

2. *Pa Kite M Deyo!* Don't Leave Me Out!

Haitian women demand
their right to participate in
public affairs



Women in Stella Maris participate in a workshop led by Mme Marie Laurence Jocelyn Lassegue, Minister of Women's Issues and Rights

The legacy of years of violent political turmoil and entrenched ideas about gender roles makes it very difficult for women in Haiti to be active in the political arena, despite the fact that many have already proved themselves to be dynamic and able leaders of their communities. This paper describes the work of women's-rights organisation *Fanm Yo La* in mobilising women to vote and to hold their elected representatives to account, and in supporting women candidates before and after election.

Introduction

Once known as the 'Pearl of the Antilles', Haiti is a country of paradoxes. It is rich in culture and beauty, yet economically extremely poor, and the ubiquitous Haitian spirit of hospitality is often overshadowed by widespread violence and insecurity. Despite an accent on community and co-operation, more than half of the population is marginalised and excluded: such is the plight of Haitian women.

In Haitian culture, women are highly regarded for their strength, perseverance, and wisdom. At the same time, they are mother and wife, sister and daughter, teacher and family provider. They are referred to as the '*poto mitan*'¹ of Haitian society – the central beam, the foundation – keeping all things together. Numerous Haitian proverbs revere and respect women, professing that '*Se fanm ki ranje tab la, e se li ki ranje lavi a*' (it is a woman who prepares the table, and it is she who prepares order in life).

It is surprising then, to witness the extent to which women are excluded from participating in so many aspects of Haitian life, and additionally the extent to which women are victims of violence and abuse.

A difficult life for Haitian women

The average Haitian woman is a master of multi-tasking, raising her children, keeping the home, and working long hours in difficult conditions to provide a meagre living. Often she does this alone, as at least 43 per cent of Haitian households are run by single mothers. Haitian girls were granted access to formal education in 1934, yet studies estimate that today only 17 per cent of girls finish secondary education.

Access to adequate health care for women remains a critical issue in a country that has the highest maternal mortality rate in the Western hemisphere (520 per 100,000 women) – a number that has actually increased over the last few years. Furthermore, it is estimated that eight out of ten women in Haiti are victims of domestic violence. It is also estimated that women contribute up to 70 per cent of the national economy through their participation in the informal sector, yet they enjoy less than 38 per cent of the profits generated by the economy.²

Women living in rural areas face particular difficulties. Eighty per cent of people living in rural communities in Haiti live in extreme poverty, and 'in a country so severely centralised, the rural poor are even more affected by blatant and systemic exclusion and marginalisation – socially, economically, and politically. Again, women are doubly hit by this reality. Their voices are drowned out

1 **2. *Pa Kite M Deyo! Don't Leave Me Out!***, Women's Leadership & Participation, Programme Insights, Oxfam GB. February 2008

and silenced', affirms Yolette Etienne, Oxfam GB-Haiti Country Programme Manager.

Obstacles facing women in political life

Historically, women played a significant role in the slave revolution which brought about Haiti's independence from France in 1804, and several women stand out as key figures in Haiti's past. Haitians are even proud to boast that they had a female president for a brief time: as the first female Chief Justice of the Haitian Supreme Court from 1986-1990, Ertha Pascal-Trouillot became Haiti's first (and to date only) female president between two coup d'états in 1990.

However, for the most part, Haitian politics have always been *for* men and *by* men. The game of politics is organised according to men's rules, with male-designed structures and political tools. It was only in 1957 that women gained their full privileges to vote and to participate in the public arena. Since then, discriminatory legislation has continued to keep women at an unfair disadvantage against their male counterparts in all areas of life, as an inherent imbalance in power relations exists, from the basic traditional family unit, all the way up to institutional structures and decision-making arenas. This discrimination serves to exacerbate the effects of the poverty in which so many women in Haiti live, and their marginalisation from political activity denies them the right to influence and input into policy decisions that could alleviate this poverty.

Furthermore, the women's movement in Haiti is sometimes seen in a less than positive light, due to negative perceptions and misconceptions that many people have regarding feminism, meaning that many men and women alike have been reluctant to associate themselves with it. Feminism is perceived by some Haitians as an attempt to replace men in their 'naturally' determined roles. In a country where many are conservative Christians, this is seen as non-Christian and therefore not acceptable.

Finally, Haiti's turbulent political history and past crises have done nothing to advance the position of Haitian women in everyday life, let alone politics. When a country is in crisis, the government is only concerned with the basic 'bread and butter' issues of politics: there is no room left to discuss other issues such as health care, education, and women's rights.

Democracy in the wake of tyranny and violence

When considering the question of women and politics in Haiti, it must be noted that the current difficulties that women face in entering politics are not just due to an unequal balance of power between men and women. The state of Haitian politics in general is also an important factor.

Following years of a brutal American occupation, more than 30 years of tyrant dictators, and several bloody coup d'états, the first free and democratic elections in Haiti were held in November 1990 with an impressively high voter turnout. Another violent coup followed nine months later, which was followed by three years of a vicious *de facto* government. With constitutional order restored in October 1994, the country experienced its first transfer of power from one democratically elected government to another in 1995. For five years the country enjoyed relative peace and stability. New elections were held in 2000, but accusations of fraud and corruption plunged the country into another violent political crisis that lasted for three years, culminating in the forced resignation of President Aristide in February 2004.

As Haiti continues to struggle along the path to democracy, a political culture where the rule of law is upheld and human rights are respected and promoted is slowly being developed. Yet many people still associate elections and politics with violence, hence affecting their notions of civic responsibility and their interest in participating in politics on any level. In addition, women have not been exempt from political violence, as candidates and non-candidates alike. During the Duvalier dictatorship (1957–1971), Lilianne Pierre-Paul, a journalist and political activist, started a call-in radio show where women were encouraged to voice their political and social opinions: as a result she was arrested and tortured. Upon release she left the country and spent several years in exile. Likewise, in 2003, two prominent female political activists, Carline Simon and Judie C. Roy (who eventually ran in the 2006 elections as a presidential candidate) were arrested and assaulted by Haitian police, allegedly operating on behalf of the ruling party.

Achievement in the face of resistance

Despite the challenges and obstacles, women have made some significant advances in the public arena over the past decade. Women's associations and groups have formed across the country, from the larger urban centres to small isolated communities in the country's most remote corners.

The creation of the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Women's Rights in 1994, charged with working to improve the conditions of Haitian women in all aspects of life, offers hope for a more systematic approach to responding to the needs and interests of women. One of the main objectives is to integrate women's issues into all aspects of public life: to place women's issues on the agendas of the Health, Education, and Justice Ministries, to name three key sectors where women's rights are systematically violated. While it took some time to develop strategies and find its unique voice, the Ministry of

Women's Affairs and Women's Rights is making some significant advances. In addition, Haitian women have held various positions of authority within state organs, including that of Prime Minister, Director-General of the Haitian National Police, and the Chief General Inspector of the Haitian National Police.

Legislative changes made in 2005 mean that today, rape is considered a crime punishable by law, and numerous rape cases (including several against police officers) have gone to trial. Furthermore, the Haitian national police recently launched a campaign to recruit more women into the force.

Working to bring about change: Fanm Yo La takes action

Comprising more than half of the population of Haiti, there is no question that women are playing a crucial role in the country's development. Therefore, women must have *and enjoy* the right not only to participate, but also the right to be heard and listened to in matters of public policy and national development. Yet, due to the systematic and structural discrimination and exclusion of women in the affairs of public life and in decision-making arenas, women are at a great disadvantage when it comes to being successful candidates in national elections, or being chosen for positions of responsibility and authority.

This is precisely what the dedicated women of Fanm Yo La – the Haitian Women's Collective for the Participation of Women in Politics – are striving to change.

Since 1998, Fanm Yo La (which means 'Women are Here' in Haitian Creole) has been promoting women's civil and political rights in an effort to ensure that women play a more active role in policy and decision-making processes. Recognising that systems and beliefs need to change, the organisation is working towards the 'feminisation' of political and public life via various activities focusing on two main areas. The first is generating awareness about women's issues and concerns within state structures, with the end goal of achieving a systematic integration of women's concerns and gender equality within public policy. The second is encouraging civil-society organisations, political parties, and women's organisations to be proactive in terms of promoting gender equity in their organisational structures, by providing and promoting access to positions of authority and responsibility to women from all socio-economic groups.

At the same time, Fanm Yo La's work is not just about encouraging women to take the challenge to run for president, or senator, or mayor. It is also about getting ordinary women – mothers and grandmothers, small-scale producers and peasant businesswomen –

to realise that it matters what they think, that their votes count, and that they not only have the *right* but also the *responsibility* to make their voices heard. Thus, Fanm Yo La's work also includes motivating women to join together in solidarity and to participate actively in local and national politics by joining in the debates and going to the polls. In this way, Oxfam GB's support to organisations such as Fanm Yo La is crucial to empower Haitian women to make their voices heard.

'Once heard, Haitian women are then able to participate more fully in decisions that affect their lives as well as in the positive development of their communities. They are able to question, challenge, and even change their environments. Strong and active Haitian women means greater social, economic, and political wealth – which translates into healthier children with brighter futures.' (Yolette Etienne, Oxfam GB-Haiti Country Programme Manager)

Seeking out community leaders

'There are a lot of peasant women with experiences to share – experiences that can positively influence the future of our country.' (Lisa François, Executive Director of Fanm Yo La)

To disregard the experiences of peasant women does a blatant disservice to the country as it strives to pull itself out of its current state of poverty and underdevelopment. Fanm Yo La's efforts, therefore, seek to draw on the rich experiences of Haitian women from all walks of life and from all parts of the country. The women active in Fanm Yo La's activities share many similar characteristics. Ranging in age from 25 to 60, most of the women come from rural areas, where they are dynamic leaders in their communities. Most are active members of community-based organisations or associations, whether it be the local grain co-operative or the local church group, and most are women who already have some leverage within their communities. Some are small-scale businesswomen or market vendors, while others are teachers, church leaders, or voodoo priestesses.

While most have not finished high school and have limited reading and writing skills, these are the women who are in a position to influence the development of their communities through political involvement. As such, these are the women that Fanm Yo La seeks out – to build capacity, to strengthen and empower. These are the women at the heart of Fanm Yo La's activities and campaigns.

Elections 2006: mobilising Haitian women and supporting female candidates

'This [citizen mobilisation] initiative has been an excellent one. In general women are afraid to get involved, afraid to take responsibility and to participate [in politics]...but due to the civic education training combined with the awareness-generating and mobilisation activities carried out, women have decided that they do not want to be left behind, they want to be out in front.' (Rosna Prével, health educator, Grand Rivière du Nord)

In the two years leading up to the 2006 presidential, legislative, and municipal elections, Fanm Yo La, together with another local partner supported by Oxfam GB, carried out a national citizen-mobilisation campaign in three northern and north-eastern municipalities. The overall aim of this campaign was to reinforce the democratic process and encourage the political participation of women at all levels, but particularly at the municipal level. At the same time Fanm Yo La used similar methods and techniques to carry out activities in other departments to ensure a broader national approach.

The campaign consisted of inter-connected activities. These included encouraging women to think more about their role in Haitian society and to find out about the various political platforms of different political parties and candidates, and getting women to commit to voting. Meetings and debates with local candidates, open to everyone in the community, provided spaces for dialogue. Workshops were also held on themes such as the importance of the elections for local authorities, the role of candidates and the different local authority positions, non-violent conflict resolution and management, and the role of women in public life.

With alarmingly high illiteracy rates, especially among women, radio is a crucial medium in Haiti. For this reason, Fanm Yo La and the other campaign organisers relied heavily on Haitian radio stations, more specifically community-based radio stations. Radio shows, commercials, and short broadcasts encouraging citizens to vote, and promoting the participation of Haitian women in the political process, were used to ensure the maximum target audience possible.

While the overall campaign targeted both men and women alike, Fanm Yo La placed a special emphasis on reinforcing the capacity of *female* candidates, political activists, and community leaders. Thematic training workshops designed to address the specific needs of these women were organised in the three target communities in the north and north-east as a way to provide additional support to the candidates. Themes included participative community management and local development, good governance, debate techniques, and campaign organisation and techniques.

Lobbying activities aimed at the Provisional Electoral Council (CEP) resulted in the inclusion of an article in the electoral law stipulating that all political parties had to ensure that 30 per cent of their candidates are women. Additionally, together with female candidates from a number of municipalities, Fanm Yo La prepared and submitted a list of demands to the CEP to request that action be taken to ensure the installation of voting offices in several communities which did not have them.

One of the creative initiatives of the project entailed the signing of protocol agreements with political candidates from all parties, both men and women alike. The protocols – based on the principles of decentralisation, local power management, respect for human rights, and non-violence – seek to ensure greater accountability of local authorities with respect to community residents, to minimise exclusion, and promote co-operation and collaboration for the development of the community. Guided by the preamble of the Haitian Constitution of 1987 which calls for the government to ensure that the civil, political, social, economic, and cultural rights of all citizens are protected and promoted, the protocols were signed following community debates between candidates and local residents that sought to identify specific issues facing the communities relating to health, education, infrastructure, environment, and justice. Specific articles in the protocols included: mutual respect and courtesy during electoral campaigns; ‘Town Hall’ meetings to be held every three months to evaluate the council’s activities during the previous months; publication of a regular news bulletin to keep the population informed on decisions made and actions taken; and the commitment to engage in promoting women’s rights and the full participation of women via the integration of women into positions of responsibility and authority within the community.

The results: Haitian women make their voices heard

In the three municipalities where campaigning activities took place, the fruits of Fanm Yo La’s efforts were visible. In Carice, the female candidate for the post of mayor was successfully elected, and in neighbouring Mont Organisé, six out of the seven female candidates were elected to their respective posts. In addition, women outnumbered men at the polls.

These results were echoed on a national level. A total of 4,000 female candidates ran in the elections; of these, 400 women were successfully elected to various posts. Most of the women were elected to local-government posts, with only eight women elected to Parliament – four as senators (out of a total of 30 seats), and four as deputies (out of a total of 98 seats). Even though the number of women in Parliament is far from high enough, the overall numbers speak

volumes when compared to the numbers recorded for the elections of 2000; in those elections, of 2,037 women candidates, 161 were elected.

Responding to the challenges and responsibilities of being an elected leader

‘We have won the first step! Now we need to persevere to the second!’ declared Fanm Yo La’s director Lisa François at a public ceremony to celebrate those women who ran in the elections, as well as a number of key women involved in the mobilisation campaign. To the words of the song ‘*Pa Kite m Deyo*’ (Don’t Leave Me Out), plaques of achievement and encouragement were presented by current and former female politicians.

Recognising that getting women into positions of power and decision-making is only the first step, Fanm Yo La’s approach entails providing continued support to newly elected officials. ‘It is about transforming the candidates into leaders, into positive role models for change’, says François when asked about what comes next. ‘It is about assisting female officials to achieve their mission related to their respective posts, whether it be in the Parliament or in their local communities as mayors and/or community representatives’, she adds.

Once elected, women leaders face a series of challenges and obstacles to overcome. Perhaps the most obstructive is the mind-set of their male counterparts, many of whom still struggle with sexist attitudes towards women. Another challenge is trying to involve more women in the community in confronting questions related to community management and development. To address this issue, Fanm Yo La is working with 120 of the 400 elected female leaders at the local level. Joint workshops are being held with local governments in a selection of municipalities in five departments, specifically targeting mayors and their deputies, men and women alike. The three-day workshops seek to combine training on community management with training on gender equity, via presentations on participative community management and local development, and good governance.

Fanm Yo La is optimistic about the workshops. ‘In the areas where we are working, the cartels of many of the mayors elected include at least one woman. If we can facilitate the enlightenment of the male mayors [regarding] specific women’s issues, than we have two out of three on a team working to seek greater gender equity and integration’, says François.

Additionally, women leaders, particularly at the level of the senate and chamber of deputies, may require additional support to increase their capacity and effectiveness relating to specific issues and/or technical skills. One such example is that of judicial and legislative reform, specifically in terms of ensuring gender equity in the revision

of laws. For the eight female parliamentarians currently in office, Fanm Yo La recently organised a two-day workshop with a prominent human-rights lawyer and former senator and deputy. During these workshops, an inventory of discriminatory legislation was prepared and analysed via a series of tools and exercises. Additionally, the women were trained on preparing proposed bills for new and reformed legislation.

Looking forward to elections in 2010

Piti piti zwazo a ap fe niche li.

Little by little the bird builds its nest.

This popular Haitian proverb aptly describes Fanm Yo La's sentiments following the last round of elections. Slowly but surely women are gaining the confidence of their fellow citizens and being chosen to hold positions of power and decision-making. They are carving out a place for their positions, ideas, perspectives, and recommendations, proving that Haitian women have a crucial role to play in determining the future of the country.

But there is still much to be done.

With a lack of credible and sufficiently professional political parties in the field, the work is not easy. Fanm Yo La will continue to lobby for the respect of the '30 per cent rule' in terms of female candidates. Lobbying the government to encourage respect for gender equity and to promote the full participation of women when appointing cabinet ministers will also be a continuing activity, as at present, only two cabinet ministers in the current government are women.

Likewise, Fanm Yo La will continue to prepare today's women to be tomorrow's leaders. With the support of Oxfam GB, the organisation's 'Women in Politics School' will provide training for approximately 50 women from the western department. The classes, which will be held on a weekly basis, will cover many of the topics covered in training sessions run during the campaign.

As more and more women are elected to official posts, demonstrating their capacity and ability to play crucial roles within the national public arenas, they will serve as role models and agents of change, positively influencing the culture of politics for the next generation of women. And as Haitian women in both rural and urban settings become increasingly active as fully fledged citizens with a voice and the right to be heard, Haiti is slowly moving towards the day when women all over the country enjoy a life in which they are treated with equality and respect.

Notes

¹ The *poto mitan* is the central post in a voodoo temple that serves as the connection between the spiritual and physical world; it is the conduit for the spirits to enter the physical world during a voodoo ceremony.

² Foire d'Opinions Haitiennes (2007), excerpt from 'Status of Women', Marie Carmel Paul-Austin, Published by HTiCamH, www.haitiwebs.com/forums/relationships/43018-status-women-haiti.html (last checked 17 August 2007).

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