

off our backs

a women's newsjournal

Feminism and the Current Crisis in Haiti

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Feminism and the Current Crisis in Haiti

A delegation of feminists from Haiti participated in several workshops at the Encuentro. They discussed both the current situation in Haiti and the women's movement there. These workshops took place during the period of Nov. 1 to Nov. 4, 1993, in the few days following the date when the popularly elected President Jean Bertrand Aristide was scheduled to have returned to power in Haiti, but was not allowed to do so.

All the women who participated were members of SOFA, a Haitian feminist organization. Because they were unsure of the possible ramifications, they asked that their names not be used.

This article is a translation of a compilation of the presentations they gave in several workshops, interviews, and conversations. The everyday language of most Haitians is Creole. The formal "colonizers'" language in Haiti is French. The women who attended the Encuentro in El Salvador either spoke what was referred to as "the other colonizer's language," Spanish, or spoke in French with an interpreter.

To understand the feminist movement in Haiti, one has to understand the origins. In 1974, there was a feminist movement called the Social Feminist Action League. It was a reformist movement and was made up of intellectual women.

From 1957 until 1986 was the period of the Duvalier dictatorship, father and son, and we didn't have the right to organize. Meetings were forbidden and groups couldn't exist. At the beginning of the 1980's, women did begin to organize. This organization started with the work of the Catholic Church in literacy programs.

Directly after the fall of Duvalier, thousands of women took to the streets to protest and to demand changes in their favor. From 1986 to Aristide in 1991, women took to the

streets in great numbers to protest the repression and the denial and violation of all the liberties that we had acquired in 1986 and were losing in '86, '87, and '88. What happened is that with the great movement that defeated Duvalier in 1986, everyone was expecting a great democratic opening, but what really happened is that, little by little, this space closed and Duvalier people reappeared. With the closing of this democratic space we were victims of a closing of the mentality, too, especially against feminism. Many women's organizations appeared in 1986, but, little by little, they disappeared. In this framework women had less space in the political parties or in any type of mixed group to express their demands or concerns.

This struggle denounced delinquency and corruption and took action against the government. There were women from the popular sectors who took to the streets and took these actions. Middle class women didn't concern themselves with the poor who took on feminism. The poor women didn't take it on as feminism. They took it on as a project where they had a right to live as women. They were continually beaten by their husbands. They were looking for a space within which to organize. Other groups, as well as their husbands, denied them this space. The men were saying that women should stay at home like the oxen.

There is incredible poverty in Haiti. There is a very small middle class. The privileged middle class women consider themselves as being without gender. A very small group of these middle class women work with the poor women in this struggle and speak up for them. They have the energy and strength to denounce the violations that women suffer in the home, in the street, and in the market.

Many women work in the marketplace. They are carrying out a struggle that has had a lot of success. There was a tax that women who work in the market had to pay. The men who worked there beat the women who didn't pay the tax. It was a humiliation. The women said they didn't want to pay the tax, because it didn't help anything because the markets were still filthy. These men touched the women's bodies to see where they had put their money. It was a double violation, to touch the women and then to tax them for nothing. The women had two demands. One was that they shouldn't have to pay the tax and the other was that men should respect the women. This was a great struggle from 1987 to 1989. It ended successfully and the women

didn't have to pay the tax. We also ended with a greater level of consciousness among the women. The



market women saw the need to organize themselves more and saw that women have rights. The problem was not just an economic problem.

Many groups of women organize with money from agencies, but, not realizing that economic problems are not women's only problems, they say that women do not have specific problems as women. There is also the discourse that says that we [feminists] want to divide the popular struggle and that we are from the bourgeoisie.

What we do within the women's movement is to divide into different branches: rural peasant women; professionals; the popular sector; and a mixed group, neither popular nor professional. This permits each branch to express itself. This means the professionals don't speak for the rural women. This has been a good experience. There is a big difference between the poor and the professional, and there has been much discrimination. The popular sector is very poor compared with the middle class women. This system has democratized the structure. It has permitted poor women to train themselves and become literate. The index of illiteracy is 83%, one of the fruits of the dictatorship that didn't want to teach people because they knew it would cause problems.

In Haiti, there is only one state-run university where people can get training. It is expensive, and it is difficult for a woman to get to the university. It is a great sacrifice to get a position of leadership.

Since 1986, it has been very important for us to struggle and hold

onto the space we have. This culminated with the elections, with Aristide. The US had to get in a neoliberal power. The elections were a symbol of the people. It was the women who participated most in all of the elections. With the arrival of Aristide, women kept up the pressure on the government to include the rights of women and to change laws. Disgracefully, we didn't have time to finish what we wanted in the seven months we had. We didn't win anything. We worked hard, but everything fell as a democratic project.



Jesús Gink - Dec 89



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Feminism in Haiti (cont'd)

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humiliated them in all forms. They have complete control over women. They humiliate the women who are more organized than others. In the last few weeks, they have killed many women. You find the body in the street without the head. They separate the body and the head and the arms and the legs. If you have someone who has died, you had to look here and there for an arm or a leg.

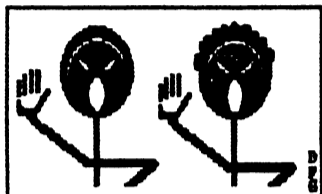
Within this framework, we present our line of work. It is a movement of women working for the interests of women. Our central base is grassroots women. All women can participate, but the emphasis is on poor women. A big problem now is our autonomy. We don't want to be the platform for any party. Nor do we want to be a project for agency funding, nor be used by someone who is opportunistic. We want a democratic space. We don't want to compromise the poor women. What we also do is have our own personality within the global struggle in Haiti. Where there is poverty, etc., we want to support the general struggle of the Haitian people. We work for the emancipation of the woman. The men are very authoritarian. Women are beaten and there is a great lack of respect, but women won't talk about it.

We want to create a space for solidarity so women can mutually support each other. It is a priority to learn to read and write. It's not possible to emancipate yourself without that. In the economic realm there is a problem with work for women. The problem is dependency that comes from the U.S. They try to destroy our agricultural economy with food assistance from the outside, beans and rice. Everything is in the name of help, but it really destroys our economy because it lowers the price for local products. For women, there are many negative impacts.

On the political level, we are thinking about the direction of Aristide. We want to change the laws that are not favorable to women. A woman who has been raped has to go to court. The only punishment is that they make the man pay a very low fine, and that's if the woman doesn't want to marry him. This is the model we have. It is very backward. We worked hard to change this during the Aristide regime. We haven't had much success at this level. We tried to work with the legislative branch, but the overthrow kept us from changing this law.

People are staying very brave in Haiti, above all the women. We have to struggle. We have a lot of energy and hope that we, as women, can construct another model of society that is more just for the whole world. We need a common strategy to face the neoliberal forces against us.

In terms of this Encuentro, there needs to be attention paid to language. Because the meetings are primarily in Spanish, the Caribbean region can't participate, with the exceptions of Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba. We do feel solidarity with the people and the sectors who have been, in a sense, "excluded."



One member of SOFA answered specific questions from several women.

Q--How is the situation in Haiti now impacting women?

A--It has been very difficult, especially in the last few months, when it has been even worse for women. The repression and the rapes are what are causing fear right now. They are looking for us now, as feminists. We are trying to raise the consciousness of women about what is going on. Women in Haiti suffer so much. The problem of rape is extremely serious. By this, I mean that you are in your house and they come and rape your sister or your mother. Or they take your mother, and you don't know where they took her. After a few days of looking for her, you find her head or her feet or her clothes in the street and you don't know where her body is. There are also many diseases because of the rapes. We are suffering so much as women.

Q--At this time, can people go out into the street? Do people go to work, even though there isn't much work? Do the children go to school, or do they have to stay hidden?



A--At this time, since we are a country that is not very developed, there are a lot of women who sell in the streets, in the markets, who have small businesses like that. They have to go to sell so that their families can eat. In order to

get food for the family, you just forget about the danger and go to the streets to sell. At times shooting starts in the streets or at times there are problems with the military and the women have to go into their houses or hide somewhere so as not to get killed.

This happened to me one time recently. I was buying something, and they started shooting and people were running furiously in the streets. There were no buses or trucks to get home. You just have to find any little place to hide to save your life. At this time, people cannot go into the streets easily. After about 4 or 5 pm, you have to be in your house. Since October 6, schools have not functioned. The children do not go to school because there is no security for the children. At any moment, there can be shots fired. Recently, in one school that attempted to function, a child was killed. The mothers are all scared to send their children to school. So the children stay home. There is nothing else to do. You never know when something is going to happen.

Q--What is happening with the blockade?

A--Right now, it's stronger. President Aristide was going to return on the 30th, but didn't. Now the blockade is total. There is no gas for cooking or for cars. There's nothing. No medicines, food. We can only find local products. But even with local products, there are problems because there are no trucks to go to the fields to look for food for lack of gas.

Q--What do Haitians think of the blockade? Do they think it will help or not?

A--I think that if it is total, it will help. But if there are airplanes, it won't work. If it is an air blockade as well as a maritime blockade it will work. But a

maritime blockade alone will not work. It will take more force to make them leave. And, there are some countries that don't respect the blockade and let the ships pass. Some of the countries closest to us don't accept the blockade and let the ships pass. The Dominican

Republic is one because the President of the Dominican Republic doesn't have good relations with President Aristide, because Aristide doesn't want Haitians going to the Dominican Republic to cut sugar cane, and the Dominicans want them to go there to work. The Dominican president doesn't want Haiti to have democracy nor a popularly elected president.

Q--Has domestic violence become worse with the crisis?

A--Right now, domestic violence is down a little bit in Haiti. Because there are so many rapes, domestic violence is second, now. There are not as many rapes in the home as in the streets.

Q--So is it a little more equal right now?

A--That's right. Both are looking for a way to live now. There is more understanding that both carry the weight of what is going on right now.

Q--Are there laws against abortion or contraceptives?

A--Abortion is something illegal. Well, there are no laws against it, but nor are there any safeguards in terms of health. There are no hospitals that do abortions, so it is something that is practiced only clandestinely. The Catholic Church and the Protestant churches in Haiti say you have to suffer and have children. So it is only done very secretly.

Q--Are there a lot of deaths from clandestine abortions?

A--Yes, there are many.

Q--So, there is no contraception, either?

A--Yes, it does exist. But, they are doing so many experiments in poor countries on the bodies of poor women with contraceptives that women are scared of them. So, we don't use them.

Q--How did you yourself get involved with feminism?

A--I started in 1981 with a mixed group, men and women. In 1985, we saw the need to meet alone because we had different problems. Men and women didn't have the same problems. We saw the necessity for us as women to meet together. It was in 1988, when we started with feminism, in the feminist movement. I wanted to meet with women like myself. We saw that when one is in a mixed group with men, you can't say everything. The men always want to be in control, in charge of everything, with the women in a secondary role. *continued on p. 27*

Encuentro --continued from page 9.

Videos from all over Latin America were shown throughout the conference and there was a resource center where women could exchange and photocopy written documents. There was also an area where women sold crafts, as well as books, tapes and other materials.

Several workshops on lesbianism were held and Brazilian lesbians announced that they were going to hold the next Latin American and Caribbean Lesbian Encuentro. Lesbians and issues around lesbianism, heterosexism and homophobia were all relatively visible, which was a courageous act for many women, especially the Central Americans, given the pre-conference events.

A critical workshop organized by participants dealt with racism and exclusion. Indigenous, Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latin American women, as well as poor women and disabled women discussed issues and needs that were not otherwise being addressed by the Encuentro and/or by the feminist movements in their countries.

A delegation of Haitian women were involved in several workshops and provided a great deal of otherwise inaccessible information about the feminist and women's movements, and about the general situation in Haiti, especially critical given that this was the week that Aristide was to have returned to Haiti.

The racism workshops and some of the workshops with Haitian women discussed the fact that Caribbean women were not adequately represented at the Encuentro, in part because of language/translation issues. All events, as well as all pre-conference communications, were in Spanish, which is not the language of many Caribbean women. For example, no women from the Afro-Caribbean/Central American country of Belize, where the predominant language is English, attended the Encuentro. Although Portuguese is a predominant language in Brazil, the majority of

Brazilian women who attended spoke Spanish or "Portunol" and were able to communicate. It appeared that exclusively Portuguese-speaking women did not attend.

Most evenings were devoted to



cultural and social activities. A popular women's band from Costa Rica, ClarOscuro, played feminist dance music. Other women presented theater, poetry and music.

What were the results of the Encuentro? Obviously, what I can share are simply my own personal observations as a white North American woman. It was evident as the week went on that there were many threads and themes running throughout. One important point is that an "Encuentro" as defined by Latin American women means a "gathering" and an exchange. It is not designed to be a "Congress", where specific resolutions are debated and passed, although there were women who suggested that format would be useful. Much of the value of such "gatherings" lies in the conversations that take place over meals or standing in line or after a workshop. Those kinds of connections definitely took

place. Many regional networks formed or were strengthened.

Clearly, there were also healthy conflicts and controversies that will be ongoing. There was continuing discussion and debate, but no resolution, on the direction of Latin American and Caribbean feminism, or if there is "a" direction or if that is even desirable. There was also considerable discussion over issues of power and decision making within feminist groups and communities. There was no real resolution as to what the character of the Encuentros should be or who should attend. Many women believe that it is time to have a definition of who is a feminist and who should attend the Encuentros. And, there are those who

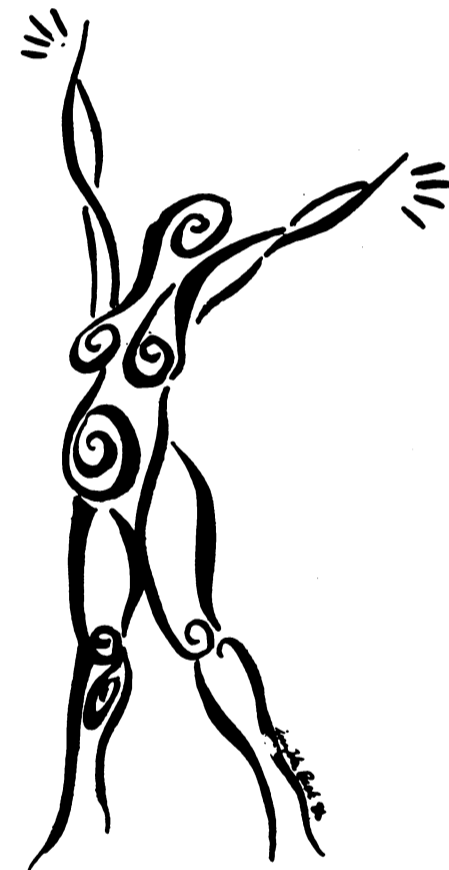
this Encuentro which they felt had been lacking at some others.

At the final plenary there was a discussion on the location of the next Encuentro, scheduled for 1995. Caribbean women had been asked to consider putting it on, but they met and decided that conditions were not yet right in the region. They did announce that they had decided that the time was right to have the first Caribbean Feminist Encuentro in the near future. Chilean women volunteered to hold the Seventh Encuentro and that was unanimously ratified by the plenary. Later, a huge "Carnival", which lasted all night for many women, ended the Sixth Encuentro.

by Kathy Bougher

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want to see the Encuentros maintain a grassroots character and remain open to all women who want to attend, whether or not they call themselves feminists. At the closing plenary this issue was left to the organizers of the next Encuentro, which will be in Chile in 1995. It seems that some advances were made in making lesbianism more visible, and in making homophobia and heterosexism more open to public discussion within both feminist and general settings. Many issues over racism and inclusion and exclusion based on race, ethnicity, class, language and ability were brought out, although no one seemed satisfied that anything was resolved. Many critical issues over the role of feminists and feminism in the popular movements and in the political realities of Latin America and the Caribbean were discussed. Many feminists are challenging traditional concepts of "democracy" and are calling for redefinition. Many women expressed their pleasure at the sense of "magic", a womanist cultural and spiritual element, that was present at



Haiti --continued from page 16.

Q--What were the things you dealt with at the beginning of the women's movement?

A--When we started with feminism in Haiti, we saw the need for literacy programs because there were so many women who didn't know how to read or write. Then we saw the need to raise consciousness and motivation. Then we talked about how to deal with economic problems, something that we could do to have money, maybe small businesses or a cooperative. Those are the things we started in Haiti.

Q--I notice that you have some of the materials being distributed here at the conference on homophobia. Have you as a group ever talked about lesbianism or homophobia?

A--We in the movement don't have problems with homophobia. We aren't scared of lesbianism. Everybody has the freedom to do whatever they want with their body. As they say, "It's your body," and you can do what you want. We have no problems with that.

Q--Are there lesbians in your group or do you know lesbians?

A--I know lesbians in Haiti, but there aren't any in the group. But, it's not as advanced there. There are lesbians, but they are hidden. There is no information. They aren't open and they don't say, "I am a lesbian." The mentality of the Haitian people would be one of rejection, so right now they don't say anything or work publicly.

Q--Is it the same with gay men?

A--It's the same. But here are some that you see, and you know who they are. We see them, and we know, and we just leave it like that.

Q--Were you afraid of coming here to the Encuentro for fear of not being able to get back home?

A--No, not for fear of not being able to return. It was fear that they would kill you in the streets on the way to the airport. When we got to the airport, we were almost the only ones there.

Q--What kind of support do you as Haitian women need from Central American or North American women?

A--Solidarity with us in the difficult movements as well as in the good times. Help so that the feminist movement moves forward in Haiti. Economically there are problems in Haiti. We need help to give training to women, training in health. It is very important, but economically we cannot do it. We also need help with medicines.