Prince, Carrefour, Petionville, Delmas, Tabarre, Cité Soleil and Kenscoff) has crippled the country’s economic, administrative, cultural, political, and population centers.

The human impact of the earthquake, referred to as “le seisme” among Haitians, is colossal. The events of January 12th are considered responsible for deaths of between 250,000 and 300,000 people, have left over a million homeless, injuries of that many or more, and economic losses of an estimated US\$11 billion (US). At least 1.5 million, or 15% of the Haiti’s population, are considered to have been affected by the earthquake bringing extraordinary loss to an already impoverished nation. While the earthquake is an overall human catastrophe, it has proven to be particularly catastrophic for women with significant risks of worsening. This crisis has intensified women’s responsibilities, such as care-giving for the vulnerable, including infants, children, the elderly and the disabled, and amplified existing social inequalities therefore exposing women to higher rates of poverty and violence.

Attention to women in the wake of the earthquake is not only important because of the jeopardy to their lives, safety and wellbeing, but because of what they contribute to overall recovery. Women commonly organize themselves to distribute supplies, establish shelter, and pool labor and re-

sources to create community support services to meet basic family needs in the emergency period. Scores of women's organizations in Haiti of all sizes and capacities across the affected areas are coming together post-quake to support their members and their communities. Yet, typically efforts of such groups are unknown or unacknowledged by top-down, externally managed aid provision systems, whether government or donor driven. This not only leaves women, children, families and their needs marginalized from aid and reconstruction decision-making, but means that such programs are not linked to local networks that can facilitate and improve efficiency of aid distribution and recovery processes.

In this context, a small team sponsored by a coalition of Haitian and American organizations undertook a rapid social assessment of women and women's organizations (or broader organizations that have a mission to serve women) who have been directly affected by the earthquake. The aim is to provide grounding for processes that will position Haitian women to fully participate in the short- and long- term relief and reconstruction processes and economic recovery.

The assessment took place in two phases, between February 5 - 19, 2010, with in-person interviews and focus groups, and between March 18-24 with phone and in person follow up conversations with leaders of the groups consulted in February. The team conducted focus groups (involving representatives from 37 grassroots women's CBOs and 1 mixed organization with a total of 396 women) in Port au Prince and Greater Port au Prince, held key informant interviews with leaders from Haitian and Haitian/Dominican NGOs, professional women's organizations, and international agencies and visited several temporary encampments for quake refugees in Port au Prince and Leogone. The assessment found that the majority of women consulted are living in precarious circumstances, struggling daily to meet their basic needs (food, potable water, shelter and medical attention), with little access to aid/support to transform their circumstances or knowledge of how to access the assistance that was purported to be available.

Membership in local women's organizations has proven to be an asset during this period of extreme hardship. Through their organizations, women have maintained ongoing contact with one another even while dispersed among temporary shelters. As a result, group leaders have been able to track members' whereabouts and how they are coping, as well as maintain core social networks will be recognized as key for emotional and physical recovery. Key activities have included carrying out surveys to track rape cases in member's camps, bringing women together for psycho-social support and involvement in self-advocacy, and collaborating with aid providers to channel support to vulnerable community members. These organizing and support efforts show how grassroots women's organizations are mobilizing in the midst of extreme hardship and demonstrate concrete areas where international women's organizations can partner to support women in their own initiatives for post-disaster recovery.

Access to aid and immediate needs

According to the Multi-Donor prepared Post Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA), through the initial US\$180 investment of the US\$1.4 billion Flash Appeal, food aid reached 5 million beneficiaries, including distribution of rice distributed to 2.9 million people in Port au Prince area and 305,000 people outside of Port au Prince and fortified supplementary rations for 421,000 vulnerable people such as children under 5 years, and pregnant and lactating women. This "surge" as it was called, was intended to provide the first wave of relief and a foundation on which independent international aid organizations and UN agencies would build with their service provision.

Yet, almost none of the 400 women consulted, who represent neighborhoods across greater Port au Prince as well as Léogâne, have had access to the "food surge" or other Flash Appeal sponsored food or supply distribution. There was criticism of the "packages" being provided, even among those who had never actually obtained the aid. The women disagreed with the strategy of providing 25

Kilo bags of rice because of the difficulty of transport and the lack of accompanying supplies that made the rice edible. At the end of March members from only 5 of the 38 organizations have connected to formal food aid and shelter supply distribution through NGOs and international agencies. The prevailing belief was that those who had access to the processes privileged their family and friends before strangers.

Potable water has been more obtainable in some cases although the availability has varied widely. Women from organizations based in Cité Soleil reported that UNICEF had set up water distribution in the city-center and that the main constraint to accessing the water was information dissemination about availability. Other women shared that they were entirely on their own finding safe water for themselves and their families and therefore without monetary resources they were forced to rely on water sources that were unlikely to be safe for consumption.

With food and water aid only minimally reaching these communities, the women shared that daily survival has above all depended on group and community members sharing with one another on an ad hoc basis. In this context women repeatedly expressed that a daily anxiety was how to keep children fed and their basic nutritional needs met. Resource constraints did not only relate to accessing perishables but also the materials, as basic as pots and fire, needed for meal preparation.

In terms of **shelter**, with limited access to tents and tarps both in February and March, most of the women consulted had created their own shelters for their families which they covered with bed sheets and other household fabrics. According to the New York Times, as of March 21, approximately 40 percent of the 1.2 million refugees that are living in 460 temporary camps across the Port au Prince metropolitan area still do not have tents or tarpaulins. Besides Famn Jamb in the Pietonville

Club camp, the rest of the organizations consulted claimed that their members had not yet had access to tarp or tent distribution, which means that they are part of the (at least) 40% of survivors in Port au Prince without water proof materials for shelter unless they found was to procure them independently.

These precarious circumstances related to shelter have produced several layers of consequences. First, bed sheets and even partial protection from tarps does not sufficiently protect against inclement weather (rain, intense heat) or insects. Therefore, housing conditions are contributing to health concerns such as flu and insect-bite related illnesses and infections, which was apparent among groups consulted. In the context of shelter, the women discussed **the need for sanitation and bathroom facilities**, the lack of which meant that human waste in addition to other garbage polluted the temporary camps.

The **medical attention** that the women sought was not primarily for quake-induced injuries. Most of the women consulted shared that they were aware of accessible medical services being provided for those that suffered from earthquake-related physical trauma, but felt that there was little capacity among providers to treat non-earthquake related illness and injuries. Their main medical concerns related to communicable diseases like bronchitis, the flu and pneumonia and waterborne/sanitation related sicknesses that particularly threaten children. The women asserted that these risks of such illnesses are exacerbated by the conditions and close quarters in the camps, the lack of protection from rain, limited sanitation facilitates, infrequent trash collection, and overall poor level of hygiene in the temporary camps.

The women expressed strong concerns related to women's sexual and reproductive health. The lack of privacy and supplies meant that bathing was challenging and women complained of increased

vaginal infections and difficulties related to menstruation. Women suggested that aid in the form of a “kit sanitaire” with basic bathroom supplies geared to women’s needs could provide enormous assistance and would help to prevent these problems. Finally, most groups mentioned that it is common in camp settings for women to give birth without medical attention, posing serious health risks for both mother and newborn.

Other essentials for recovery:

While food, water, shelter, sanitation and medical care received the most immediate attention in the focus groups, discussions would inevitably turn to two issues the women emphasized as essential for recovery: re-accessing school for their children and employment opportunities for themselves. Clearly also a long term goal, women, from all socioeconomic classes consulted, focused on education as an immediate need both for children’s’ learning but also a means to heal from the trauma of the quake. One woman from the Cité Soleil organization Fam Viktim captured many of the women’s fears when she shared, “We want to know what we can do about our children’s education which we see is at risk because the majority of schools were destroyed. This is urgent because we know that it is education that makes a people.”

Women across the career spectrum emphasized their need to return to work and re-establish independent income generation even while living in such precarious circumstances. Even in the midst of extreme immediate needs, several suggested that support for work opportunities could be more valuable than other kinds of external aid.

As a member of Association de Bolosse asserted, “We want to go back to work. As they say you can give someone a fish or you can teach someone to fish. We need to go back to supporting ourselves.”

Integrating local groups in aid distribution: Women’s groups’ ideas for improving access

After discussing the shortcoming of the first phases of aid distribution that had not reached the majority the members of these women groups, participants recommendations were clear - **integrate local organizations, like theirs, into the aid and recovery processes.**

As expressed by a member of the Cité Soleil organization, Ligue Ministériel des Dames de la Cité, “we can find out who needs what and where they are.”

Such groups could also be involved in disseminating information to potential beneficiaries so that they were aware of both the opportunities available, the rules of access and any responsibilities they might have to meet in order to access the support. Several focus groups discussed creating local committees with representation from local organizations so that there could be a streamlined body that would be the intermediary to coordinate with aid organizations while being grounded locally. A member of the Femmes Travailleuse de Jacquet noted that if local organizations were involved in aid distribution this would create a way for survivors like her to have a link to the continued recovery, even past this emergency stage.

Safety and violence

The majority of women consulted counted safety and security as primary concerns especially among those women who were in temporary camps or relocated elsewhere. The women said that having to live out in the open meant that any of the few possessions they salvaged or obtained following the earthquake, including provisions of food or water, vulnerable to theft.

“We are much more vulnerable now,” stated a woman from KONAMAVID.

Without electricity in the camps, the complete darkness after sundown gives cover to perpetrators. Therefore, many of the women shared that they would organize sleep shifts overnight so that there

was consistently someone who remained vigilant to strangers and potential thieves in the vicinity of their families and possessions. Only members of one group, FAVILEK, had been able to obtain connections to a source of electricity within a section of their camp and they reported that they thought crime had been reduced since they could keep lights going throughout the night.

While the ongoing threats of property theft are of considerable concern, sexual violence is a greater fear for the women consulted. KOFIVIV, one of the highest capacity groups interviewed, undertook an assessment of members to track their overall circumstances and they found that as of March they had been 20 cases of rape post-earthquake among their members. The constant threat of rape has had an impact on women's mobility and autonomy, with daily decision-making - particularly after dark - informed by safety considerations as much as practical needs.

Across the groups women said that they thought the presence of the Haitian police force, the US army or UN forces would help to improve security. In the Pietonville golf-club where Famn Jamb members are based the participants said they believed that the presence of soldiers on the camp grounds (although they do not patrol inside) as well as intermittent visits by the local police and even the mayor had been positive for women's safety. **In addition to externally provided security, the women advocated for all women to have phones and phone credit so that they could report cases of sexual violence and reach out for help if they were in jeopardy.**

Mid and long term Priorities for Reconstruction and Recovery

Participants made clear that given the hardship Haitians had faced pre- January 12 it was necessary for recovery to build beyond for the better.

As one woman from KONAMAVID shared, “you can't think of reconstruction without thinking of improving people's lives... People must be able to live like people. That is what we ask for from the reconstruction - that we can live like normal people. There are people that don't know how to work - never had the chance - reconstruction must bring a way to live as normal people should. If the 12 of January could bring a new Haiti, we would want that.”

Second, women underscored the importance of processes that would allow them to begin to provide for themselves again instead of becoming dependent on external assistance.

With this in mind, women's longer term priorities included permanent, safe, and stable housing, education from the primary to professional levels, healthcare and employment opportunities, aspects of life that most of the women felt had not be adequately provided for prior to the earthquake.

As part of fostering sustainable long-term recovery, it was suggested that aid processes should focus not only providing for victims but also integrate alternatives, whereby women could provide for themselves. They saw local markets and women producers as a way to do this, expressing concern that a significant proportion of the staples such as rice that had been distributed as food aid had been imported rather than purchased locally even though local production has continued in parts of Haiti not damaged by the earthquake. While recognizing the essential nature of timely food aid, the National Haitian Women's organization Solidarité Fanm Ayisyen (SOFA) asserted that such processes cannot be prolonged and provided in a way that would undermine Haitians' ability to provide for themselves over the long-term.

Representatives of the Commission Nationale des Femmes Travailleuses d'Haiti (CNFT) were adamant that women be central in the reconstruction, that they be included in decision-making as well as recruited for the jobs that will be generated by recovery projects. Ginette Appolon, president of the commission and long time union leader said, **“I do not want to see women only supporting the reconstruction, cooking for or bringing water to the men who get the jobs working on construction projects. Women can learn how to do this work too.”** To be sure that Haitian authorities and donors are aware that women want the same opportunities as men in the reconstruction, CNFT organized a march through downtown Port au Prince that included 250 male and female supporters calling for women's inclusion throughout all stages of the recovery process.

Recommendations

In light of the findings presented above the authors have generated the following recommendations:

- The findings show how grassroots women's organizations have a unique, and unparalleled role in keeping local communities connected, providing emotional and physical support, and sustaining social infrastructure in the aftermath of the earthquake where there have been few or no other mechanisms available to survivors. Yet local and international support to Haiti has largely bi-passed such organizations in terms of assessing needs, planning responses and engaging survivors. Therefore, it is essential that those international organizations that seek to support women do so through the systems that women have created for themselves.
- Even while confronting continued urgent basic needs, women want to be involved in improving their own circumstances as well of that of their neighbors. Therefore partnerships with women's organizations must seek to provide support for short and long-term activities, fostering opportunities for input to longer-term development while also facilitating immediate action such as community-based counseling and support groups within camps or neighborhoods.
- The women repeatedly emphasized that they and their families, particularly their children, were dealing with overcoming the psychological trauma of the earthquake and therefore supporting organizations in providing ways to manage these psychological issues is as important as meeting the physical needs, even if they are less obvious.
- Safe spaces for women are sorely lacking which has contributed to the increase of sexual violence and the creation of environment of fear in which women and girls' mobility has become limited. Interventions must consider lighting and location of common facilities like toilets, washing and bathing facilities. Self-generated solutions, such as bringing electricity to encampments or creating vigilance brigades should be supported. Best practices as implemented in other disaster settings by women's groups offer important blue prints for possibilities in Haiti.
- Any support provided needs to be done with full transparency and accountability mechanisms. There is little trust of external support among Haitians as demonstrated by the women consulted and even though in many cases it seems that there was no fraud in how aid has been distributed, that is immediately what has been assumed.
- Local organizations of all kinds have been left out of planning processes for Haiti's recovery. As the women's organizations and grassroots leaders consulted have shown, this does not mean these groups have stood still but instead have mobilized to the extent of their capacity. They have in depth knowledge of how to organize in Haiti as they have demonstrated prior to and after the earthquake and their direct experiences as survivors post-earthquake has given them great insight into aid processes. This knowledge must be mined as long-term planning is undertaken.



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The Huirou Commission, established in 1995 at the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing, is a global coalition of networks, non-governmental and grassroots organizations, institutions and individual professionals that links grassroots women's community development organizations to partners for access to resources, information sharing and political spaces. The Huirou Commission fosters grassroots women's groups' participation in decision-making processes focusing on promoting urban and rural livability and sustainable development, local to global, and promotes the awareness of a pro-poor, women-centered development agenda among key bilateral and multi-lateral institutions.

The Huirou Commission members focus on network building, knowledge sharing, and advocacy activities associated with:

- Sustaining grassroots women's leadership in redeveloping families, homes, communities, and economies in crisis situations (disaster, post-conflict, and HIV/AIDS);
- Local governance and asset-securing approaches that anchor grassroots women's participation;
- Collaborative partnerships that strengthen and upscale grassroots local knowledge and advance alternative development policies.

Huirou Commission member networks and other organizations organize through four campaigns: Governance, Community Resilience, AIDS and Land & Housing. These Campaigns are identified bottom-up from the work of grassroots women's organizations, and they concretize and advance the contributions poor women are making to reduce poverty, meet basic needs, re-establish collective self-help approaches, and change local decision-making to include them. The Huirou Commission's core goal is *to win the development community's recognition that grassroots women's groups' participation in local planning, implementation, and evaluation is a prerequisite for effective poverty reduction and decentralization.*

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Member Networks

Federacion de Mujeres Municipalistas--America Latina y el Caribe -
GROOTS International - Red Mujer y Habitat de America Latina - Information
Center of the Independent Women's Forum - International Council of
Women - Women in Cities International - Women and Peace Network