Voices of Haitian Women: Letters of Displaced Camp Dwellers in Port-au-Prince

Nicki Fraser, Ms., Florida International University

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RESEARCH PROPOSAL

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Introduction: On January 12, 2010, an earthquake of unprecedented scale shook the small Caribbean nation of Haiti. The epicenter of the earthquake, which measured 7.0 on the Richter scale, was approximately 25 kilometers west of Port-au-Prince. The earthquake killed an estimated 222,570 people and left 3.7 million people affected one way or the other. In the summer of 2010, 1.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) were in camps distributed across Port-au-Prince. That summer, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), an intergovernmental organization dedicated to the humane and orderly migration, undertook a project in Haiti which involved placing suggestion boxes in IDP camps and inviting the displaced to voice their concerns, hopes and dreams. Given the opportunity, the traditionally under-served and under-represented displaced Haitians dropped letters in IOM’s suggestion boxes by the thousands (approximately 2,500). The name of this project was Voice of the Voiceless. The project was the first serious attempt in the country to provide a voice to those who were displaced by the earthquake. Voice of the Voiceless letters (both the hard copies and the digital copies) will soon be housed at the Special Collections of the Florida International University (FIU) Libraries (see Letter of Support from Mr. Leonard Doyle, IOM), offering a unique learning opportunity never before afforded to the scholarly community, a rich trove of feelings and wants of the displaced. Focusing on the gender dimensions of disaster recovery, the proposed research, if funded, will be the first study to analyze the letters of the displaced by the earthquake in Haiti.

Problem Statement: The literature on gender and disaster highlights the unique vulnerabilities of women in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from disasters. Studies show not only that more women die in disasters than men, but also that women and women-headed households have limited access to formal relief and recovery mechanisms after disasters, and therefore they take more time to recover. Yet, women are resilient in the face of a disaster, playing active roles during disaster relief and recovery (op. cit 4). Despite a growing number of studies on gender and disaster, however, little is known on whether or not there are differences between women and men in terms of their rebuilding needs, priorities and visions in a post-disaster context. Voice of the Voiceless letters will provide an excellent opportunity to study such differences in Haiti. Haiti is the poorest country in the Americas and one of the poorest in the world. 78 percent of its population lives on less than $2 a day (op. cit 5). Women and girls in the country are especially vulnerable. Haiti ranks 123 out of 146 countries in the Gender Inequality Index. The condition of the IDP camps in Port-au-Prince present even more challenges to women and girls (e.g., lack of privacy, safety and security; increased gender-based violence). Yet, they lack a voice in the reconstruction process. As noted by the Gender Shadow Report, women’s voices were missing from the post-disaster needs assessment (PDNA) conducted after the earthquake as a blueprint for reconstruction by the Haitian government. There is a need to study women’s voices so that they could be integrated into the ongoing post-disaster recovery process.

Specific Aims and Hypotheses: My long term goal is to contribute to advancing knowledge on gender and disaster. My proposed research has three specific aims: (1) to determine the characteristics of IDPs who wanted to have a voice in the post-disaster recovery process; (2) to compare the rebuilding needs, priorities and visions of the IDPs through a
gendered lens; and (3) to understand what policy makers can do to address the unique needs of women and build on their strengths during the post-disaster recovery process. Based on preliminary analysis of 20 Voice of the Voiceless letters, I expect to find significant differences between the rebuilding needs, priorities and visions of women and men IDPs in Haiti. While women place a high priority on the basic needs of their children (e.g., food and schooling), for instance, men’s preferences indicate an emphasis on income generating activities during the post-disaster recovery period.

Research Design and Methods: For the proposed research, I will mainly use qualitative content analysis, “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns.” For this purpose, I will use the NVivo 10 software. I will design the analysis such that I code the content as data in a form that will help me achieve the specific aims of the study. Specific Aim 1, I will prepare a demographic database of those who wrote the letters. This database will include information not only on the gender of those who wrote the letters but also on their needs, their marital status, the number of their children, and their IDP camps. I will map the data on the location of the camps by using the Geographic Information Systems (GIS). [Timeline: August 2013-July 2014]. Specific Aim 2, I will utilize both directed and summative content analysis. The directed approach is where analysis starts with a theory or relevant research findings as guidance for initial codes. The summative approach involves counting and comparisons (e.g., of keywords) as well as interpreting the underlying context of the text (op. cit 8).[Timeline: August 2014-July 2015]. Specific Aim 3, I will analyze current economic and social programs in post-earthquake Haiti to understand how these programs have addressed gendered concerns. In addition, I will prepare a policy note suggesting improvements to the existing programs. I will distribute this policy note to the representatives of international aid agencies involved in recovery efforts in Haiti as well as to Haitian government officials. [Timeline: August 2015-September 2016].]

Significance and Broader Impacts are Fourfold: First, this study will contribute to knowledge on gender and disaster. It will be the first study to analyze the letters of IDPs in Haiti from a gender perspective. Second, the study will provide policy insights for Haitian government officials and international aid agency representatives involved in recovery efforts in Haiti since it will highlight the differences between the rebuilding needs, priorities and visions of displaced women and men in the country and evaluate existing social and economic programs. Third, the study will lend a voice to women in Haiti displaced by the earthquake. Fourth, the GRFP fellowship will help me, a student of Haitian descent, complete my graduate studies in public policy allowing me to teach, and mentor other Haitian students.