

Women as Active Agents of Recovery in Haiti

Response from Huairou Commission & GROOTS International

The outpour of international aid that Haiti has received within the last week and messages of solidarity are intrinsic to helping the Haitian community build back better. But, coordinating aid is about brokering a larger vision for women in Haiti. While the issues of governance, accountability and transparency are essential in the relief and recovery efforts, it must align with efforts to engage communities and support grassroots women's organizations to sustain their involvement both in the short and long term.

The Huairou Commission and GROOTS International are urging government agencies, bilaterals and donor agencies and NGO's to use Haiti as a model of what women in the most desperate situations deserve, and can actually lead.

The Huairou Commission and GROOTS International are specifically looking at how women can be active agents of recovery, take on public roles and be empowered to shape the long-term development of their communities in Haiti. Women can undertake the following roles effectively when they are supported to do so in the following:

- a. Be part of assessing damage and loss, particularly to women whose household assets, care giving networks, informal incomes are frequently unaccounted for in damage assessments
- b. Organize distribution of aid to make sure it reaches particularly vulnerable groups. They can run community kitchens, direct aid supplies to the elderly, sick, injured.
- c. Coordinate volunteers
- d. Act as community facilitators and information disseminators to support communities to access information, resources, shelter, health services, work, etc
- e. Monitor services and provide feedback to authorities on a regular basis.
- f. In the recovery stage they can shape and monitor the extent to which shelter, basic services to ensure that these respond to priorities of grassroots women and their communities.

A major issue in Haiti is the issue of safety and violence. In this context the Huairou Commission is calling for all tent cities, and temporary community structures to have women and children centers, as they can be part of the economic, physical and social recovery. These centers will simultaneously provide a safe space for women while creating a place where women can come together to organize and plan.

Advice and messages of solidarity

"During these pressing times, we must be united. As a grassroots woman, I extend all my solidarity with the women and the people from Haiti. We here in Nicaragua have suffered from an earthquake and the most important advice I can give is for communities to organize by blocs in the neighborhood, and create commissions to delegate work. All the affected areas must be mapped and distribution points must be created." Haydee Rodriguez, Cooperative Las Brumas, Nicaragua.

"When we suffered from the earthquake in 2002, we administered the resources efficiently by organizing. One of the ways we did this was by creating self managed community kitchens to work with 20-30 women. By cooking together, we save resources in food and effort, and we share and organize as women to develop our capacities of community leadership. We have also found it is also a long-term measure to battle poverty and malnutrition." Carmen Robles, SEA, Peru.

The Huairou Commission, together with the United Methodist Church and AJWS is supporting one of our long time colleagues to go to Haiti to undertake a rapid social assessment of women and women's organizations (or broader organizations that have a mission to serve women) who have been directly affected by the earthquake to capture their immediate needs and their priorities for recovery and reconstruction. As our experience in the network shows, we can't think of this as a one off activity where we will simply make an assessment. We will develop a plan to organize women's groups to take leadership in the relief and recovery processes to catalyze and facilitate a set of practices that will sustain women's participation over a period of time.

It is with this goal of long-term transformation of women's public roles in mind that we are looking at several different action areas to help create a pathway of change for Haitian women.

Huairou Commission & GROOTS International, January 2010