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Haiti

# How women shake up the political world

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**This paper was presented at the REHMONCO symposium during activities commemorating the earthquake of 12 January 2010, in Montreal.**

The originality of the Haitian feminist movement lies in the fact that it can be thought of neither in terms of a wave (first, second or third) [Bibia Pavard, "[Faire naître et mourir les vagues : comment s'écrit l'histoire des féminismes". Itinéraires \[Online\], 2017-2](#), published online 10 March 2018, consulted 14 January 2020.]] nor in terms of a defined current (liberal, black, decolonial, etc.). This movement in contradistinction to other feminist movements contributes enormously to the identification of problematic national realities, such as violence against women and girls, political participation, impunity, national sovereignty and the fight against obscurantism.

It seems to me that the metaphor of the earthquake is more appropriate to talk about the Haitian feminist movement. Whenever a problem arises at the national level, feminists take centre stage to make demands and indicate guiding principles, as was the case in 1915 (occupation of Haiti by the United States), 1957 (rise of Duvalier to power), 1986 (fall of Duvalier), 1991 (military coup d'état against the government of Jean Bertrand Aristide), 2004 (fall of Lavalas power). The movement takes shape in critical situations where the foundations of living together as a community (*vivre ensemble*) are attacked by both internal and external dominant actors.

These struggles are organized around strategic pillars based in popular demands such as the right to self-determination, equal sharing between men and women, and the right to resources. The feminist movement fights against gender asymmetries from a global popular perspective. Feminists have always been part of the effervescence that stirs our society. Faithful to this tradition, after the earthquake, the movement took a stand against a series of abuses that jeopardized its existence and were opposed to a real reconstruction of society.

To talk about its actions on the political scene over the last ten years, we will focus on: firstly, the losses suffered during the earthquake, secondly, the exclusion of Haitian feminists imposed by international actors present in Haiti after the earthquake, after the actions to restore reality, and finally, the struggles against sexist or anti-feminist actions undertaken by Haitian governments since that time.

## The losses of the feminist movement

The 2010 decade began with the terrible earthquake of 12 January 2010. The disaster hit the country hard. Among the victims, several feminists perished, including 3 historical leaders of the movement, namely: Magalie Marcelin leader of Kay Fanm (Women's House), Myriam Merlet leader of EnfoFanm (Organization for the Defence of Women's Rights) and Anne Marie Coriolan, the instigator of SOFA (Solidarity of Haitian Women). It was a painful moment for the movement. The feminists did not even have time to mourn their sisters. The unprecedented international influx of foreign military forces, humanitarian contingents of NGOs, and missionaries that the country experienced after the disaster also came with its share of problems and aggressions. These new actors settled into society with an imposing apparatus. They took advantage of this to strengthen their hold on the state apparatus with the complicity of the national authorities. [1] They mapped out the country according to the self-assigned competences of these actors while imposing emergency as a managerial management method for the socio-political and economic problems raised by the earthquake. By setting up this mechanism, they imposed the conjuncture as the criterion for governing the country while ignoring the weight of Haitian civil society in the traditional management of certain problems. The NGOs took advantage of this situation to take decisions, some of which were more inappropriate than others for the Haitian population.

# An ideological struggle imposed by external actors

In this logic, these new actors have taken an interest in the issue of violence against women in defiance of the know-how developed for more than two decades by post-dictatorship feminist organizations. In order to impose their legitimacy in dealing with violence, international actors have used the concept of a rape epidemic to talk about violence against women in the camps. The result has been a construction of Haitians as sexual predators and Haitian women as prey. This has depoliticized rape and sexual violence against women, even though the political construction of rape has been a fundamental structural part of the feminist movement since 1915.

Post-1986 feminist organizations rebelled against this situation. They refuted the constructed discourse and also rejected the collaboration proposed by certain NGOs and denounced these unhealthy intrusions into the media. In order to neutralize feminists and continue their designs, these actors spread the rumour of the “death of the movement” worldwide. [2] The result was a negative assessment of Haitian feminism, which was then disqualified as an interlocutor in the resolution of the national crisis after the disaster. The circulation of this rumour facilitated the rise of a victimizing discourse aimed at denying any form of recognition for the work already done by feminists since the end of the dictatorship. The opinions of the feminists who survived the disaster has also been delegitimized. In this struggle for information, feminists' access to media platforms has been restricted; their visibility has been reduced in favour of women's organizations created in the aftermath of the cataclysm.

In this struggle that tried to sideline organized actors on the ground, NGOs either stopped funding the organizations' programs or offered them exaggerated amounts of money that they had to spend in record time under the pretext of urgency (the Haitian state does not fund its civil society). Organizations that refused these conditions suffered a drastic reduction in their funding during the first years after the earthquake, despite continuing their political work in support of women. The movement was banned. By going down this path, external actors reaffirmed the subordination of women in the debate on the reconstruction of the country.

At this stage, the mechanism put in place by international actors facilitated the domestication of civil society by regimenting expression and controlling the available resources: on the one hand, they make speeches about recognition of women's rights, and on the other hand, they prevent feminists' access to media arenas and the resources to continue this same struggle. By its workings, this mechanism ensures that the organizations that make up the movement appear and remain as objects rather than subjects of an internally constructed discourse.

## Affirmative action in the field

In order to fight against these abuses and to challenge the discourse of impotence of feminists, Haitian feminists have resumed their work of accompaniment, referral and support to women victims of violence in extremely difficult conditions since February 2010. They commemorated the key dates of the movement, namely 8 March and 3 April. [3] Indeed, in March 2010, they set up a mobile psychological intervention structure to support women in temporary shelters [4] while continuing to raise awareness against rape tendencies in the camps. In addition to these actions, their efforts were manifold: they in turn sheltered abused women in their homes and supported the revival of income-generating activities with other women.

The first major post-earthquake battle that the women waged was against the PDNA (Post Disaster Needs Assessment), the document which defined the actions to be followed for post-earthquake reconstruction). The PDNA was the result of a two-month process led by the Haitian government that brought together more than 250 people from the United Nations, the World Bank, the European Union and the Inter-American Development Bank. Despite

the number of actors involved, the document failed to integrate the gender dimension into the strategies proposed by the Haitian government for the reconstruction of macroeconomic, social, environmental, infrastructure and governance policies.

During this same period, Haitian feminists led the struggle for the passage of the law on responsible fatherhood by the Haitian parliament, with the support of Gérardal Thélusma, a Haitian politician and member of the 48th legislature. They won their case.

## More realistic information on women's conditions

To counter the PDNA, feminists with the support of international allies produced a counter-report in which they denounced the absence of the specific problems experienced by women in the document.

On 3 April 2010, CONAP (Coordination nationale de plaidoyer pour les droits des femmes - National Coordination for Advocacy for Women's Rights) issued a statement denouncing the country's structural dependency on imperialist powers, questioning the legitimacy of the IHRC (Interim Commission for the Reconstruction of Haiti) in Haiti as the body in charge of reconstruction. In an article published online on the Radio Kiskeya website on 3 April 2010, CONAP stated the following:

*For this 3 April 2010, CONAP proclaims its independence from opportunistic actors or any populist approach involved in efforts to pick up the crumbs of a poisoned cake whose recipe, as always, has been simmered on the backs of women and once again at the expense of the claiming people and therefore against the interests of the Haitian nation. [5]*

In another position paper on March 31, 2010, the same organization explains:

*CONAP is more determined than ever to take up the pen of Mireille Neptune-Anglade, to claim the contributions of the second half of development to the creation of wealth in our country, and thereby continue the struggle to claim, to impose the recognition of the "very fanm" of those left behind by women workers in the industrial park, domestic workers, traders in the informal sector and peasant producers exposed more than ever to the phenomenon of the feminization of poverty and gender violence. The devastating impact of the January 12 earthquake has resulted in immeasurable economic losses in terms of the economic situation of families, weakening the "potomitan fanm" on which the survival of more than 80% of the nation's households, 48% of which are managed by heads of household, surviving on less than US\$2 per day, thus compromising the well-being of several generations. [6]*

## Women's quota or men's responsibility

In 2012, feminist organizations have stepped up to the plate to reject the promise of 40% women in the Lamothe/Martelly government. For Danièle Magloire,

*The most important thing is not the presence of women. What is most important is the government's focus on social and economic issues and the rule of law.*

Michaëlle Desrosiers, for her part, says this:

*the presence of [these] women in an extreme right-wing government - although popular - reflects the vision and the ideopolitical and economic positioning of women at a time when Haiti is extremely open to investors linked to the neo-colonists. [7]*

In May 2012, SOFA asked that President Michel Martelly publish a report outlining the sources of funding for his election campaign and that he denounce the blue helmets who are at the root of the cholera epidemic in Haiti. Since that time, SOFA has been drawing society's attention to the corruption that has plagued the political arena and the institutional abuses of parliament. At the same time, SOFA had sounded the alarm to show the problems related to the cherished *ti manman* programme implemented by the Martelly government. Contrary to this measure, feminists through Marie Jocelyn Lasègue demanded the promulgation by the executive branch of the law on paternity, maternity and filiation, while positing the principle of free DNA tests to break with the reality of children without fathers in Haiti. This step is part of the feminists' struggle for women's access to uncontrolled autonomy in Haiti. In Haiti, women's movement are not restricted, but this apparent autonomy is correlated to the fact that they take care of their offspring.

The year 2012 was crucial for feminists in the fight against the sexual harassment of professional women in Haiti with the highlighting of the Josué Pierre-Louis Affair [8], then president of the electoral council and former minister of justice. It was a key year in the fight against sexual and gender-based violence. At the same time, we witnessed the implementation of internal anti-feminist strategies led by male journalists in Haiti. Danièle Magloire's article on the women's movement (ibid. 2018) bears witness to this.

In 2013 feminists demanded the introduction of the 30% quota in the electoral law. Speaking of this period Marie Frantz Joachim noted:

*The institution of the 30% quota principle in the 2006 electoral law is one of the greatest advances of the feminist movement during this period, in that it introduces a formal political dimension to the feminist struggle in Haiti. We say formal because it is well known that the feminist movement is eminently political in its struggle to overthrow the patriarchal system and transform women's living conditions economically, politically, socially and culturally. It opposes all forms of authoritarianism. [9]*

They also wanted the electoral law to crack down on political parties, groups and groupings guilty of sexist practices, including the derogation of the quota principle. In October 2013, feminists marked the year with the holding of the symbolic women's parliament. Speaking about this action, Marie Frantz Joachim explains:

*The action mobilized about a hundred women representing forty (40) associations and women's committees of Political Parties from all departments, except those of the Centre and North East. 150 members of women's organizations and mixed structures were involved in the Women's Symbolic Parliament. They simulated with the utmost rigour, pride and serenity the role of Women Deputies (99), Senators (30), Prime Minister and Ministers (Men and Women). The Women's Symbolic Parliament process was in itself an important inclusive advocacy action linking SOFA, friendly and associated organizations and parliamentary authorities. [10]*

In 2014, the movement's biggest battle was the enactment of the Responsible Fatherhood Act under the Martelly government. This was a key moment in the fight against impunity in Haiti. The turbulence brought on by political aberrations consecrated the government's control over the Ministry of Women's Affairs, which has become a pro-government propaganda institution.

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Focused within their respective organizations, during the five years that followed the cataclysm feminists led a merciless struggle for women's participation at all levels in decision-making spaces. Within this framework, SOFA [11] conducted a study in 2015 on the obstacles preventing women from accessing decision-making spaces. This struggle has made it possible for feminists to be recognized as interlocutors able to position themselves on national issues, leading to pleas for a greater number of women to enter these spaces.

Several women's coalitions emerged, including COTEM (Technical and Multi-sectoral Committee). These actions have borne fruit and feminists have won the battle for representativeness at the level of town halls and territorial authorities. All the municipal executives have at least one woman out of the three compulsory members. It is in the wake of this struggle that we must understand the existence of the association of Haitian women mayors *Fenafemh* (National Federation of Haitian Women Mayors). Currently, feminist organizations are working with local elected women, including women mayors, for the preservation of the 30% quota recognized by the amended Constitution of 2011.

Throughout Michel Martelly's mandate, women have denounced the abuses of power, including the president's attacks on women in society. The *Nou Tout se Lili* (We are all Lili) support campaign in support of journalist Liliane Pierre-Paul, who was attacked by President Martelly, is one example. In addition to the struggles for women's political participation, a constant watch is kept on how politicians deal with the movement's main strategic areas, including women's health issues and the ruthless fight against violence against women.

In 2016, an international symposium on gender, feminism and gender relations was held in Port-au-Prince. The result was a book published in 2018 by Editions Féministes Remue-Ménage, entitled *Déjouer le silence: Contre-discours sur les femmes haïtiennes* (Breaking the silence: A counter discourse on Haitian Women). In addition, feminists have participated together in several major international feminist scientific events. This dimension of the struggle reflects the global dynamic that drives the Haitian feminist movement. Indeed, due to the unfavourable position occupied by the country on the international scene, feminists generally fight on two fronts: national and international. Haitian feminists were the first to denounce the excesses of MINUSTAH (United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti), the rapes of minors and young people of both sexes and the abandonment of their children by peacekeepers. To mark their disagreement, feminists have cut off ties with MINUSTAH in Haiti by starting a battle for the disoccupation of Haitian territory by UN soldiers and the compensation of abused women and cholera victims.

At the same time, during this period, struggles for the decriminalization of abortion intensified. This is because feminists have become aware of the damage this act has done to the lives of women, especially the poorest women. They have therefore set up a collective, the DSSR (Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights) collective, which is essentially responsible for fighting for women's access to sexual and reproductive health rights.

Between 2018 and 2019, post-1986 women's organizations, including SOFA, waged a fierce struggle against the current government by taking a stand for the departure of the current president, participating in demonstrations, writing statements for the press, and organizing activities to denounce the creeping signals of the dictatorship. This struggle is part of a fight against obscurantism and for the survival of Haitian society.

In addition to these actions during the decade, feminists have been waging a relentless battle against the ruling PHTK (Haitian Tet Kale Party), which mobilizes a toxic form of masculinity to govern. Indeed, this power does not hesitate to call for women to be raped when they question the authorities. The PHTK does not distance itself from the men in power, officials whose names are cited in physical and sexual assaults on their relatives and employees. PHTK officials use slander, insult, violence and corruption as modes of government.

In Haitian society's fight against corruption, the rape of women, particularly in poor neighbourhoods, is used as a means of repression to neutralize the mobilization. To counter these abuses, SOFA), Kay Fanm (Maison des

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femmes) and Fanm Deside (Femmes déterminées) are carrying out a series of awareness-raising activities in the field to explain to the population the danger posed by this power by showing the similarities that exist between the PHTK power and the power of the Duvalier. The regime that had reigned in Haiti by killing, massacring, pillaging and raping for 29 years with the complicity of a large fringe of the international community, as is the case today with the PHTK regime.

In conclusion, this journey through the decade shows that the feminist movement carries in its momentum a double movement: responsibility towards Haitian society and hope for a better tomorrow. Women refuse to give up. Since 1915, they have made indignation a *leitmotiv* to build a political dynamic in Haiti that will bring about social transformation. Faithful to its strategic pillars built over a century of struggle, the Haitian feminist movement has been able to impose the question of political participation in the national debate over the last ten years, although the means at its disposal are rather weak.

During this decade, women have strengthened their presence on the political scene at the level of town halls and local authorities. They have emerged as key political interlocutors with CONAP, which in the past decade has been engaged in a relentless struggle to raise the profile of the political work of feminists. They also succeeded in adding the issue of harassment to the debate as violence against women with the Josué Pierre-Louis Case and they succeeded in imposing the term *Tizonnay* in Haitian vocabulary to qualify sexual harassment. They have transformed women's political demands into public policy through the National Plan for Equality between Women and Men and the national plan to combat violence against women, while demonstrating the need for a national law to combat violence.

In the area of health, they have shown the need to link the fight for the decriminalization of abortion to the fight for the right to life, and for access to sexual and reproductive health rights. They also relaunched the fight against impunity by taking up the fight against corruption and administrative mismanagement with the rest of society by participating at various levels in the battle over Petro-Caribe funds. In addition to these actions, the most important gain is the transmission of feminist know-how to a new generation of activists in order to keep alive the flame of women's combativeness in Haitian society.

Ultimately, through this presentation, the earthquake shows how feminists are forced to fight on several spaces (international, national ...) to maintain their gains while campaigning for new ones. This shock evokes the idea of an earthquake; after aftershock after aftershock, women respond to situations of aggression while clinging to the strategic pillars that support the movement's social demands, which must help them overcome social crises and contribute to building society.

Translated by **International Viewpoint** from "Haïti : comment les femmes secouent le monde politique" [Plateforme altermondialiste](#).

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[1] Sabine Lamour, "L'irresponsabilité une compétence de dominant" *Revue Internationale des études du développement*, n°239, September 2019.

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[2] Danièle Magloire, "L'antiféminisme en Haïti" et Denyse Coté, "Défense des droits des femmes en Haïti: les effets déstructurants de l'aide humanitaire" in *Déjouer le silence : contre discours sur les femmes haïtiennes*. Editors Sabine Lamour, Denyse Coté et Darline Alexis, Montréal et Port-au-Prince : Remue-ménage, Mémoire d'encrier et Press UniQ, 2018.

[3] 3 April is the Haitian National Women's Day in commemoration of the demonstration of 3 April 1986 organized by feminists after the fall of the dictatorship.

[4] Ronald Colbert, "Des cellules mobiles d'intervention psychosociale pour soutenir les femmes victimes de violences," [Alterpresse](#), published online 9 April 2010.

[5] See "[Statement by CONAP against the 'rebuilding project' adopted in New York](#)". The statement was signed by the organizations Fanm Deside jakmel, Kay Fanm, REFRAKA, SOFA.

[6] "Haïti-Séisme/Conférence NY :La CONAP Â« s'inscrit en faux contre la tenue de la rencontre onusienne Â»" [Alterpresse](#). Published online 31 March 2010, consulted 10 January 2020.

[7] "Haïti : Une organisation féministe dénonce le silence de Michelle Bachelet sur la violence des casques bleus contre les femmes," [Alterpresse](#), published online 25 November 2011, consulted 14 January 2020.

[8] "Haïti-Viol-Affaire Josué Pierre-Louis : des organisations de droits humains interpellent le CSPJ sur de graves menaces contre un juge d'instruction, Lettre de 4 organisations et plateforme d'organisations de défense des droits humains aux membres du Conseil Supérieur du Pouvoir Judiciaire," [Alterpresse](#), published online 20 December 2012, consulted 9 January 2020.

[9] Marie Frantz, Joachim. "Quand Fleurissent les lilas acquis et questionnements autour de 25 ans de lutte de femmes," [Alterpresse](#), published online 27 December 2012, consulted 12 January 2020.

[10] ["Haïti :Le mouvement féministe est-il en hibernation ?" [Alterpresse](#), published online 9 January 2015.

[11] SOFA, *Ankèt prezans fanm yo nan eleksyon législatif 2015 yo : Baryè avan, pandan epi apre kanpay* sou direksyon Julien Sainvil, Septanb 2016.