

“They Forgot about Us!” Gender and Haiti’s IDP Camps

The house came crashing down on me. When I was knocked off my feet, I was with my child. When I looked for my other daughter, who was pregnant, I didn’t know what was going on. Meanwhile the house was emptied out because everything was shaking. I ran out. A cement block fell on my head and I got a fracture on my body. Now, when I got out of the house I saw how outside everything had crumbled to the ground. I said, oh my God! My friends! I can’t see them!—Solange, Poto Mitan

If I’m alive I can say that it’s only thanks to God because, for me, I didn’t think I would live anymore. I was leaving work. I didn’t have time to get home because the catastrophe took me when I was walking in a corridor, when I was still going home. I felt movement and lifted my head to look up. I saw a block falling on my head. I went unconscious. When I came to, I looked around and I saw the rubble buried. I leaned against a wall to support myself, and the whole concrete house fell down just then. I fell on my knees and the house fell on my ankles. I tried getting up on my hands but all my lower body was destroyed. Many people, young men in the neighborhood, came to pull me out, but unfortunately

they couldn't. I waited for something like 35-45 minutes under the blocks. After this, God sent someone else to pull me out. We hit the road and went to the hospital. It was then I saw that it was everywhere. That really struck me. That was very sad.—Marie-Jeanne, *Poto Mitan*

The children who were in the entryway came and called “Auntie! Auntie! Auntie!” And they struggled with me to get me out of there, and I said, “Let me pray. Let me pray!” And they picked me up and left with me. They sent me to a neighbor's house. During this time I got outside and I saw that everything was destroyed! My house didn't fall down but it was cracked. There were holes inside, so we couldn't go in. I have a cousin who stayed close by, so I went to visit her but I couldn't find her house. And when I went up to the street, I saw that the country is totally destroyed! Cadavers, cadavers everywhere! People on top of people. Nazon was destroyed. That made me very sad; I couldn't even see my roof. Until now, they still haven't found where my cousin and neighbors died; their bodies were never found at all! My cousin died with all her children!—Frisline, *Poto Mitan*

These women, all activists whose lives are shared in the film *Poto Mitan*, also shared a trauma. First their own houses crumbled around them and then the bigger shock of seeing the whole picture of an entire neighborhood, an entire city, an entire country in shambles. These women lost a sister in the struggle. Said Marie-Jeanne, “What made me even sadder: even though we were hit, God didn't deliver us to death. However, we lost Anne-Marie Fontus in our midst.”

Like 1.7 million people, Frisline, Marie-Jeanne, and Solange were made homeless. Like 1.7 million people, they sought immediate shelter. Frisline and Marie-Jeanne returned to their hometowns, to heal. In this, they joined an exodus of 600,000 people, many of them women. Like most of these returning migrants, Frisline and Marie-Jeanne came back to Port-au-Prince. Said Marie-Jeanne: “I moved back because there weren't any jobs. I'm back on my feet, and began working on April 12.”

Where could people go?

The first camp we were in wasn't good at all. When it rained the mud invaded the house. Water filled up just up to here [her shins]. We could

never find a place to sleep. If it rained, we had to stay the whole night standing. That's why we looked for another shelter, another camp. This is my third camp. It's better, but it's still not normal. A house made of tarps isn't really a house!—Frisline

Like 400,000 families, Frisline's family lives in a camp for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), one of almost 1,300 in the country and 860 in the Port-au-Prince metropolitan area. Many of these camps just sprang up organically, out of desperation and need.

The people came here because of a natural disaster. Before this the people never came inside these school grounds [Saint-Louis de Gonzague, a well-heeled private school for boys]. If they came inside it's because they had a necessity that forced them here. When the people ran here they were looking for a little shelter. They didn't know where to go. Most of our houses are destroyed. There were three types: homeowners, renters, and people living in the street. My organization, Òganizasyon Fanm ann Aksyon Ti Rivyè Latibonit (Women in Action from Ti Rivyè Latibonit), OFAPRA, came here to support people who are victimized. That doesn't mean we ourselves aren't suffering, but as a women's organization we came to give people who don't have support a little courage, helping them live. Our organization came to help people with health. We had something like 174 babies born in this site since the earthquake. Babies born here in the camp. Yes. We have 800 babies born before the catastrophe. Among the 800, many of them lost their mother or father. Some were abandoned. Some were orphaned, losing their mothers.—Elvire Constant, OFAPRA/ Poto Mitan

Living in these camps is re-traumatizing. Many call it the “second earthquake.” In Solino, for example, 6,000 people live in tents eight inches apart in a football field.

The people had a lot of infections. There's a lot of dust when it doesn't rain. I see a lot of children have fevers, diarrhea, or colds because of the dust. I was forced to go to Delma 75, to find support for a mobile clinic here. The priest told the Americans to not pile up the grounds! He said there were too many tents in the compound, that the space was saturated.—Elvire

No one has ever passed through here to investigate, not even a doctor comes here. Some people are stressed, who lost their children under the rubble, who are very stressed. They never had aid. They never saw a psychologist spend even an hour here. It's like they forgot this camp. Everywhere we are, all the NGOs we know: UNICEF, OIM, WPF . . . everywhere we sent a letter but we have received nothing. World Vision too. Only Mercy Corps came by to offer people a little water. You see the reservoir? It's empty. Water never comes out any more.—Aline Deveine, OFEDA

Unfortunately, these cases are far from unique; almost 40 percent of the camps don't have access to water. Fewer than a fifth have a clinic. More noticeable is the smell, as 30 percent of the camps don't have a toilet. Of those that do, a quarter hadn't been cleaned since January.

In my camp, there are 12 toilets in the front and 12 toilets in the back for 4,200 people. In the camp, the shower is . . . even though it's been 6 months—they gave a shower but it's the people themselves who installed it with their scarce means—you can't use them: you wash to get dirty. People hardly use these facilities anymore. Everyone at their tent has a little plastic tub, where they throw water over themselves, or they just shower in public. They put water in their tub and they bathe like that. Many young men and women do it that way. In my journal I wrote about this: young women suffer sexual aggression because they have to take showers in public.—Carine Exantus, blogger

The statistics of rape and violence against women have become alarming, a result of this close proximity, a lack of privacy, and ineffective response. Women's organization KOFAVIV (Commission of Women Victims for Victims) reported 230 incidences of rape in 15 camps. Médecins Sans Frontières reported 68 cases of rape in one of their clinics in April.

The question of security! They never did anything about that and they still haven't. There is rape, but people don't want to talk about it publicly because here in Haiti, someone who has been raped is traumatized, and they don't want people to know they've been raped. They are very restrained, so you can't know about it easily.—Carine

In a big camp like this, there should be some surveillance from time to time, but there isn't! A young man came inside the camp to rape my

daughter. When we went to the police station right here, they didn't even come, and they never even conducted an investigation when I explained the problem: This guy took my daughter to run away with her, to rape her. The guy returned under the tent and had a weapon in his hand. A police officer said, "I can't say anything. That's [Haitian president René] Préval's problem. Préval has to get involved." The police came to the camp twice, but they only patrolled the perimeter. Because the day of the earthquake, January 12, the prison wasn't destroyed but it was opened, people let out. You don't know where the key went because it was open. Everyone who was in prison—rapists, thieves, bandits—are all outside.—Eramithe Delva, KOFIV

According to official statistics, 5,409 had escaped. Given the ineffective response, many women's groups have taken it upon themselves to organize security brigades.

We hadn't had rape or violence in this camp. Last week we recorded a case. The police were behind and the thieves ambushed them here, inside the camp. They stole people's motorcycles. We don't know if it's because people are too frustrated. We organize ourselves, small families who are here, we get together to survive. We need to organize our own security. We close the gates at night. We lock the gates at 9 at night and open them at 5 in the morning. In the camps here's what activities we created: because the government doesn't see us, big people don't see us, foreign services don't see us, we created an activity for people to forget about their stress on Sundays, the women's Group called OFEDA (Organization of Brave Women in Action).—Aline

KOFIV, already active before the quake, has ramped up their efforts with their 33 community agents accompanying their 3,000 members to the police, to the courts, to the hospital, and to the streets in protest. Their work has forced them—especially leaders Eramithe and Malya—into a position of high visibility. This means that they have also become targets.

I decided to leave the camp because I was a victim of violence, where a prison escapee pulled a gun on me, pressuring me. He tried to kidnap me. He said that the police are behind him, he uses the police's firearms, that he killed a lot of people, raped a lot of women, and kidnapped many people. That's what he does for a living. This camp has a

lot of people who escaped from prison living inside. He said that he wasn't alone; he had a team of some 50 people. After we left the camp we made a lot of effort, to the Haitian government, the Port-au-Prince police station and tribunal. We have a lot of formal complaints and a warrant. And the UN (MINUSTAH) and the Bureau des Avocats Internationaux (BAI). We have the papers for them to follow up on our case, to arrest the prison escapees. Until now—two months later—nothing has happened. So we're still in *marronage*, in hiding. We have a driver pick us up and drop us off in secret.—Malya Villard, KOFATIV

Women are more vulnerable because of traditional gender roles combined with extreme poverty, social exclusion, and inequality, not just in Haiti but within the contemporary world system. Before the government stopped it in April, food distribution was managed by NGOs and officially recognized committees. This system—more efficient for foreign NGOs—was ripe for all kinds of abuse.

In Matisan, in order to get the food ration cards, young girls are forced to sleep with bandits.—Malya

Why is it these hard-up guys get the cards to distribute? Now NGOs are using them to distribute the cards. And they don't give the cards to the women. So now even a young girl in need is forced to sleep with the person for a little card. What does she get with this card? A little rice.—Eramithe

Even when the person has a card in her hand, the bandits force themselves on her, pull guns on her for her to give out the card. So now he has a monopoly. That is, he will just give out the cards to whomever he wants. You understand? The woman doesn't like it. In order to get a card you need to sleep with them. To get a tent you need to sleep with them.—Malya

Indeed, many women are victims of another form of insecurity: forced eviction.

This affects women more because you know, normally, women are always more affected by difficult situations. Because it's women who have to take care of children. It's women who have to go out in the

streets and look for a livelihood to give their children food. It affects women when the government or anyone else forces a woman to leave the camp to go somewhere else, with a lot of children in her hands without knowing where she will go.—Malya

Whereas Frisline left the first camp she was living in by choice, she was forced out of her second. Elvire retells the story of how neighbors were threatened.

So the priest didn't let food in the camp, just once. He refused water and health care. That didn't work because we had nowhere else to go! So then he threatened violence. The government never told us anything. On Monday or Tuesday [March 29 or 30], a representative of the government told us we need to create a central committee to make arrangements for when we all are forced out; we do so in an orderly fashion. The priest needs to re-open the school here, because the Minister's speech said that if a school isn't open by Monday [April] 5th, the school will be closed. The priest didn't want to lose the school.—Elvire

Elvire, along with 6,000 of her neighbors, was moved to another place, away from her social ties, family, the place where she sold goods as a street merchant, and her children's school. "IDPs" all over Haiti are facing a similar threat: 70 percent of the camps are on private land; 29 percent were shut down as of August.

Women's groups are among the leaders in improving living conditions for neighbors living in tents.

We didn't wait for people to come give us orders. We might have potential that we weren't aware of. We use what resources we have in hand. We don't wait for millions to arrive; we create. We went to an agency that works to save children, and asked for funds for education, child protection, etc. We went through the whole process but they never supported us. So we created our own space.—Elisabeth Senatus, l'Étoile Brillant

You know in Haiti, folklore is a big deal. The drum is the sign of music and the sign of happiness that allows people to relax. When you beat it, "peem, peem, peem," everybody dances. Even if you have problems, you

dance. We didn't even have the women's organization at first. We started the folklore group dancing like this in the traditional way. [Women's group] L'Étoile Brillant (Shining Star) came about when several women who were dancing started talking about what they used to do when they went to the market together. One afternoon I asked them, why don't we form a women's organization? We did it.—Elisabeth

L'Étoile Brillant created a school, an income-generating activity for women, and weekly plays and movie nights, while engaging the men and stopping rape. Women's groups are among the forefront of a growing social movement to pose solutions, to demand better from the Haitian government and from donors. The first solution is permanent housing.

I think that if the government provided permanent housing, the incidents of rape and violence would diminish. True, even when people had houses there was still violence. But it was never this bad. I think if someone has a house to stay in she has more security. Now, the person's under plastic. All it takes is someone to come by with a razor and rip the tent, and he can come inside and do what he wants. It's like you're sleeping in the street if you're in a tent.—Eramithe

And for a last word to share: the population needs to put their heads together. Now the people are living under the tent, we need to stand in front of the candidates who are going to be the president of the country and demand, what are you going to do for we who are living in the camps? What are you going to do for poor people, for women in dire poverty, who are totally let down, who are victims, who are living in the camps?—Malya

My last message to share with foreigners is that, even though they send aid, it's true, only a portion of people actually see it. The rest of us don't. I would like foreigners to really understand and follow this. I hope that they would come to visit this camp. To see what is not happening, to see what's going on, to see what's missing in the camps. If people can't visit the camps, then you who can visit, it's up to you to share our message.—Marie-Jeanne

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