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## **Among Endemic Social Illnesses, Gender-Based Violence Is Rampant in Post-Quake Haiti**

by George Rodríguez

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In general, women—and girls, for that matter—in Haiti have historically been, at best, second-class citizens, culturally seen as fit only for household work and assigned the role of sexual object with no rights, a context in which abuse comes naturally and goes unpunished. Gender-based violence in homes has been coupled with sexual violence as political repression by dictatorial régimes in this French- and Creole-speaking Caribbean island nation.

Evidence points to the successive dictatorships of Presidents for Life François (1957-1971) and Jean-Claude (1971-1986) Duvalier, the three-decade, father-and-son régime that mercilessly ruled through repression and massively violated human rights.

Rape and assault were used during the short-lived régime headed by Gen. Raoul Cédras (1991), one in a succession of governments that rose to power and were toppled in a series of coups.

Years of violence, which included the 2004-2006 political conflict, were the framework for "widespread and systematic rape and other sexual violence against girls," according to the international nongovernmental organization (NGO) Human Rights Watch (HRW). UN reports also revealed that criminal gangs used threats and actual sexual violence to terrorize Haitian communities.

### ***Human rights organizations document abuse***

Within the 2004-2006 period, the Institut Haïtien de l'Enfance (IHE) carried out the fourth Enquête Mortalité, Morbidité et Utilisation des Services (EMMUS IV), covering 2005 and 2006, which focused on, among other Haitian issues, reproductive health, infant health, gender-based violence, and use of health services.

EMMUS IV revealed that more than 25% of Haitian women and girls reported they had been subjected to physical violence since the age of 15, while another 16% said they had been victims of the same phenomenon in the 2004-2005 period, and almost 30% said the violence had come from a husband or partner.

Violence-related pregnancies also ran high, with one in 20 women reporting such cases and, again, identifying a husband or partner as the aggressor, according to the study.

The Geneva-based NGO Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has reported that, from January through June 2007, one of its facilities in Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital, treated some 500 rape victims, which included girls under the age of 5 (2%), as well as in the age groups from 5 to 12 (10.6%), and from 13 to 18 (27.5%).

MSF says that, of those victims, 68% percent said they had been raped by several aggressors, 67% reported they did not know the attacker, and 66% percent said they had been raped at gunpoint.

Local NGOs such as Kay Fanm (House of Women) and Solidarité Fanm Ayisyen (Solidarity with Haitian Women, SOFA) reported that in 2005 they treated 188 and 112 rape victims, respectively.

The health hazards of rape translate into sexually transmitted infections, as well as stillborn or unwanted births, among other problems.

As she took part in a workshop organized by the Centre d'Information des Droits des Femmes (CIDF) in June in southwestern France, Kay Fanm coordinator Yolette Jeanty vividly depicted the local situation of the female half of her country's population. "The feminine condition is the same all over, marked by a lot of suffering and precariousness," she was quoted as saying by the regional French newspaper Sud Ouest. "In Haiti, women are still considered a sexual object, devoted to family reproduction tasks. The mentalities begin to change, but there's always a big gap between boys and girls. More and more of the latter reach the secondary level [in education], but they're still less at the university."

### *Earthquake compounded women's problems*

Among other devastating effects of the magnitude 7.0 earthquake in January 2010 ([NotiCen, Jan. 21, 2010](#), and [May 31, 2012](#)) was the deterioration of the already appalling situation of most women and girls in Haiti, which shares the island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic and also shares high poverty figures, but not to the degree of its next-door neighbor to the west.

The event, which devastated Port-au-Prince and other sectors, claimed more than 200,000 lives, displaced more than 600,000 Haitians, and left a total of 1.5 million homeless in this country of some 9.7 million people, has been particularly traumatic for women and girls. Thousands of quake-displaced people are still living under highly precarious conditions in camps set up for quake victims, a situation particularly affecting women and girls.

Regarding women's and girls' rights in Haiti, in its World Report 2012—containing data for last year—HRW explained that "high rates of sexual violence existed before the earthquake, but the precarious safety and economic situation after the earthquake has left some women and girls even more vulnerable to such abuse."

"Many women lost their homes and livelihoods in the quake and now live in informal settlements or rely on host families for shelter. The UN and HNP (Haitian National Police) have increased their security presence in some camps, and the UN Population Fund and humanitarian organizations have worked to increase lighting in many camps," the agency added. "Yet Human Rights Watch found that some victims have difficulty accessing post-rape medical services in sufficient time to prevent unwanted pregnancy."

HRW also said that "pregnancy rates in camps for displaced people are three times higher than urban pregnancy rates were before the earthquake."

"Human Rights Watch found that many women and girls in camps do not know where to get birth control or prenatal care even though these services exist. Many have given birth in tents or some on the street en route to the hospital because of transportation difficulties," said the New York-based NGO. "Human Rights Watch also found that women's lack of access to economic security leads some women to trade sex for food or other necessities without using contraception, compounding the impact of their lack of access to reproductive health services and increasing chances for unintended pregnancy and disease."

"In particular, pregnant women and lactating mothers face increased hardships, as do women with disabilities and elderly women, due to constrained mobility and greater need for health services, food, and water," HRW went on to report. "Women also have difficulty participating in decision-making about recovery and reconstruction."

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