

Holding Up Haiti: Women Respond to Nightmare Earthquake

"It's important for us to recognize how strong women have been in this; how much leadership we have shown." —Liliane Pierre-Paul

Returning to the country she was raised in to respond to the aftermath of Haiti's January 12th earthquake, journalist **Anne-christine D'adesky** finds that amidst the rubble women leaders are poised to take charge.

All along the grid of streets that crisscross the Bois Verna neighborhood of Haiti's shell-shocked capital lies evidence of mass destruction in heaps of tangled concrete and twisted steel so massive one shudders to think of the people who now lie entombed there.

It's week two following *le gran choc*—the great shock—and everywhere one goes, from the ports to the hillsides, from the poorest shanties to the palatial homes of the rich elite, the rubble remains as a testament to the sheer leveling power of January 12's earthquake.

Even two weeks later the earth continues to unleash daily aftershocks that both terrify and remind dazed survivors that the nightmare is not over, nor is the danger. Ironically, the only houses that have managed to escape the historic 7.0 earthquake that leveled much of the country are the elegant gingerbread-style wooden homes that are reminders of colonialism and slavery—periods that shaped Haiti's resilience and courage as a people.

When I arrive on Saturday, January 23, there are no longer crowds of frantic relatives picking through collapsed buildings for loved ones. And there are no longer aid workers anxiously placing their ears to the giant cracks that run up the buildings—listening for the faint cries that kept hope alive day upon day. The air is getting clearer, though it's still dusty. Here and there the faintly nauseating sour-sweet smell of death rises up from giant mounds of broken cement that entomb loved ones.

Port-au-Prince has become a giant cemetery. People around me seem unable to grasp the sheer enormity of what has happened to their country. They stare at the words scrawled in Kreyol across any and all remaining walls: an X, a *demoli*, meaning 'to be demolished.' Haiti's people are still shocked and unable to imagine how to begin grieving for their dead as they take on the challenge of living and rebuilding a future. At night, sections of the city's population are camped out, witnessing, reliving the horror out loud, laying their exhausted bodies and the few goods they could rescue in front of still-standing houses that no longer offer shelter or safety. With another shrug of the earth, they too could fall.

That's where I am told to find Liliane Pierre-Paul, one of Haiti's leading journalists and a fierce feminist, as well as an old friend. She's been spending her days and nights camping out in the concrete courtyard of her second home, Radio Kiskeya. The building that houses one of Haiti's most popular community radio stations was damaged, I was informed, and the studio where Liliane has resumed broadcasting is not safe. Her team is looking for a new space, but in the meantime, there's an urgency to speak out, to give voice to ordinary Haitians who lost their public forum—community radio—during the first week of the quake. That includes women, who, Liliane confirms, have been tremendous in responding to the quake and the myriad challenges that have followed—ordinary women, market women, elite housewives, grandmothers, and girls—displaying remarkable courage and solidarity.

A dynamic woman with a warm manner, Liliane meets me in the small reception area of the radio station, glancing up from time to time at the ceiling, watching, I assume, for signs of weakness. She's wearing a knitted Rasta-looking cap—from Ethiopia, she tells me—and a white shawl with casual trousers. Despite years of intense living and speaking out against

successive Haitian dictators and strongmen, she remains youthful looking and clearly battle-ready, even if weary and grieving for lost colleagues and friends.

"From the minute the buildings fell," Liliane informs me, "women were there and everywhere. They were leading the way into buildings; leading stunned children into safety; tending to the wounded; screaming and demanding help; speaking to the foreign media and CNN; setting up instant street kitchens and camps; singing, witnessing, praying."

"There's no doubt that the earthquake has had a massive impact on Haitian women," Liliane confirms, "in ways that we as feminists and women leaders have yet to really take in—we haven't been able to analyze this. It's just survival now. We're so busy trying to cope right this minute, to just get through this day. But we know... I know... it's huge."

I ask her about Myriam Merlet and other well-known women leaders who were killed in the earthquake. She shakes her head, extends her fingers widely and fans her arms to indicate a large space. . . .

"We've lost so many leaders, so many women leaders, and so many women at all levels that it's just... just... inestimable." She's trying to find her words. "It's an enormous loss."

In a breath, she ticks off the names of the famous and the lesser-known: "You've got Myriam Merlet, and Magalie Marcelin. There's Anne Marie Coriolan of SOFA, the Society of Haitian Women. They're right across the street. You've got Myrna Narcisse Theodore, who died and was with the Ministry of Women. She was really a presence at the Ministry. There's also Nicole Gregoire, who was in the public administration. She was an important woman who did a lot in the area of Haitian-Dominican affairs, who really did something..." Liliane pauses, looking around, her fingers counting. "There are more, there are more... We should name them, it's important."

She closes her eyes, concentrating. "You have Gina Dorcena, an ex-journalist who was with Radio Tropic. You have the woman who deals with geospatial issues..." She grabs my leg: "My God, of course there's Mireille Anglade—*une grande femme*—again, an immeasurable loss. We have two members of SOFA that died, Mirland Dorvilus and Bernardine Bourdeau..." Liliane stops, reflective. "There's also an enormous loss of women who were in the professional sectors, and young women—so many young women who were our next generation of leaders. How can we even measure this?"

Liliane informs me that two days prior, at SOFA, surviving women leaders from across social sectors met to talk about the impact of the earthquake, which damaged SOFA and destroyed the office of Kay Fanm, a leading women's rights organization. There are a litany of community non-profits, microfinance organizations, rural centers, and other institutions serving women that have been destroyed or impacted by the quake.

"We're going to have to assess, and then find ways to help," she says.

What about how the earthquake affected ordinary women? In Haiti, there's a Kreyol word used for the central, fundamental role of women: *Poto-Mitan*, from the French word *Poteau*, as in 'the solid beam that holds up the house.' Haitian women are regarded as the brick and the engine of society—the mothers, the caregivers, the money-makers, and market-vendors, the ones who work tirelessly to care for their children and husbands and parents.

"*Tu touche la femme, tu touche la famille*," Liliane says, reciting another well-known fact: When you touch women, you touch the family. By now, we know that at least 140,000 lie dead in the rubble of the quake in Port-au-Prince, and that smaller cities like Jacmel, Petit

Goave, and Jeremie suffered equally or even greater comparative destruction. Tens of thousands have been injured. Within these statistics are women and girls, including snapshots that reflect a terrible loss: 300 nurses in one institution, the collapse of schools with many girls, and more. Now, looking ahead, there are many women and girls who have amputated limbs, crushed bodies. And there are the women and girls who remain profoundly traumatized, in need of mental health services, as well as physical therapy, and ongoing restorative care.

There is also the additional vulnerability and threat of sexual violence and violence to women and girls that is a common feature during catastrophe and social instability. Without shelter or safety, there is real reason to worry about the period ahead. Haitian groups and UN agencies have gone public about their fear that sex traffickers will target Haitian children and orphans, especially girls. As a leading orphan's advocate stressed this week, "This is a serious preoccupation for us right now. We have to be vigilant and proactive to confront this threat."

Yet, as Liliane Pierre-Paul stresses, Haitians have long proven unbelievably strong and resilient, and women have demonstrated this in spades since the nightmare of January 12.

"It's important for us to recognize how strong women have been in this; how much leadership we have shown," she says. "As of now we haven't been able to really tell that story, the story of ordinary women, because we lost our voice—the radio—for that critical first week. And we've been in a state of complete survival and shock. But let me tell you, they have been incredible. The Haitian women are mobilizing. Even with everything that's been lost, with all their own injuries and pain, they are brave. It has to be said."

Later, at SOFA, we come together to set an agenda for how to include women's voices in the discussions about rebuilding Haiti. We talk about how if there are any people who are prepared to survive nature's most catastrophic earthquake, it is Haitians, a population that has learned to live with almost nothing, a people who have forever endured a scale of suffering unlike anywhere else in this hemisphere. We talked about the innumerable demonstrations of extraordinary strength and human spirit all around us: as individuals, as women, as a people, as a nation.

Looking ahead, Liliane is confident that women leaders will rally, and a new generation will rise to the extreme challenges that lie ahead. That includes creating fresh avenues for women to not only lead but to have a voice in the rebuilding of Haiti that is being envisioned now. And it means reaching out to other women, men, and groups around the world to ask for support and partnership.

"We need many partners, but we are ready to lead. That's the message that needs to be broadcast."

<http://www.worldpulse.com/magazine/articles/holding-up-haiti-women-respond-to-nightmare-earthquake?page=0,0>