

Feminist struggles in Haiti: historical landmarks and current consequences of the international presence



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The author describes the history of feminist struggles in Haiti as also being the struggle for democracy and against foreign intrusion. The *Ligue Féminine d'action sociale*, created in 1934, introduced a variety of activities such as civic education for women, night classes for female workers, a cooperative credit union, conferences throughout the country, the creation of libraries, a workers' hostel, petitions sent to the relevant authorities to open schools for girls, and campaigns for equal pay. For more than 25 years, these activists demanded democratic freedoms, including the emancipation of women, before being silenced by the regime of François "Papa Doc" Duvalier.

On the strength of the independent Haitian spirit, the feminist movement came back to the fore after the fall of Jean-Claude "Bébé Doc" Duvalier in 1986, led by a new generation of activists and certain leaders who returned from exile. The event which marked the beginning of this new era was without doubt the call by feminist leaders to demonstrate for democracy and women's rights two months after Jean-Claude Duvalier's exile. This resulted in 30 000 women taking to the streets in Port-au-Prince on 3 April 1986. During this period, many grassroots organizations were created; the first refuge for women victims of violence was created (Kay-Fanm), as well as 400 local women farmers groups, bigger national groups such as EnfoFanm, the women's sections of the *Mouvement Paysan de Papay* (MPP) and the *Confédération nationale des éducatrices et éducatrices d'Haïti* (CNEH), and the *Centre de promotion des femmes ouvrières* (CPF0).

Eight months after Jean-Bertrand Aristide was elected (1991), he was ousted by General Cédras. Most militant feminists went underground and cases of human rights abuses, particularly rape as a means of repression, increased dramatically (HRW, 1995). Under the military regime, feminists publicly denounced the rising number of rapes and other violations of a political nature committed by the security forces on women and feminist leaders. They encouraged international organizations to document rape in Haiti as a means of repression and, in doing so, they ended the taboo associated with sexual violence against women (Fuller, 1999).

The end of the Cédras military regime and the return of Aristide's constitutional Presidency was accompanied, in 1994, by the arrival of a multinational military force. Feminist groups took advantage of this new democratic environment to obtain the creation of a Ministry for Women's Condition and Women's Rights (MCFDF).

Having joined forces within the CONAP (national coordination for women's rights advocacy), they denounced those who were responsible for political violence specifically directed against women and the murder of a militant (CONAP, 2004). For many, the forced departure of President Aristide in February 2004, under the auspices of the major powers, was a victory for women's rights, but at the same time, it represented an unacceptable form of interference by the United States (Burton, 2004). The CONAP also denounced the individual and collective rapes carried out by soldiers of the MINUSTAH. It was behind the creation of a mixed body bringing together representatives of the state, international institutions, INGOs and feminist associations: *la Concertation nationale contre les violences faites aux femmes*. Following the earthquake, the CONAP organizations also conducted preventive operations in poor neighbourhoods and in IDP camps.

The international community, the diaspora, INGOs and international contingents of United Nations peacekeeping operations have been part of the Haitian political landscape for a long time and constitute an unavoidable reality for its feminist movement. However, the arrival of great numbers of male and female international humanitarian workers following the earthquake radically changed the political landscape. The concrete assistance that was provided was positive but it also had significant secondary effects. The author argues that the humanitarian response increased not only the Haitian population's dependence on international aid but also damaged large areas of the local economy and the social fabric: as in other major humanitarian operations, there was a great surge of media interest, sensationalism, over-simplification of messages, an emergency culture and disorganization.

International organisations spread the image of Haitian women as victims, an image forged by the information spread by the western media, the horrors that they witness, the extreme poverty of the population and the disorganization of the Haitian institutions and infrastructure. Haitian women were transformed by the discourse of INGOs into a symbol of support for the whole of humanity, of self-sacrifice, of the family and education (Corbet, 2011), so that they were no longer active social agents but victims. These representations relegated the Haitian feminist movement to the shadows, whereas in previous periods it had managed to impose amongst its compatriots and international partners an image of women who were strong and socially committed.

The Haitian feminist movement fought to transform patriarchal ideas, laws and practices. But the humanitarian response radically transformed the Haitian political and economic landscape. This became more permanent with the presence of the MINUSTAH. Also, media attention fixed the image of Haitian women as victims and dependent on foreign aid in western minds. This therapeutic representation helped to justify the foreign incursion into the Haitian territory and undermined the feminist movement. As a result, sexual violence was viewed as just one more source of

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trauma in this natural disaster situation that the humanitarian response had to address. But a feminist analysis helps to shed light on the reinsertion of patriarchal conceptions of femininity in the humanitarian discourse which invalidate the advances of Haitian women, rendering the significance of the Haitian feminist movement invisible and weakening it in the process.

Summary of an article by Denyse Côté, which have been published in the review, Possibles (vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 209-223), with the title “Anpil fanm tombe, n’ap kontinye vanse: luttes féministes en Haïti”. [Read the full article](#).

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