

# **Gender in Post-Earthquake Haiti: Gender-Based Violence, Women’s Empowerment, and a Way Forward**

Moderator: **Elise Young**, *WomenThrive*  
Speakers: **US Representative Frederica Wilson** (D-FL)  
**Colette Lespinasse**, *Support Group to Repatriates and Refugees (GARR)*  
**Smith Maximé**, *Free the Slaves*  
**Anne-christine d’Adesky**, *PotoFanm+Fi*  
**Claire Lauterbach**, *Gender Action*  
**Jean-Ariel Joseph**, *Secretary General, Haitian Senate*

Access the full presentation [here](#)

## **Description**

This briefing highlighted the challenges facing women in post-earthquake Haiti and opportunities for gender equality as Haitian women and men collaboratively rebuild their country. Participants addressed the prevalence of gender-based violence in Haiti and strategies for its prevention, as well as related issues, including women’s economic empowerment, inclusion of women in the development and reconstruction process, and gender integration in foreign development assistance.

The panel included the voices of Haitian grassroots leaders, the government of Haiti, and the authors of two studies on the effectiveness of responses to gender-based violence in Haiti and the integration of gender issues in the post-earthquake aid response. Recognizing that Haitian actors understand best the challenges on the ground, this briefing reflected frank and productive conversations on the vital role of both women and men in Haiti’s development and how the U.S. government can best support them in this endeavor.

## Analysis

*Elise Young* launched the discussion by asking the audience to reach out to their representatives in Congress and ask them to take three steps that will help address gender inequality in Haiti: 1. support the House Resolution on Gender Based Violence; 2. Speak up on the implementation of USAID Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Policy; and 3. Improve consultation processes with women.

The conversation expanded with *Colette Lespinasse*, the Executive Director of the *Support Group to Repatriates and Refugees (GARR)*, an organization that works with refugees and Internally Displaced Populations (IDPs) in Haiti. Colette observed that, in the aftermath of the earthquake, the people who were carrying on with daily tasks necessary to keep the community alive and moving forward – cooking, caring for the wounded, and taking goods to the market – were women, demonstrating the fundamental value of women as the pillars of Haitian society. She noted, however, that ***policies that benefit women are sorely lacking in Haiti***. Women bear the brunt of social responsibilities, but are treated as second-class citizens. Ms. Lespinasse' analysis of the national budget in Haiti revealed that there were no funds for female-specific policies and needs, although 80% of those living in poverty are women, as are 80% of those who are illiterate in Haiti.

Ms. Lespinasse called for policies in Haiti that take women into account. In particular, she noted rampant impunity for violence against women, citing a recent case where a high-ranking government official was accused of having sexually and physically assaulted a woman who worked for him. According to Ms. Lespinasse, the justice system put greater pressure on the alleged victim, than on the accused, who still enjoys all the privileges of his position. Despite the mobilization of



*Representative Frederica Wilson*

human rights and civil society organizations, the pressure on the alleged victim was so severe that she withdrew the case.

Haiti has a multitude of cases where men in power abuse their position and commit violence against women with impunity. Ms. Lespinasse noted that women's groups are fighting so they can effect change that will allow women to participate more in civil and political contexts. There is a lot of work that needs to be done so that women have greater power in Haiti's political system. Women's organizations are working hard to fight impunity and promote gender equality. Ms. Lespinasse also thanked everyone who still follows the situation in Haiti, particularly the question of violence against women in Haiti.

*Smith Maximé* is the Country Coordinator at *Free the Slaves* and focused his presentation on the issue of *restavèks* – child domestic servitude. The general estimate of the number of *restavèks* in Haiti is between 100,000 and 400,000. Two thirds of *restavèks* are girls from poor families living in rural areas who are forced to send their children away for a better life. Mr. Maximé argued that these children do not experience a better life but are instead often mistreated.

Mr. Maximé identified ***four main causes for the situation of restavèks: poverty, cultural norms, gender discrimination, and lack of***

**social services.** Children who are *restavèks* live without hope; they are illiterate, they are mistreated, and they are victims of sexual violence. When these girls turn sixteen and are ready to leave the house where they work, they become more vulnerable to sex trafficking and prostitution. The explanation for this, as in many countries, is that domestic tasks are fulfilled by women. The good news is that Haitian society is making an effort to eradicate the practice of *restavèks*. In addition, Mr. Maximé noted that there is a program funded by the US State Department J/TIP office, which is a community-based strategy to combat slavery. A major challenge is that the Haitian economy does not generate enough revenue to finance national programs to combat slavery. Mr. Maximé’s organization, *Free the Slaves*, has a community-based program that has helped liberate 70 children. At the national level, there is an inter-agency effort to exchange ideas, but the project faces many challenges. One obstacle is that of fathers acting irresponsibly, often leaving their families without the means to subsist.

Mr. Maximé concluded with some recommendations. Among them, he noted that Haiti should develop a national strategy to combat the practice of *restavèks* and that USAID should implement their trafficking in persons policy, their gender equality policy, and the Interagency Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence.

*“Children who are restavèks live without hope – they are illiterate, they are mistreated, they are victims of sexual violence. When they are 16 and ready to leave the house where they work, they are vulnerable to sex trafficking and prostitution.”*

**Smith Maximé (Free the Slaves)**

Anne-Christine d’Adesky is a journalist and a human rights activist representing *PotoFanm+Fi*, a coalition of grassroots Haitian activists, Diaspora, and global women activists, who came together after the earthquake to find a way to amplify the voices of Haitian women on the ground and internationally.

Ms. d’Adesky based her remarks on two recent reports that challenge assumptions about gender-based violence in Haiti after the earthquake.

Ms. d’Adesky was the lead investigator on “Beyond Shock”, a study in which she and partners systematically interviewed approximately 60 organizations and collected data and published reports from the Haitian courts, hospitals, the police, and some local organizations. The study examines specific questions: what happened after the earthquake in regard to sexual violence – was there, in fact, a significant increase in rape? They wanted to know how this had changed as groups had come in; what was the impact of interventions? Was the narrative of sexual violence changing? Were there emerging trends?

Key findings included some good news: ***many groups have been engaged in fighting Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and there is evidence that Haitian communities play a social protection role and are capable of protecting women from sexual violence***—this capability is probably the biggest loss after the earthquake. Also, before the earthquake, GBV was a significant problem and there exists confusion about the difference between sexual violence (including domestic violence) and rape. There is often a tendency in the media to present a case of sexual violence or rape which is really a complaint; it’s not necessarily an evidence-based case. The study found that sexual violence did increase significantly after the earthquake; but it also increased because groups began to report sexual violence. What is most notable is that within the issue of sexual violence, the real issue is domestic violence. Rape constitutes a small proportion of GBV. Statistically, reports of rape have declined since 2011, but unofficial cases increased. *PotoFanm+Fi*’s study revealed that there is more reporting because there are more services, but there are also more barriers to receiving services. In rural areas, reporting

of sexual violence has steadily increased. A parallel study called the “PotoFi Haiti Field Initiative” which surveyed 2000 pregnant girls confirmed that adolescent girls are the majority of rape victims in Haiti and there is a strong link between sexual violence and a wave of early pregnancy among girls. While more services are available, most cases of early pregnancy only get access to counseling. The report provides suggestions for more comprehensive case management.

Ms. d’Adesky concluded with the following recommendations: ***it’s necessary to focus on vulnerable communities and populations. Disabled girls and the displaced have been more affected by sexual violence.*** Housing and economic livelihood are key strategies to addressing what’s happening to adolescent girls in Haiti, a demographic that should receive more attention. Furthermore, Haitians need to participate in this cause.

*Claire Lauterbach, of Gender Action, discussed the effects and implications of International Financial Institutions (IFIs) policies and projects on women in Haiti. Ms. Lauterbach based her remarks on a forthcoming study assessing the gender sensitivity of IFI operations in Haiti after the earthquake. She noted that donors, including IFIs, have committed \$13 billion dollars in recovery and humanitarian aid since the Haiti earthquake. The IFIs, particularly the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), have all erased part of Haiti’s debt, with the last two promising to only make grants (and not loans) to Haiti going forward. Many reports have questioned the effectiveness of aid to Haiti, but very few reports have actually focused on the extent to which this public aid has benefited Haitian women or addressed gender inequality in Haiti.*

Ms. Lauterbach highlighted three issues from Gender Action’s assessment of World Bank and IDB operations in Haiti. The first is a ***lack of***

***consultation with women in planning projects***; the second is a ***lack of consideration of women’s particular needs in the actual project activities***; and the third is a ***lack of sex-disaggregated data*** that would allow us to assess whether or not a project or intervention has actually benefited women. One such example is that of an IDB project supporting a Haitian credit union that did not consider key gender issues such as women’s disproportionate lack of access to credit. Ms. Lauterbach concluded with recommendations for making IFIs, and other donors’, responses in Haiti more responsive to the needs of women by, for example, conducting consultations with women at all stages of the project cycle and collecting baseline and periodic sex-disaggregated data to monitor effects for women.

*U.S. Representative Frederica Wilson (D-CA) lamented the high levels of gender-based violence in Haiti and noting the frequency with which she hears similar stories of rape and gender-based violence in displaced persons camps. Rep. Wilson ***called for an increase in the number of women represented in Haiti’s parliament***, noting that the number in the US is still too few as well. Representative Wilson also announced the imminent reintroduction of *House Resolution 521*, calling on the US government to work with Haitian authorities to combat gender-based violence and commit to provide services for survivors. Following Rep. Wilson’s departure, panel moderator Elise Young noted that a Haitian constitution amendment requires 30 percent of representatives to be women.*

*Jean-Ariel Joseph, Secretary General of the Haitian Senate, was the panel’s final speaker. He spoke on three topics: education for women, the representation of women in national institutions, and the participation of women in domestic life. Mr. Joseph noted that Haiti’s very independence would not have been possible without Haitian women’s support. Looking at education, he noted that*

majority of schools being built in Haiti today are generally benefitting men (there are only 10 public schools in Haiti for women versus 130 for men). Mr. Joseph condemned this exclusionary policy, noting that women 'do a better job' than men in most affairs.

Mr. Joseph noted that there is still much work to do regarding the representation of women in national institutions, given that there are ***only 5 women of 299 members of the lower***

***house and no longer any women in the upper house. Women have more difficulties accessing credit than men, and carry the lion's share of domestic responsibilities***, like feeding and paying for school fees for children. Mr. Joseph noted that a new law voted in the lower house now requires fathers to be financially responsible for their children. Senator Joseph called on allies everywhere to support Haitian women in their struggle to gain more representation.

## Conclusion

Participants identified gender inequality as a key obstacle in Haiti's reconstruction process and called for renewed attention to the issue. While gender-based violence remains a source of great concern for Haitian women, the speakers noted the need for women to be supported in several arenas, including education, political representation and at the

household level. Haitian participants called on donors to be more attentive to gender concerns in their relief and recovery efforts, and to support women actively fighting GBV and gender inequality with their own representatives in the Haitian government and among international allies.