

Impact of the Current Crisis on the Achievements of the Haitian Feminist Movement

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Abstract: Haiti is facing an unprecedented crisis that affects all institutions and all actors in social life. This article aims to address the consequences of this situation on the struggle of women and the feminist movement in Haiti. The impact of this unique circumstance on women's rights is illustrated through three key sub-themes of the fight for equality in Haiti: the political aspect, the fight against violence against women and the institutionalization of gender. These different themes had known a certain timid but tangible progress. In terms of women's political participation, the 30% quota set out in the Constitution and in the electoral decree during the last elections had enabled leaders to question the need for more women and even the emergence of women in structures traditionally controlled by men. A mechanism for the holistic management of violence files had been put in place and gender was involved in the reflection on public policies, although partially implemented. In the context of this article, apart from the data collected from the executives of the ministry in charge of gender equality, we have used the content analysis of articles and reports to clearly understand the impact of the context on the achievements of the feminist movement.

Keywords: Gender, Feminist Movement, Crisis, Gender Gaps, Insecurity

1. Introduction

N'oubliez jamais qu'il suffira d'une crise politique, économique ou religieuse pour que les droits des femmes soient remis en question. Ces droits ne sont jamais acquis. Vous devrez rester vigilantes votre vie durant." Simone de Beauvoir, Le Deuxième Sexe, 1949

For more than ten years, Haiti has been weakened by a profound social and political decay, a deterioration of the economic and humanitarian situation and generalized violence that attack the entire social and environmental fabric. If there is integrated the risks exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic – the fragmentation of the national territory, favored by the reinforcement of armed gangs and the total rout of the police; one could conclude that Haitian society is on the verge of explosion. The impact of the crisis is visible on the entire Haitian population, but it is stronger on categories in situation of vulnerability, particularly women. Indeed, the latter have less access to resources, information, opportunities, or strategic spaces. [7] If the return to an ordinary situation takes place together with a return to

gendered order, but the latter is not identical to the one that prevailed before the crisis. [3]

Moreover, many achievements of the feminist movement are currently being questioned. Among the various advances of the movement currently contested and threatened with disappearance, this article will mainly take into account the political participation, the fight against violence and the institutionalization of gender issues through public policies. This article is based on the analysis of various reports, newspapers published on these issues. Nevertheless, the last part concerning the risks at the level of the institutionalization of actions in terms of gender equality, required interviews with employees of the Minister Ministry for the Status of Women and Women's Rights (MCFDF) as well as its partners.

2. Towards Invisibilization of Women in the Public Space

One of the first achievements of the feminist movement

was women's access to voting rights in 1950 thanks to the fight of the Ligue Féminine d'Action Sociale (LFAS). From the 1980s, the political participation of women was to take a more formal turn, with the presence of feminists in various governments and in Parliament. The creation of the Ministry for the Status of Women and Women's Rights (MCFDF) has contributed to promoting the representation of women in decision-making bodies. [16]

Thus, in 2012, with the work accomplished by this ministry and the continued mobilization of feminist organizations, the principle of quota for women in all decision-making positions in national life, including public services and elective positions, was recognized by the 2012 constitutional amendment. Actually, the constitutional women quota has never been fully implemented by the electoral law.

The elections held the same year favored the election of eight women parliamentarians and four hundred (400) elected at community level. But already in 2000, following the mobilization of organizations like Fanm yo la 2000, 161 women were elected during the elections like said Marie Frantz Joachim:

«Il est intéressant de relater qu'historiquement en Haïti, c'est la première fois que 161 femmes ont été élues, sur un total de 2 037 candidates, aux élections de 2000. Cet intérêt des femmes à occuper des postes politiques et à exiger leur acceptation par la société dans une place différente de celle qui leur est assignée traditionnellement, est dans une grande mesure, le résultat d'un travail d'éducation et de plaidoyer des organisations de femmes, notamment Fanm yo la, auprès des partis politiques et de la population haïtienne en général¹. » [9]

In addition, the obligation of the quota in the 2015 elections, enabled the choice of 30% of women at all levels in the local authorities. [6] Ketele Charles thus presents the framework of application of the quota:

“En 2013, la loi sur le règlement des partis politiques dans les articles 31, 37 et 43, a prévu un quota obligatoire afin de faciliter la présence des femmes a toutes les postes de décisions. Plus récemment, le décret électoral de 2015, par ses articles 62,67 et 100.1, impose un quota obligatoire de 30% de femmes sur la liste électorale pour les municipalités et souhaitable pour les postes législatifs².” [5]

It also allowed the appointment to position of responsibility of 30% of women in the Lamothe-Martelly government in 2012.

However, from 2014, the government formed by Prime

Minister Evans Paul began to undermine the 30% quota, particularly in appointments to strategic positions. The various successive governments between 2015 and 2022 have never taken into consideration the women quota. In addition, unlike the 2015 local government elections, the appointment of interim executive officers in 2020 neglected women quota³.

In the parliament, the 50th legislature (2016-2020) saw a record reduction in female representation with one woman senator and 3 women deputies elected, despite the increase in seats in the Lower House. Actually, women quota have not been implemented for legislative election in the 2015 electoral. As a result, appropriate measures have not been taken to guarantee the representation of women in elected positions.

3. Increase of Violence Against Women

From the year 1986, a timid awareness of gender-based violence (GBV) took place in Haitian society due to the work carried out by women's organizations through awareness-raising actions. They are beginning to facilitate the establishment of assistance mechanisms for victims of GBV. Voluntary structures have emerged and have been structured over the years. Subsequently, women's organizations chose to adopt a holistic feminist intervention approach by providing comprehensive support that takes into account all dimensions of acts of violence and their consequences in the lives of women. [8] An institutional mechanism to combat violence against women via the National Concertation against Violence against Women, an intervention and monitoring structure involving the different actors working on the issue of GBV, has been established. Comprising three groups of actors (women's organizations, state actors and international actors), the Concertation has developed public policies on GBV and coordinated interventions on the issue. At the same time, the advocacy of feminist organizations will contribute to the publication of a legislative decree criminalizing rape and the development of several legislative proposals (including those on paternity, maternity and filiation, and on human trafficking). [10]

It is also thanks to their contribution that the Convention of Belem do Para was ratified. Several collaboration protocols between the three main ministries: women's rights, justice and health (MCFDF, MJSP and MSPP) working on the issue of GBV to ensure better care for women victims of violence have been adopted. [11]

It should be noted that since its creation, the Concertation has suffered from a funding deficit and a strong dependence on international aid, which was not always aligned with all national priorities.

Thus, with the evaluation of the 2nd national fight plan, feminist organizations proposed to the MCFDF that the Concertation has an autonomous status like that of the

¹ It is the first time that 161 women were elected, out of a total of 2,037 candidates, in the 2000 elections. This interest of women in occupying political positions and demanding their acceptance by society in a place different from that which is traditionally assigned to them, is to a large extent the result of educational and advocacy work by women's organizations, in particular Fanm yo la, with political parties and the Haitian population in general.

² “In 2013, the law regulating political parties in its articles 31, 37 and 43, provided for a mandatory quota in order to facilitate the presence of women in all decision-making positions. More recently, the 2015 electoral decree, through its articles 62, 67 and 100.1, imposes a mandatory quota of 30% of women on the electoral list for municipalities and desirable for legislative positions.

³ <https://lakouayiti.com/haiti-collectivites-jovenel-moise-nomme-de-nouveaux-agents-interimaires/>

International Red Cross, allowing it to be more autonomous, including in fundraising. [15] This request was unsuccessful. Since 2017, the Concertation has been dysfunctional due to lack of funding, even though it has drawn up the 3rd plan to combat violence against women and girls 2017-2027, which is having great difficulty in being implemented. More and more organizations are now working on GBV without any training or activism. Several of them are created thanks to NGOs and disappear with the end of the project which caused them to be created. At the same time, the old organizations with the expertise in care received less and less funding. Currently, there is no mechanism for monitoring their interventions and the existing coordination only operate on a project basis. The old state tools are neither renewed nor updated. Thus, if the protocol between the MCFDF and the MSPP informing that any doctor can issue a medical certificate, currently only those issued by public hospitals are considered valid.

In parallel, since the government of Martelly, a beginning of trivialization of GBV has been noted in the public space. Thus, several cases of violations of women's rights by actors in the public sector, including by the highest official of the State, had been denounced without success.

In addition, since 2019, with the rise of armed gangs in the country, cases of individual or collective rape have multiplied and diversified. Femicide has become increasingly common and tolerated and is even tending to become commonplace. Women's bodies have become a weapon of combat and rape against them is seen as a means of control such as in the BINUH (United Nations integrated office in Haiti) reports:

"Besides resorting to sexual violence as part of a strategy to expand their area of influence or to inflict pain to rival communities, gangs also use this violence as a way to assert power and control over people living in their own areas. In an environment where fear prevails, local populations are subjected to subjugation to gang elements." [4]

Thus, several cases of rape in buses and cases of kidnapping accompanied by rape have been made public via social networks and traditional media.

Several reports from human rights organizations and international actors show how violence, and in particular rape, is increasingly used as a political weapon by gangs. Several massacres in rival neighborhoods were accompanied by rapes. The women and girls residing in the neighborhoods controlled by the latter do not have the possibility of saying no to the advances of the leaders of these said neighborhoods.

4. From the Institutionalization to the Instrumentalization of Gender

SOFA was the first organization to launch a call for mobilization in 1991 to demand the creation of a Ministry for the Status of Women to guarantee the systematic consideration of the concerns and interests of women during

the design, execution, monitoring and evaluation of public policies and development programs. This was created in 1994. It promoted the development of a public policy for gender equality as well as gender-sensitive sectoral policies. It contributed to the ratification of Conventions and Treaties such as the Convention of Belem Do Para and reported on their programming. It is important to note that most of the results of this ministry are due to the continuous exchanges and consultation with feminist organizations and to the advocacy efforts of feminists with other state actors for the respect of these commitments.

Most of the ministers have been chosen in concertation with women's and feminist organizations. In 1994, 2004 and 2006, the MCFDF was led by feminists or pro-feminists from the movement. In addition, most advocacy actions are carried out by the MCFDF jointly with women's and women's associations and feminists. They support the MCFDF in advocacy actions to force other state actors to take equality issues into account in their interventions. [14] But also, as such their article Baranyi and Champ shows, they are also present in the development and application of public policies on gender:

«L'histoire de la Politique Egalite femmes-hommes, interprétée par l'entremise d'un cadre théorique féministe institutionnaliste, laisse bien voir la dialectique de l'agentivité féministe et des contraintes récurrentes dans le contexte haïtien. Elle capte d'abord le génie stratégique du mouvement féministe, l'importance des alliances entre les militantes de la société civile, les femocrates travaillant au sein de l'État (notamment du MCFDF) et leurs partenaires de la coopération internationale, ainsi que leur capacité de mobiliser des ressources de façon audacieuse pour créer des occasions ou profiter de celles qui sont offertes par l'État national ainsi que par les normes et la coopération internationales⁴.» [2]

However, from 2010, the ministers have been chosen unilaterally by the political parties. Most of them have no knowledge of the subject and become aware of the issue only once in office. One of the most emblematic cases of this situation was the minister designated in 2018. Indeed, the latter before being chosen as minister had the habit of making sexist remarks about women via social networks. [12] In addition, instead of working with women's organizations, one of the ministers publicly attacked women's organizations, accusing them of being responsible for the scant resources allocated to her ministry. [1] This caused a position of feminists and a cold between the two actors.

The latest cabinets of MCFDF ministers are increasingly led by men without knowledge or interest in the subject and

⁴ The history of the Gender Equality Policy, interpreted through an institutionalist feminist theoretical framework, clearly shows the dialectic of feminist agency and recurring constraints in the Haitian context. It, first, captures the strategic genius of the feminist movement, the importance of alliances between civil society activists, femocrats working within the state (in particular the MCFDF) and their international cooperation partners, as well as their ability to mobilize resources boldly to create opportunities or take advantage of those offered by the national state and international norms and cooperation.

the chiefs of staff will most often be men⁵.

Thus, with the coming to power of ministers with no knowledge or commitment to gender, the application of gender equality policies will be limited or exploited for political and partisan purposes.

There are certainly two or three women like Edmonde Supplice Beauzile or Marjorie Michel who have emerged in the context of the crisis, but it is not a leadership that takes into account the strategic issues of women and their practical needs but above all at the service of a camp such as shows in:

“These structures called to take power are controlled by men. The women who are available can be counted at their fingertips. [...] However, this sector can be considered as spaces of male self where the participation and the practical or strategic interests of women are not considered as important themes.” [13]

One of the strategies adopted by feminist organizations to ensure their claim is the holding of rallies which allow them not only to discuss but also to defend their positions in public. This freedom to move is called into question by situations of violence, particularly on main roads, national roads. With the proliferation of gangs, it becomes more difficult to organize large gatherings, so that organizations can meet. Remote interactions not only are less dynamic, but most women's organizations also encounter a number of difficulties with regard to the operation of technological tools. They cannot all have access to high-speed internet capable of participating in these kinds of exchanges and interactions, particularly those living in rural areas. In addition, the country suffers from a serious energy problem which has been exacerbated by a fuel crisis which has significantly reduced public electricity.

5. Conclusion

The achievements of feminist movement in terms of the institutionalization of gender issues, the political participation of women in public life and the fight against violence have never been so much in jeopardy.

Admittedly, women's organizations have multiplied during this decade: in several cities of the country, young peasant women are active in women's or feminist organizations. In cities, female students are very open to feminism, but they lack initiatives and exchanges with the older generation and are often influenced by the political context.

If this link is not established between the different generations of feminists, if the movement does not offer alternatives in the face of the trivialization of sexist violence, the continued absence of women in strategic spaces and the instrumentalization of the ministry in charge of women's

equal rights issues, particularly because of the control of power by groups with very little interest in gender, as well as the exacerbation of the crisis that the country is going through, the risk of a relapse is real. Given these considerations and given the importance of the values advocated by feminists and their contribution to change and social transformation, there is an urgent need for action.

Therefore, Haitian feminists face a major challenge: that of seeking ways and means to organize themselves democratically, in order to erect a power likely to attack simultaneously against the face of patriarchy in the country.

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⁵ The information available on the last three women's ministers shows that there have always been two chiefs of staff, a woman and a man. But the man being more present. At the level of the members of the Cabinet during the mandate of Mrs. Sainvil out of the 20 members of the cabinet, 9 are women and 11 are men. For Madame Mompremier, of the 15 people, there are 8 men and 7 women. For Ms. Loreus, there is equality between women and men among the 10 members of the cabinet. Unpublished data provided by MCFDF senior management.

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