

Gender in Haiti

Unpacking the Masculinist Narrative of Power

A DEAFENING SILENCE: WOMEN IN RURAL HAITI, GLOBAL EXCLUSION, AND MARGINALIZATION

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Rural Haitian woman with kivét. Image courtesy of [Cesar Lopez](http://www.actionaid.org/haiti/2015/07/racism-statelessness-zero-tolerance-against-situation-dominican-republic) (<http://www.actionaid.org/haiti/2015/07/racism-statelessness-zero-tolerance-against-situation-dominican-republic>).

ABSTRACT

Gender is deemed a social construct and is commonly overlooked in economic conversations (Padgett and Warnecke 2011). However, there are critical intersections between gender and economic maturation. Additionally, gender relations in Haiti demote women to the positionality of the “most marginalized” in the country with the fewest liberties yet the greatest socio-economic responsibilities. Thus, rural women are disproportionately affected by most disparities, inclusive of

the economic implications in Haiti. Drawing from Crystal Felima's and Kimberlé Crenshaw's concepts of multiple jeopardies of Haitian vulnerability and intersectionality, respectively, this paper will argue how women in rural Haiti are more vulnerable to discrimination as a result of the intersectional nature of classism, sexism, disability, and social exclusion. For rural women, this means having less access to assistance and mobilization, state cooperation, and national alliances (Sheller and Leon 2016). The examination of this "exclusion" of women from global conversations for change within Haitian Studies would enhance understanding of the plight of women in rural Haiti due to globalization, neoliberalist policies, and imperialism as well as cultivate dialogue addressing ways to assist them moving forward.

Keywords: Gender dynamics, marginalization, rural women, multiple jeopardies of Haitian vulnerability, intersectionality, global exclusion.

RURAL WOMEN IN HAITI

"Woch nan dlo pa konnen doule woch nan soley¹." – Haitian Proverb



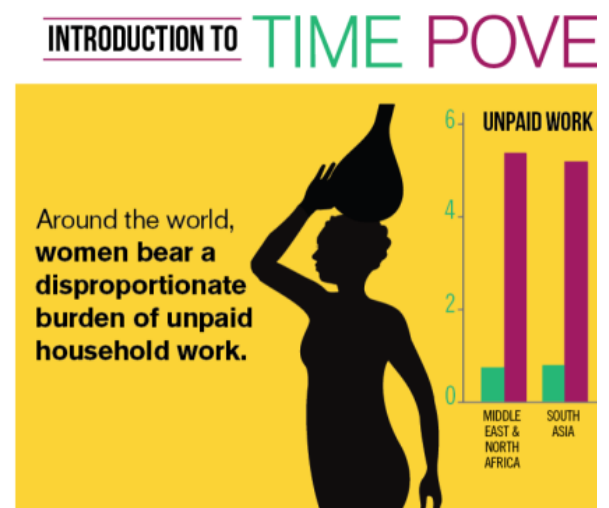
Image found at [Women For One \(http://womenforone.com\)](http://womenforone.com).

Gender in Haiti has always been a controversial topic. Women are silenced and burdened by the duality of economic and social oppressions. According to Charles (1995), in Haiti, there is an intricate system of gender stratification which has an intersectionality of classism, colorism, as well as biases due to religion (Catholicism vs. Vodou), language (French vs. Kreyòl Ayisyen), and geographic location (rural vs. urban). This research focuses primarily on the biases related to geographic location and how women in rural areas are adversely affected by a series of oppressions. Thus, this paper argues that women in rural Haiti are the most easily targeted for the exploitation of globalization due to their numerous indicators for vulnerability. As a result, they have a multitude of factors stacked against them namely age, sex, disability, and social exclusion, that contribute to their vulnerability. There are a couple of ways in which vulnerability can

manifest itself: physical and social. Social vulnerability, as defined by Felima (2009, 15), is the potential for disruption to an individual or group. Together, these multiple jeopardies of vulnerabilities are the lens for which this paper dissects the intersectionality of the plight of rural women in Haiti.

VULNERABILITIES

Unpacking the vulnerabilities of rural Haitian women begins with the acknowledgement of the class system. The bottom-most tier of the Haitian class system is predominantly filled with Haitian workers. In this homogenization of peasants, workers, and a small percentage of the middle class, women's involvement is crucial. In Haiti, women are demoted to second-class citizens despite shouldering the majority of the socio-economic responsibilities of the country. Women, especially those in rural areas, partake in many unpaid, time consuming, and grueling tasks. This is a phenomenon known as "*time poverty*" which limits their capacity to find work, go to school, or get skilled training even if it is available. Therefore, neoliberal policies oftentimes magnify time poverty for rural women due to a reduction of social services like health and education.



An introduction to time poverty. Source Gender Institutions and Development Database (2014). In [gap-nobody-s-talking](#):

These policies are not gender specific, but result in gendered consequences — such as parents allocating scarce monetary funds towards the education of their boys rather than their girls (Padgett and Warnecke 2011). This creates a vast disparity in the education and illiteracy rates of women and men. Generally, women's participation in politics and the formal² economy is negligible, at best. As such, rural women are forced into the informal sector of the economy, which pays little to no wages, and provides an obvious parallel between social policies and gender-transformative economic ramifications. Additionally, although crises and natural hazards do not "discriminate" according to gender, such events are known to exacerbate existing societal inequities.³



Haitian market woman, or *Madan Sara*, part of Haiti's informal economy. Image found at Belneges.

Marginalized groups, inclusive of women, children, and minorities, have less means to shield themselves from unfavorable economic, ecological, and health risks due to lack of access to resources, knowledge, and circumstances and are, consequently, more vulnerable (Neumayer and Plümper 2007). Research shows that poverty affects women disproportionately because it merges with structural limitations that prevent women benefiting from their human rights. Padgett and Warnecke (2011) contend that there is also a strong correlation between poverty and the inequitable allocation of economic resources and political influence. For rural women, their shortage of political and economic power exacerbates their positionality (<https://genderinhaiti.wordpress.com/potomitan/>), as a vulnerable class.



Vulnerability Equation. Image found at EGU (<https://blogs.egu.eu/network/gfgd/2015/01/>)

However, rural women in Haiti have to combat issues that go beyond the huge economic gap. Barring wealth disparities, Haiti also encounters social inequalities in terms of education and health. In large part resulting from institutional neglect and political instability, social services have rarely been provided by the Haitian state. In fact, nearly eighty percent of public services and seventy percent of health services in rural areas are provided by NGOs, the church, and other foreign organizations (Dupuy 2010). As reported by the Swedish NGO Foundation for Human Rights in "*Women and Poverty in Haiti: Report on a Mission in Haiti*", these services are not accessible to all Haitian people, with peasant women in rural areas being affected the most.

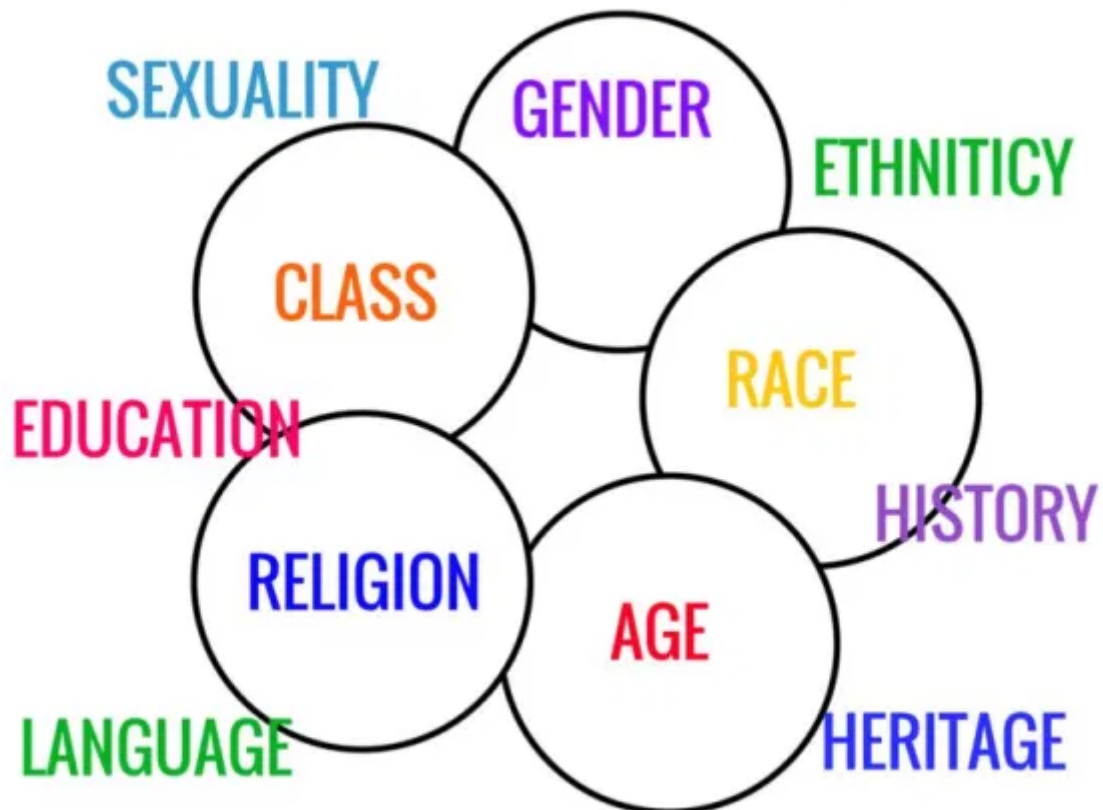
A Day in the Life of Rural Women



This video depicts a day in the life of rural women, worldwide, which showcases a visual representation of “time poverty”

In addition, the “*Women and Poverty in Haiti*” report stated that women in rural areas typically do not have access to health services, this encompasses hospitals and clinics that are mostly in urban areas. Transportation costs to the nearest doctor’s office is oftentimes too high for peasant women. Furthermore, in urban areas the medical fees can be expensive for women with inadequate funds. Felima (2009) asserts that the multiple jeopardies of Haitian vulnerability are dangers such as socioeconomic, political, environmental, and institutional conditions. For rural women, these vulnerabilities are magnified by social roles much like the appointment of the *poto mitan* (<https://genderinhaiti.wordpress.com/poto-mitan/>), *femme couverte*⁴, and *fanm plase*⁵. Other characteristics that underscore their positionality are their geographical boundaries within rural areas in parallel with Crenshaw’s (1993) intersectionality of sex, class, and color (instead of race⁶) discriminations.

INTERSECTIONALITY



"overlapping or intersecting social identities and related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination."

Visual representation of intersectionality. Image found at [Oldsimo](http://oldsimon.com/politics/intersectionality-is-bad-fetish-oppression-olympics/) (<http://oldsimon.com/politics/intersectionality-is-bad-fetish-oppression-olympics/>).

Consequently, these vulnerabilities of women have implications including, but not limited to, lower life expectancy, an intensified time poverty, and an inordinate impact on the informal sector (Neumayer and Plümper 2007). Nearly all women spend most of their life working. The women work in the field, they cook, they carry wood and water, and care for their children and other members of their families. Many women have to work outside of the home as well in order to make money to care for their families (Burns et al 2000). Specifically in rural areas, women have gathered their *lakou*, or neighboring families, together to prevent the deterioration of the community due to political unrest. Haitian women have greatly contributed to the cultivation of social capital by means of forming *boulette*, or group lottery, and loan systems within the community.



Rural women carrying fire wood. Image courtesy of [Robert Harding](http://robertharding.com) (<http://robertharding.com>)

DIVISION OF LABOR

In rural Haiti, women and men are interdependent actors. Approximately seventy percent of the Haitian people live in rural areas and are employed (both formally and informally) as peasant farmers. On tiny sectors of predominantly mountainous land, they struggle to subsist in an agricultural economy that has been decimated by deforestation, soil erosion, and neoliberalist policies. Women comprise of forty-eight percent of the workforce in rural areas. A great deal of rural women make up the faction of the Haitian peasantry who are landless workers or small landholders. Many peasants also participate in *metayage*, or sharecropping. This independent peasantry utilizes the *konbit*, or family labor, and there is a strict gendered division of labor (Charles 1995).



Rural women partaking in their various tasks: harvesting, cooking, and carrying water. (<http://www.actionaid.org/haiti/2015/10/empowering-women-and-celebrating-international-d>; [Haiti Next Door \(http://www.haitinextdoor.com/2015/0](http://www.haitinextdoor.com/2015/0)

In recent years, this task has become much more arduous due to not only environmental degradation but the monopoly of key markets by the elite in Haiti (Racine and Ogle 1999). While men do the heavy lifting in agricultural work, women lend a hand with the weeding and harvesting. Women are then expected to sell these agricultural products within the informal sector. Additionally, most women spend a lot of time, each day, cooking. This is another example of the time poverty of Haitian women. Women's labor is routinely regarded as thankless in addition to being unpaid (Racine and Ogle 1999, 55). Per Dupuy (2010), women's needs are not prioritized as it pertains to health, nutrition, or the facilitation of social services. Moreover, the reduction of social services have amplified the workload of women. The violation of political, civil, social, and economic rights positions women amid the "poorest of the poor", exceptionally so in developing countries.

This tale of Haitian exceptionalism explains nothing; it assumes that Haitians are so unique-bizarre... that their predicament is beyond any solution. – Robert Fatton

Padgett and Warnecke (2011) assert that because gender is regarded as a social variable it is often neglected within economic discourse. However, the intersectionality between gender and economic development cannot be ignored. Whilst gendered policies have the potential to enact bias against women, they do not prescribe it. Gendered policies are typically "gender-blind", causing women's interests to be silenced as they are not explicitly included in conversations (Warnecke 2006). Gender inequality in education, health, and the workforce discourages economic advancement. Women in rural Haiti, especially those who have taken on the role of *poto mitan*, feel innately responsible for the family. Thus, the disempowerment of these women trickles up and adversely affects society as a whole.



Young Haitian girl (symbolically) chained to the country she loves. Graffiti by Jerry Moise Rosembert

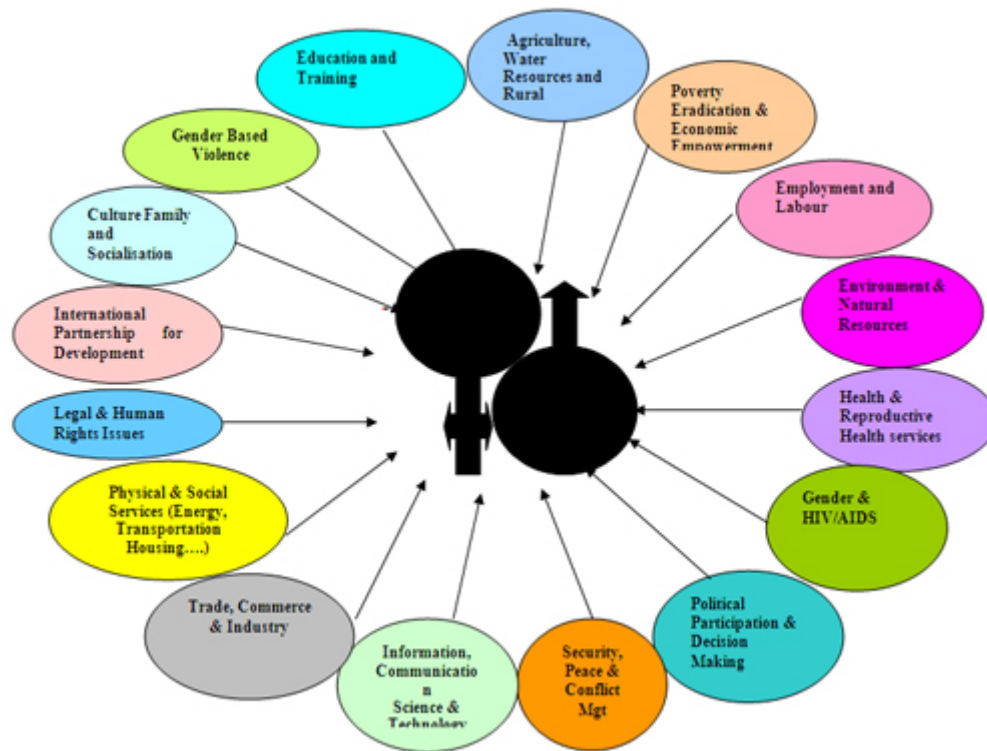
By limiting the breadth of economic opportunity and advancement, gender inequality subscribes to shifts such as Fukuda-Parr's (1999) feminization of poverty. Feminization of poverty is defined as the weight of growing poverty shouldered by women, especially in developing countries. As such,

that “women are poorer than men” has become a truism (Fukuda-Parr 1999, 99). Furthermore, the chasm between women and men ensnared in the cycle of poverty persistently grows each year. Women in rural Haiti constitute the majority of the population that live on less than a dollar a day. Also, women lack the protection under the law that secures access to education, land, inheritance, and other assets. This makes it particularly difficult for women to alter their predicament. Laws created to protect women’s rights are rarely enforced, if they exist at all, in developing countries (Padgett and Warnecke 2011). This trend notes that governmental bodies, much like the Haitian state, either magnify or reduce changes within the family structure, the workforce, and the social and domestic spheres, thereby molding the feminization of poverty.



Feminization of Poverty. Image found at [Mtholyoke](https://www.mtholyoke.edu/~abbat221/classweb/feminizationofpoverty/)
(<https://www.mtholyoke.edu/~abbat221/classweb/feminizationofpoverty/>).

In advocating for or obstructing women’s social and economic empowerment, the Haitian state influences Haiti’s probability of achieving socio-economic results that are conducive to sustainable progress and human development. Sociocultural standards and systems of power impact this process by shaping not only the scope and results of policy discourse, but also by affecting the odds that marginalized peoples can benefit from rights protected by the law (Blanchard and Warnecke 2010). Women, due to sociocultural norms, are underrepresented in leadership positions, which also prevents gender-specific issues from taking precedence (Warnecke 2006). Due to societal standards being institutionalized as time progresses, both traditionally and through policy, they begin to “seem natural and thus may not be viewed as biased”. This reinforces the cycle of gender-biased policy-making in numerous countries.



Visual representation of “Gender-biased policy making”. Image found at [National Coalition on Affirmative Action](http://www.aacoalition.org/national_policy_women.htm) (http://www.aacoalition.org/national_policy_women.htm).

In Haiti, the government has not been able to appropriately handle these challenges; effectively securing the hegemonic power structure in times of disaster. Haitian women have frequently been overlooked in national relief and reconstruction efforts with those in rural areas finding themselves having no place in the line for aid. The absence of proper lighting, privacy for bathing, housing, and security enables sexual assault in displacement camps. Programs set up by foreign aid much like cash or food for work aided two hundred thousand Haitians, yet only about one third of them were women. Domestic social capital was key in assuring the survival of many Haitians throughout this time. Sirianni and Friedland (1997, 14) define social capital as “those stocks of social trust, norms and networks that people can draw upon to solve common problems.” In rural areas, specifically, strong solidarity in the community has been integral in keeping Haiti’s institutional and political predicament from declining into rampant social destruction or civil war (Verner and Heinemann 2006).

GLOBAL EXCLUSION

Imperialism leaves behind germs of rot which we must clinically detect and remove from our land but from our minds as well. – Frantz Fanon

Haitian women encounter specific challenges due to a perpetuation of gendered violence and societal inequities. It is hypothesized that women’s economic empowerment acts as a catalyst for the stimulation of health and prosperity in countries stemming from three distinct theories: 1) the most noteworthy factor that affects the overall equality of women and men is economic strength in terms of ability to obtain credit, as well as dominance of revenue, agriculture, and other capital; 2) when women are granted more economic strength, they have greater command of their livelihoods

including reproductive rights; and 3) when women control finances they prioritize the education of children, nutrition, and health (Engle 2017). If this catalyst were to infiltrate a community, the possibility for better outcomes for children would grow exponentially.



Rural woman providing food for the community. Image found at One Hundred For Haiti (<http://One Hundred For Haiti>)

According to N'Zengou-Tayo (1998) the role of the rural Haitian woman in agriculture, vending, and the domestic market sector is crucial for society to function. However, the adverse effects of political disruption, physical repression, rural deterioration, and internal emigration (<https://genderinhaiti.wordpress.com/migration-in-haiti/>) on the lives of women, particularly rural peasant women, offset this importance. Rural women migrating to the city constitute one of the most marginalized groups in society. Many of these women are unemployed, single parents, and end up living in the slums of Haiti, in major cities such as in Cap-Haïtien, Gonaïves, and Port-au-Prince (Racine and Ogle 1999). As a result, gender-based violence is a threat commonly brandished as a method of state and structural control over women. Their lack of consciousness and subordinate societal status situates them in an extremely vulnerable positionality, especially post disaster.⁷ Given the frequency of attacks and brutality against women, there is a shared feeling of hopelessness and rage among the victims (Duramy 2014).

WOMEN'S AGENCY

Nou Gen Fos - Haiti Coeur de Femme



The foundation of Haiti is built upon a debilitating class structure that triggered a hierarchy system that ignores the demands of rural peasant women. Agency was established as a means to counter this structure. For Haitian women, agency can present itself utilizing various methods. For the purpose of this paper the focal point will be on three main facets: women's organizations, the informal economy, and Haitian Vodou. However, Chancy (1997) reiterates the importance of separating oppression from identity and recognizing that agency does not equate to freedom. Bakan (1996) was quoted per Felima (2016, 182) as having defined agency as when individuals manifest themselves in "self-protection, self-expansion, and mastery of the environment." When confronted with poverty, illiteracy, inadequate education, biased employment, and lack of legal protection, Haitian women must continue to fight for their rights (Chancy 1997).



Image found at [Women of Milot](http://www.womenofmilot.com/home.html)
(<http://www.womenofmilot.com/home.html>)

"Lè fanm bay manje a, tout moun manje"⁸ – Haitian Proverb



Rural W.O.M.E.N. entrepreneurs in Milot, Cap-Haïtien. Images found at [Women of Milot \(http://www.womenofmilot.com/\)](http://www.womenofmilot.com/)

Women are an invaluable component of the Haitian economy. As a result, women's organizations have been founded in an effort to help grow the economy and support women. A perfect example of this would be the establishment of W.O.M.E.N., or the Women of Milot Entrepreneurial Network. W.O.M.E.N. produces sustainable work for women in rural Milot that utilizes a collaborative work system. This serves to cultivate their unique skill sets and their dynamic work ethic. W.O.M.E.N. helps to build entrepreneurship in Milot through various workshops and trainings that allow the women to learn a new trade or build upon their current one. This gives rural women the ability to build wealth and compete from within the informal sector of the economy. Most importantly, these items can be done in the home without intensifying an already maximized time poverty.

Rural women are involved in the informal economy to a great extent; only twenty-five percent of the people working in the informal sector are men. They engage in selling produce, foodstuffs, and other goods at *Ti Mache*, or the marketplace. This is where the bulk of their income is made. By working in the informal economy as vendors, rural women effectively support the entire community's economic activities. Additionally, women have also utilized the informal economy to sell Vodou ritual items at social gatherings (Felima 2016). Vodou, especially the appointment as a *Mambo*, can allow rural women to overcome class, social, and economic barriers. It is important to acknowledge that rural women's involvement with the informal economy showcases their resilience and resourcefulness in the face of adversity.

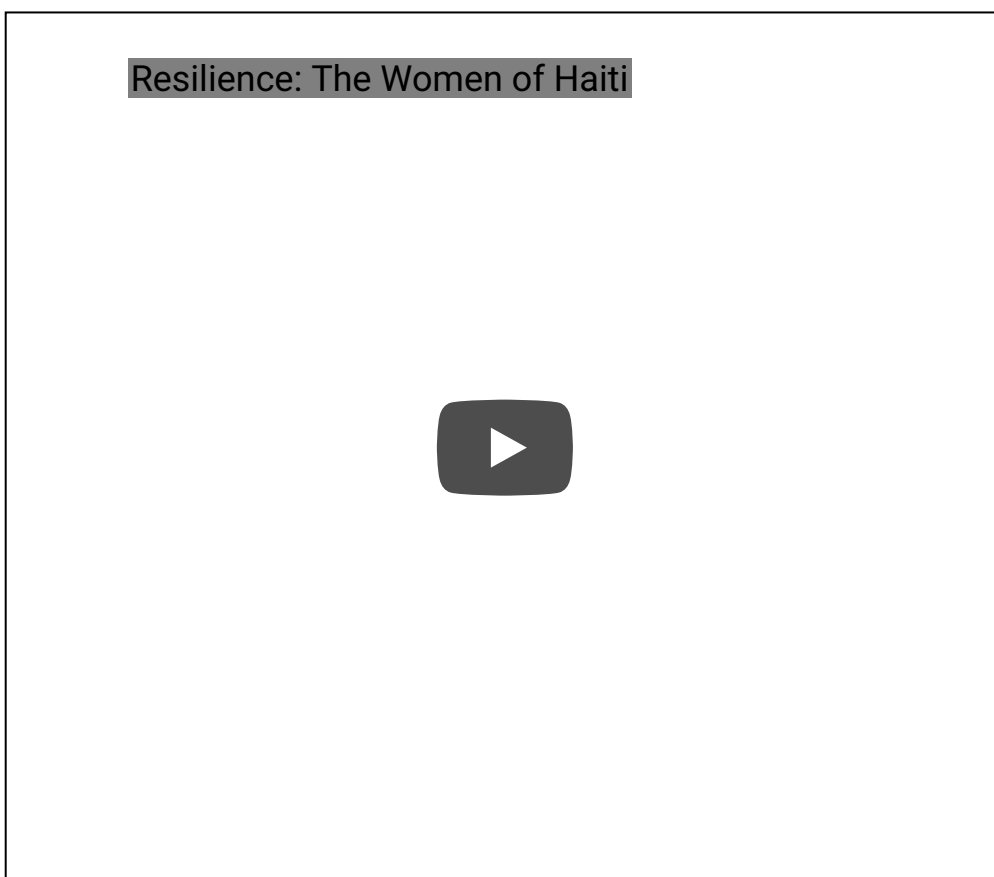


Video of rural women singing and empowering one another. Video courtesy of [Dr. Crystal Felima \(http://crystalfelima.com/\)](http://crystalfelima.com/)

**(Men yo) Fanm pa dra
Fanm pa fatra, ni avadra**

Fanm se potay lespwa⁹(Lyrics to the video above.)

Despite there being a growing respect for the invaluable contributions of the rural woman in ending poverty, hunger, and improving the health of rural households and communities, there is a lack of statistics on the considerable influence of rural women on empowerment and equality. Engle (2017) argues that women's economic empowerment in particular provides a 'magic potion' to stimulate well-being and wealth in countries such as Haiti. Greater exploration of the economic, political, and social discriminations that plague rural Haitian women would present a comprehensive outlook on the stagnant development of Haitian society. This is (most likely) due to rural women participating in all facets of society. The various departments of Haiti, including the Diaspora, should *bwase lide*, or brainstorm, on the various ways that women, particularly rural peasant women, can overcome "exclusion" from global discourse and have their voices and issues heard.



NOTES

¹Translation: A rock in the water knows not the suffering of a rock in the sun.

²The formal economy, which includes the government, armed forces, businesses, and Haiti's most profitable jobs, have always been male dominated.

³See Fordham, Maureen. "Making Women Visible in Disasters: Problematizing the Private Domain." *Disasters*. 22 (1998): 126–143, and Enarson, Elaine and Betty Hearn Morrow. *The Gendered Terrain of Disaster: Through Women's Eyes*. Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger Publishers, 1998.

⁴The constitutions of 1801 and 1950 relegated women to a subordinate position and until 1979 were considered "*femme couverte*", meaning they were covered by the legal rights extended to women as minors or wives. See Myriam Chancy, *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

⁵*Fann plase* is loosely translated "placed woman" which means *kept woman*. This is the designation of unmarried women who have been with their significant other for an extended period of time.

⁶Because Haitianess is synonymous with Blackness, racism in Haiti takes the form of colorism.

⁷See AMARC et al, "Gender Shadow Report," In *Tectonic Shifts: Haiti Since the Earthquake*, edited by Mark Schuller and Pablo Morales, 221-227. Virginia: Kumarian Press.

⁸Translation: When women provide the food, everyone eats

⁹Translation: (Here, they are – presenting) Women are not sheets (Symbolic for scapegoats)
Women are not trash, or good for nothing
Women are the portals of hope.

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Featured image found at [madamsara.com](http://www.madamsara.com) (<http://www.madamsara.com/reportersnotebook/few-crops-after-hurricane-sandy/>)