

Benedetta Faedi Duramy

Gender and Violence in Haiti: Women's Path from Victims to Agents. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014. 172 pp. (Paper US\$ 25.95)

In this book, Benedetta Duramy explores a theme not often addressed in the literature about gender-based violence, that of female participants. She argues that in the context of civil conflicts, the conventional wisdom is to explain the prevalence of sexual violence within a framework of a social division of labor, with men as perpetrators and women as continued victims. The book questions this approach, showing how, in Haiti, women and girls can also be the aggressors.

Organized in seven chapters, the data come from 150 individual interviews and 10 focus groups targeting organizations of civil society, international agencies, and nongovernmental organizations. Duramy identifies six main armed groups, all of which, with the exception of the political organizations, are involved in practices of sexual violence. Women and girls are found in all but the political organizations. Haiti, a country of extreme poverty with increased degradation of its social fabric, has created an environment susceptible to civil unrest and gang activities.

Assessing the Haitian case, Duramy argues that worldwide patterns of gender-based violence prevail but that in Haiti the degree of normalization of these practices is higher because the existing culture of violence creates a climate of greater acceptance. In that respect, the participation of women in Haitian gang violence is closely associated with their previous experience of sexual victimization. For Duramy, there are three main causes explaining the actions of these female gang members. They need protection, they have to satisfy their basic economic needs, and they are angry at their oppressed and unequal conditions. As previous victims they also want revenge.

An important point raised by this book is the fact that although Haiti has signed many international agreements, the prevailing conditions tend to restrict compliance and application of the laws. Thus, the weakness of the Haitian legal system, reinforced by common law practices and traditions, aggravates the problems. There is need for the state to come to terms with the signed international agreements and the possibilities for enforcement could be achieved by crafting the principles of CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) into domestic law. Duramy argues that there is an urgent need for national intervention and the development of new legislation because the currently existing laws only provide for the prosecution of female aggressors and therefore are inadequate since they do not address the issues of their previous victimization.

Although the book brings more insight on the practices of rape in Haiti and on the participation of women in the sexually violent activities of gangs, the first issues that need to be clarified are about methodology and epistemology. What kinds of practices of sexual violence are being considered—is it primarily rape? How much of the population has been victimized by rape? How many women in the population are members of the armed groups? How were these female members recruited? What place do they occupy in the structure of the armed groups? How does Haiti compare with Jamaica and Trinidad, which are said to have the highest rates of gang violence? Are rapes more prevalent in Haiti compared to places like St. Vincent or the Bahamas?¹ What are the dynamics of gender relations regarding the place of Haitian women in the household? Is there polygamy in Haiti? And what is the scope of incestuous relations? The tendency to impose certain categories without a clear understanding of the dynamics of gender relations weakens the analysis. There are other examples of a weak sociological and historical reading of the roots and nature of the exploitation of child labor known as Restavek. How is it embedded in the patriarchal control of the female body as property? Although much of the book's argument is clearly uninformed, one of its most interesting findings concerns the participation of women and girls in all the groups except the political organizations. Nonetheless, a more profound analysis of gender power dynamics and the presence of women in these groups would have contributed to an understanding of changes in their empowerment.

Rape is a particularly complex crime to analyze, partly because many sexual assaults are never reported. There are many factors influencing the silencing that are not a peculiarity of Haitian culture as the study seems to imply. This is because of a lack of confidence in the security and justice systems but also because of fear of acts of vengeance as well as feelings of shame. The American organization Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN) reports that out of every 100 rapes only 32 get reported, that only 7 lead to an arrest, and that only 2 get prosecuted (<https://www.rainn.org/get-information/statistics/reporting-rates>). As Soraya Chemaly points out in a post to the website Feminist Wire (<http://thefeministwire.com/2014/08/gendered-violence-wasnt-problem-talking>), “gendered violence wasn’t the problem: talking about it was.”

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1 See Ludovica Iaccino, 2014. Top 5 Countries with the Highest Rates of Rape, *International Business Times*, January 29.