

“No More” Project, Léogâne –Haiti
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Background

When the 2010 massive earthquake hit Haiti on January 12, 2010, it claimed more than the 300,000 lives reported by the news media. Buried beneath the rubble were many untold stories of pain, hunger, violence, victimization and failures in the justice system. These stories include experiences of rape and sexual violence. A nearly destroyed country trying to make sense of its bodies and care for its wounded found itself hosting yet a war, the war on Haitian female bodiesⁱ. Extreme poverty combined with sexism caused many girls and women to be exploited after the earthquake, resulting in internal fears and external conflicts.

Now in the aftermath of the trauma of the earthquake, people are talking about rape and sexual violence. Haitians, especially in the capital city, are able to address their traumasⁱⁱ. However, monies aimed at helping women after the earthquake were funneled to the capital, leaving smaller towns like Léogâne (20 miles west from the capital) without additional support. As a result, the sexual violence in these towns remains unnamed, women’s stories are silenced, and many still live in fear of being attacked. Due to Léogâne’s lack of support and resources, and lack of employment, young girls are dependent on men in the community, whose assistance is contingent on sexual exploitation. Studies have shown that poverty is a major contributing factor to sexual abuse. Adult men are abusing young girls under the guise of helping them. Desperate to hold on to their only means of survival, many parents and caregivers often turn the blind eye. It is a common trend in Léogâne for an adult male to call an under-aged girl living in poverty with a single mother, his daughter. In many cases, these men sexually abuse these “daughters”. Their dependence on these men keeps these women and girls living in condition of sexual exploitation and with no peace.

The root cause of this persistence is continued poverty, silencing, and lack of financial opportunities.ⁱⁱⁱ An intervention is necessary for change. Through this project, I aim to raise the level of understanding about sexual violence in Léogâne; empower a small group of women to become financially independent; and bring together women in the community for mutual support. The ultimate aim is that violence through sexual exploitation in this town will happen “no more.”

Project Summary

Léogâne holds a special meaning for me, as I was born and raised there. Located at the epicenter of the earthquake, the town is largely devastated and under resourced. With the Davis funding, this project will foster women’s safety and peace by promoting awareness, building community, providing skills training, and by ending the war on the female body in Léogâne.”

The “No More” project has three major components:

1-Education: This program will raise awareness and educate the population of Léogâne about sexual violence in an effort to reduce the stigma and shame that survivors often experience. I will work along with Association des Femmes pour l’Amelioration des Valeurs Familiales (AFAVAF), Lchenn Foundation for Democracy and liberty, and Medic Haiti to conduct workshops offering resources and support available for survivors. I will also host radio shows on Cool FM to discuss sexual violence and resources. In addition, I will organize tabling events at the Catholic and Protestant churches and the Vodou temples on Sundays to disseminate information both verbally and in print. Furthermore, I will hold clothesline events in the park during which residents will have the chance to write their thoughts in a publicly displayed bed sheet in order to get the community involved in the project. I hope that the knowledge will raise awareness and reduce the uncomfortableness about talking to sexual violence aloud.

2- Skills-Training: Financial freedom is connected with independence and can alleviate issues of violence. Therefore, I plan to use part of the Davis fund to equip young women with technical skills they can build upon to earn a living. I will collaborate with Haiti Institute of Technology (HAITEC) to establish the *Peace Scholarship*, which will allow some women to go to trade school. The *Peace Scholarship* will be awarded to 10 women

between the ages of 16 and 30 for the full period of one year and it will cover tuition, books, and uniforms, as well as a stipend for transportation. The recipients will learn a trade of their choice. Options will include sewing, cosmetology, culinary arts, and computer skills. I will review the applications along with members of AFAVAF and the criteria for selection will include risk/exposure to or history of sexual violence, financial hardship, lack of employment opportunity, and desire to learn a trade. Based on their level of education, applicants will have a choice between writing an essay and having an interview.

3- Empowerment and peace through community building: During the summer, I will hold several meetings each Friday with the *Peace Scholarship* recipients and local organizations. Each meeting will have a thematic focus such as additional opportunities and resources available for women (specifically sexual violence survivors); developing safety strategies for young women in situations of violence; and healthy relationship training for men including masculinity and appropriate sexual behaviors. I aim to create a culture where women at risk can talk and help each other. These meetings will be open to members of the community including men. Peace scholars will be empowered through their knowledge and new skills. They will be able to create a strong network of women and pass on the legacy of activism and peace by serving as role models for the next generation.

I anticipate that many of these teens and young women might have children. Therefore, I have contacted the founder and director of Les Gaies Hirondelles Kindergarten, who is willing to accept the children in her summer camp while their mothers are participating in the meetings. In addition, I have a team of community members in place to help prepare lunch the days of the meetings.

Expected outcomes

At the end, the “No More” project aims to achieve many milestones. First, the community as a whole will be more aware of sexual violence and teens and young women will be able to assess their risk of victimization. I plan to survey the residents of the town before and after the project in order to assess their knowledge about sexual violence pre and post campaign. Second, each *Peace Scholarship* recipient will gain a new skill over the course of one year, which, I hope, would foster her independence and freedom. I expect that all 10 recipients will complete the program of their choice. Third, the project will help reduce the risk of sexual violence against teens and young women living in poverty by creating a strong network of women and restoring peace through community building. I will conduct focus groups at the end of the project in order to measure the benefits of the meetings/workshops.

Plan for sustainability I intend to look for additional funding in order to maintain the *Peace Scholarship*. Once the recipients graduate from HAITEC in 2016, I would like to organize the first Annual Peace Fair in Léogâne in which Peace Scholars would get a chance to present their work to the community and at the same time advertise their work and skills. Because Léogâne has no industry and residents rely mainly on their skills to support themselves, these women will be able to enter the informal market and create small businesses. In addition, I plan to continue the education campaign along with the local organizations and I hope that women will share their knowledge through networking. The more extended goal is to have a connected town with strong and financially independent women able to provide for their families and advocate for their children.

This project has met the approval of Mayor Santos Alexis and was acclaimed by a team willing to collaborate on a long-term basis. This team includes Medic Haiti, Lchenn Foundation for Democracy and Liberty, AFAVAF, HAITEC, and Les Gaies Hirondelles Kindergarten. Edwyn Labaze will provide me with a secure location to conduct the meetings and workshops.

¹ Isabella Szabloc interview with Jocie Phillistin (2014). Women’s bodies, today’s battleground: A personal story of courage from the global summit to end sexual violence in Haiti. Retrieved from www.globaljusticecenter.net.

² Amnesty international (2011). Haiti: Sexual violence against women increasing. Retrieved from www.amnestyinternational.org.

³ Institute for justice and democracy in Haiti. (2014). Mario Joseph on rights enforcement as a solution to end sexual violence in Haiti. Retrieved from www.ijdh.org.