

From the Guest Editor

Paying the Price, Waiting to be Heard

The earthquake that struck Haiti on January 12, 2010, not only unearthed the physical environment, but further exposed many of the underlying humanitarian issues that have persisted in the country for decades. According to Oxfam America, prior to the earthquake 80 percent of Haitians lived on less than US\$2 a day, nearly 60 percent were undernourished, and only 19 percent had access to improved sanitation (Offenheiser, 2010). After the quake, these statistics only worsened as more than 1.5 million people were left homeless, businesses and livelihoods were destroyed, and families and communities broken apart.

More than one year later, removal of rubble and housing reconstruction has barely begun. As of early 2011, only 15 percent of basic and temporary housing has been rebuilt (Oxfam International, 2011), and nearly one million people still live in one of the 1,199 makeshift camps erected near and to the south of the city of Port-au-Prince with limited access to food, water, and sanitation (Amnesty International, 2011).

Finding ways to cope with these immediate needs has captured the primary attention of aid organizations and media outlets, yet there is more to this tragedy. Fueled by the widespread civil instability, multiple sources have confirmed that sexual violence against women in Haiti is on the rise, further complicating a problem that already existed. Prior to the earthquake, a survey estimated that rapes in Port-au-Prince averaged 50 per day, based on reported cases (McClelland, 2011). In the first 150 days following the natural disaster, KOFAVIV (The Commission of Women Victims for Victims) registered more than 250 cases of rape within multiple camps (Amnesty International, 2011). SOFA (Solidarite Fanm Ayisyen), a prominent Haitian Women's Organization, documented 718 cases of gender-based violence against women and girls in its clinics from January–June 2010 alone (MADRE et al., 2011).ⁱ Although these numbers are staggering, most grassroots and aid organizations agree that reported incidents represent only a fraction of the overall scope. According to Gerardo Ducos, a researcher for Amnesty International in Haiti,

The overcrowding of the camps, the lack of security, the lack of protective measures that actually prevent or respond to sexual violence—and the lack of capacity of the Haitian police to respond . . . to reports of sexual violence, has all compounded a humanitarian crisis, and women and girls are actually paying the price for it (Democracy Now, 2011).

Why, we may ask yet again, must women pay such a price in the midst of what is already an overwhelming crisis? Many of these women and girls are already isolated as the remaining family survivors of the earthquake, and are now further stigmatized by

the sexual violence that has marked them. In a country that is suffering from many layers of inequity, gender-based violence has too easily become a way of further diminishing the presence and the voices of women. Unfortunately, it seems we have seen this scenario played out many times before in times of conflict or natural disaster, yet women too often remain excluded from the conversations and the policy-making that can work to change the governmental and community structures that directly impact them, especially in the rebuilding stages.

Grassroots women's organizations such as KOFAVIV and FAVILEK (Women Victims Get Up Stand Up) continue attempts to raise their voices in support of women's rights, although the resources and support they receive from civil authorities is minimal (or on many days, nonexistent). Blaine Bookey, an attorney with the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti, states,

Poor women are shut out of decision making processes, lack access to justice and appropriate medical services, and continue to live with heightened risk of violence.

Despite all of this, women's groups like KOFAVIV and FAVILEK are organizing and finding ways to support and protect themselves. (MADRE, 2010)

Volunteers for FAVILEK, working from under a blue tarp that constitutes their office, face death threats yet continue their efforts in the camps (McClelland, 2011). KOFAVIV, partnering with international women's human rights organization MADRE, has worked to bring international attention to the voices of Haitian women, including petitioning the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to demand action to end sexual violence in the camps.

In addition, international recognition of the need for women's voices in policy-making is slowly growing. Amnesty International recently published recommendations that underscore the need for gender-based violence to be treated as a priority within both the humanitarian and reconstruction effort in Haiti, and also reinforce the idea that participation of women and girls is a necessary prerequisite for creating effective strategies to prevent and respond to gender-based violence in the camps (Amnesty International, 2011). And as a recent Oxfam International report suggests,

Haitian authorities, along with the international community, should consult, communicate, and involve the Haitian people in national reconstruction plans and programmes. Women must be part of this process. Women's participation in decision making at all levels is fundamental for the transformation of power, citizenship and democracy. (2011)

Supporting such efforts should be an essential part of a feminist approach to humanitarian aid. Yet, this is clearly not enough. For as feminists, how do we navigate the hostile terrain surrounding humanitarian crises? How do we remain engaged when faced with the daily reminders of inequality, injustice, and violence that effect women throughout the world? In recognizing the complexity of humanitarian aid, we must in part also pay the price of negotiating our own crisis of humanity—that is, our responses to these crises. Is it enough just to know and to tell? To reflect, support, and encourage

from a distance? Must we all be on the ground—reporting, working, restructuring? Is it possible to meld the academic and the activist? To speak with others while allowing them voice?

In this special issue, our contributors grapple with these questions and more as they offer up for discussion their experiences and their thoughts on the roles of feminism, gender, and language in humanitarian crises. Kate Lockwood Harris looks at the ways gender-based violence is complicated by the inherently violent rhetoric that often accompanies speeches following disaster, and considers how such talk not only reinforces white, male hegemony, but also serves to bypass both compassion and serious considerations of social justice. Courtney E. Cole and Stephanie Norander examine gendered approaches to peacebuilding through the lens of two non-profit organizations operating in post-conflict areas—organizations that work to add local women’s voices to the healing and reconstruction of their communities.

As there are many valuable ways to approach the topic of humanitarian aid, we have expanded our Salon section in this issue to incorporate a range of essays, many from women who work to blend their academic and activist roles. Essays by Deborah Ballard-Reisch and Danielle Hope Lucier with Shawny Anderson highlight humanitarian aid efforts in Haiti. Ballard-Reisch reflects on ways to consider a feminist approach to food aid, while Lucier and Anderson consider the difficulty of understanding our responsibilities both to listen and to speak when working with communities in need. In her essay, Radhika Gajjala critiques the artificial binary of academic/activist and considers ways to address this binary in the feminist classroom. Sarah Ryan and Shirley Randell advocate for conferences reconceived as social justice workshops, based on a model from the International Conference on Gender Centres in Africa. Finally, Judy Battaglia and Erica Solomon address their work with the non-profit I Live Here Projects, which was formed after their experience with the stories of women and children in crisis compelled them to act.

In their own way, each of these articles and essays illuminates the complexity of navigating issues of race, class, and economic inequality while serving both immediate and long-term needs of those affected by humanitarian crises. Looking forward, we would do well to consider these responses as we prepare for ongoing humanitarian challenges in the hopes that our efforts may someday limit the price that those in the midst of crisis must pay.

Final Thoughts

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ⁱ The 718 cases of violence against women included 114 rapes and 540 cases of physical abuse as reported by SOFA (Solidarite Fanm Ayisyen [Haitian Women's Solidarity]), Rapport Bilan 10, Cas de Violences Accueillis et Accompagnés Dans Les 21 Centres Douvanjou de la SOFA de Janvier à Juin 2010 (Nov. 2010).