

‘We can't find support’: Three women’s stories of repeated rape by Haitian gangs



‘They asked me to undress, and one said he would put a knife on my neck. Facing five men, I couldn't fight and there was no help around.’

In Haiti, rape has become a weapon of war for gangs. What happens in the hours and days after women and girls are raped can determine their future, but most survivors face insurmountable obstacles before they can start recovering physically and mentally. And that’s if they aren’t raped a second time or third time.

Once a woman is raped in Haiti, she faces a maze of other challenges. These are just a few:

The New Humanitarian talked to three survivors from Cité Soleil: a shantytown on the outskirts of the capital that is entirely controlled by gangs. For safety reasons, their names have been changed, but their testimonies (which they voice themselves in the short video clips below) are all too real, and their experiences reflect those of an untold number of women who, just like them, confront impossible challenges and dangers every day just to keep themselves and their children alive.

The following testimonies have been edited for length and clarity.

(Contact with the women was arranged through the Haitian feminist group [Nègès Mawon](#)).

Kari: “We can't find support. It's war everywhere.”

Kari, 39, had already lost her baby and her husband to gang violence before she was raped, then later kidnapped. While held captive, she was beaten and raped again repeatedly over three days before being released naked into the streets. She sees no point in reporting any of it to the police. Struggling psychologically and physically from an infection due to the rapes, and trying to look after five children on her own, Kari has received no assistance, bar some food from a local priest and some support from a women’s community organisation.

Read Kari's testimony in full [here](#):

Kari: “We can't find support. It's war everywhere.”

First, Kari, a 39-year-old resident of Cité Soleil, lost her baby to a stray bullet. Less than a year later, in June 2021, her husband was shot by criminals while fishing on his canoe. Kari was still trying to recover from those tragedies when the bloody events of July 2022 unfolded.

That month, [10 days of heavy gang warfare](#) in the seaside shantytown left nearly 500 people wounded, missing, or dead; multiple sexual assaults were registered; and 3,000 people fled their homes, Kari and four of her children among them.

“I started to live badly on 8 July 2022. [Gang members] burned my house down and were violent to me. I wasn’t a victim of sexual violence, but they raped a young woman who was living in the house. I lost all my important documents,” she said. Since the death of her husband, Kari had been struggling to meet her children’s needs. She made money selling goods – fish, rice, dried baby shrimps – but the attack of July 2022 left her with nothing. Helpless, she fled the neighbourhood with a group of people. To do so, they had to cross an area called dèyè mi (“behind the wall” in Krèyol), known to be the frontier between two gangs’ territory. It is also the only way in and out of the Brooklyn neighbourhood of Cité Soleil where she lived.

“As I was walking in dèyè mi with other people because there was no public transportation, men from the area grabbed us and raped us,” she said. “I was also hit by a bullet and my leg still hasn't healed. When it rains, the pain dominates me.”

Kari spent some time living in the Plaza Hugo Chávez, a public square in the centre of Port-au-Prince where thousands of Haitians fleeing from violence had settled in an improvised camp. She had managed to take a few things from her house to sell, but the precarity of her situation pushed her to leave for the Dominican Republic with her two youngest children, aged 17 and 11. She didn't last long in the neighbouring country – Haiti and the Dominican Republic share the Caribbean island of Hispaniola – as her children couldn't get proper schooling there. Three months later, they returned to Port-au-Prince.

Back home, she started trading again, as many women do to survive. On Tuesday March 14, she took a bus with 16 other women she used to sell products with. Their destination was Arcahaie, a town 25 miles northwest of the capital. Travelling out of Cité-Soleil is not safe, but Kari didn't have a choice. Business had started to slow, and she had borrowed the equivalent of \$140, only managing to give \$18 back.

“While I was going to Arcahaie, arriving at Source Matelas (a neighbourhood north of the capital where there have been a series of violent gang raids in the past few months), people stopped the bus I was on and ordered us to get down and follow a funeral,” Kari said.

After the funeral, she and other women were kidnapped by the men who had forced them out of the bus.

“We entered a house. They asked for our identification documents. I told them that I had come to sell, that I had no ID with me,” she said. “They pushed us and said that we surely live in the area of Ti Gabriel (one of Cité Soleil’s gang leaders). ‘You are thieves, we are going to kill you,’ they told us.”

The men kept them captives for three days, beating and raping them repeatedly.

“They did everything they shouldn't do to us,” Kari recalled. “When I was still conscious, I counted seven men. I am asthmatic, and although I had an asthma attack, they kept beating me,” she said.

She ended up passing out, but that didn't stop her assailants either.

“When I regained consciousness, I saw young men who could have been my children raping me. I told them: ‘If you want to kill me, you can do it, even if I have young children; God will continue to watch over them. It's better to kill me.’”

During those three days, the women had to do the gang members’ laundry. They barely ate. The men constantly told their captives they would kill them and continued to rape them, until the fourth night came.

“After all that, they changed the dialogue and asked us if we wanted to stay with them. I told them that I have four children without a father. We spoke to them at length. In the end, they released us, naked. As we left, people of goodwill in the area gave us clothes to put on.”

It took Kari eight hours to reach her mother for help. Kari’s mother bought medicinal leaves to take care of her wounds. The window to take medication to prevent unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases is 72 hours, but 15 days passed before a friend convinced Kari to go to the hospital. There, she received medication for an infection, but she still hasn't fully recovered.

Kari hasn’t been to the police to file a complaint. She doesn't believe it will make a difference. “There is no justice,” she said.

Since the kidnapping, Kari lives in extreme poverty. The gang members stole all the goods she planned to sell, which means she has no money to resume her business. She still has to pay her debt and is now also responsible for her fifth child as well – a six-year-old girl who hadn't been living with her before.

Kari doesn't have enough money to pay for rent, so they live in a camp set up in a school. When it rains, they must spend the night standing or sleep under the water. To eat, they depend on a priest who distributes food; for water, they rely on rain. Pressed by their desperation even for basic food needs, her 20-year-old son, the eldest, dropped his studies to go fishing. Kari blames authorities for her situation, and for leaving her no other option than risking her life to survive.

“We, who are from Brooklyn, have never had the Haitian state saying ‘no, [these violent attacks] shouldn't take place. If we had enough money, I don’t think we would be in the streets. We know that if [the gang members] take us, they will kill us.’”

Since the rape of last March, Kari has been struggling psychologically. The only support she has found is at the women's organisation Nègès Mawon. But in the past few weeks, the rise in gang-related violence has prevented her from reaching the organisation, which is located in a neighbourhood out of Cité Soleil. She says she feels ashamed of what happened to her, and can't overcome the trauma of her assaults.

"I intended to hurt myself because I saw that I was living in bad circumstances. The violence I suffered in Source Matelas is the one affecting me the most," she told The New Humanitarian.

When she remembers what happened to her, she can't hold back her tears.

"I was a fat person; I became small as you see me. They took my business; they beat me, and they raped me", she said. "I demand justice from [the authorities]. We who are unfortunate are asking for more security. In Cité Soleil, we suffer more. We can't find support; it's war everywhere."

Madeline: "My mother keeps crying – she doesn't see what she is going to be able to do."

Madeline, 16, was heading home to Cité Soleil after trying to make some money reselling food in the city when armed men stopped her bus, killed some people on board, and took others hostage. Raped and beaten, she found herself covered in blood when she regained consciousness. An unknown number of men raped her over several days before she was released, again, naked. Later, at hospital, she learned she was pregnant from the rape. Feeling trapped by the rising tide of gang violence and the possibility of being raped again, Madeline has repeatedly tried to take her own life.

Read Madeline's testimony in full here:

Madeline: "My mother keeps crying – she doesn't see what she is going to be able to do."

The day she was raped, Madeline, a 16-year-old girl from Cité Soleil, had decided it was time to help her parents make some money. The situation was desperate for them. They barely had any food or clean water, and her school had been closed after several students got hit by bullets on their way back home after classes.

"My parents had set aside money to pay for my education. But the school had to stop; that's why I asked them for the money," she said.

They gave her 2,500 gourdes, the equivalent of \$18. With that she bought cloves and dried baby shrimp to sell out of the capital, in Arcahaie, with a group of women. They reached the town and spent the day working. Then came the trip back to Port-au-Prince.

"That day, we had been walking in the sun, selling all day and we were thirsty. After we finished, we were heading home when a group of armed men stopped the bus we were on. It was 28 March 2023," Madeline recalled. "They drove the bus in the undergrowth. Afterward they beat us, some of us were killed, and we asked to be spared. They took us, they tore the clothes we were wearing, and they raped us. They abused us so much that I lost consciousness. When I woke up, I saw that I was soaked in blood."

Madeline and her companions were taken hostage for three days. She told The New Humanitarian she doesn't remember how many men sexually abused her; they took turns. Following what appears to be a common modus operandi when the gangs in Haiti kidnap women, the perpetrators had their captives do their laundry and later released them naked.

After the rape, Madeline was taken to the hospital, but not soon enough to be given emergency contraception. They told her she was pregnant.

"I am very sad and in a lot of pain. I am now pregnant, and I have no relief. My mother has no money, nor does my father," Madeline said. "My mother keeps crying; she doesn't see what she is going to be able to do. My father has not said a word. They are sad... Where I live, if it is blocked, we will not find water – there is only one road for access. Even for food, we cannot eat well."

Since the rape, Madeline has been feeling dizzy and having suicidal thoughts.

"Several times I took water with Clorox [bleach] to drink. There is always someone who sees me and takes it from my hands to throw it away and advise me on it," she said, adding that if she finds help, she will move somewhere else.

"I hope in the future I can leave where I live to have another life. I have this in mind," she said. "As long as you live in Cité Soleil, you always think that a bullet could hit you, that you could be a victim. I hope one day I will be free, that I will no longer be under (the gangs') control."

Tamara: "I looked at the children on the ground crying. I felt that I was no longer alive."

Tamara, 24, was raped by two gang members. When she regained consciousness, she found her husband had been killed and his body burnt. Two months later, she was raped again by three men after being set up by someone pretending to help her. She took her three children to a main square in the capital, Port-au-Prince, where she begged to survive until they were thrown out by the authorities. More recently, her nine-year-old daughter was also raped by a gang member. Tamara became pregnant from her ordeal and continues to suffer physically after drinking something on purpose to make herself abort.

Read Tamara's testimony in full here:

Tamara: “I looked at the children on the ground crying. I felt that I was no longer alive.”

At 24, Tamara never had an easy life. She has taken care of herself since the age of 15, when she had her first child. She managed to get by. By the time she met her husband, she was already a mother of two. She started a new life with him, had another child, and he supported them all. They lived in Cité Soleil.

On the night of 8 July 2022, they were woken up by violent clashes that erupted between gangs in the area. Her husband didn't want to try to flee because he thought it wasn't safe, but she convinced him that they needed to go.

“The men invaded our neighbourhood. People were shot dead. They also set houses on fire. People were running everywhere. I didn't want to die in the house; I had to leave,” Tamara said.

They took their children and left their home with the little clothing they had on. They walked for hours. But when they reached dèyè mi, gang members stopped them. Tamara, in tears, recalled what happened next when they spoke to her husband.

“The men said: ‘Here is someone who has put his gun on the ground; he is running away because he sees that he is going to die’... While they were talking to him, some of them took me aside and two of them raped me on the grass. I looked at the children on the ground crying. I felt that I was no longer alive.”

After that, Tamara asked for her husband; they told her to follow them. She found him severely beaten and could barely recognise him. When she went to him, the gang members hit her in the head and she lost consciousness. What she saw when she woke up is a trauma she will never overcome: Her husband's body was completely burnt into charred remains.

“Then, I took the three children and left... I went to Hugo Chávez square. I stayed there for four months in misery. I was selling water, begging for money. I worked with food vendors near the airport. I was doing things to be able to live,” she recalled.

On 25 September 2022, Tamara was raped again. That day, her children – who are now nine, six, and one – had not eaten and were crying.

“They were hungry; the baby had fallen ill because of the rain, so I arranged a bed for her and told the older ones to watch over her. It must have been 6 or 7pm. I went out and spoke to a man who asked me what my problem was and if he could help me”.

Tamara explained her situation, and the man offered to buy her food and give her some money. She followed him until four different men stopped them and the original man ran away. She would later understand that he actually wasn't and that it was all part of a set-up. When her captors took her to the nearby undergrowth, the man who had originally offered her to help was waiting for them.

“He was sitting down and asked me: ‘Am I your father to feed you? I don't even know you.’ He started insulting me,” Tamara said. “They asked me to undress, and one said he would put a knife on my neck. Facing five men, I couldn't fight and there was no help around.”

Three of them brutally raped her.

“After all of this, I told myself I had to die,” Tamara told The New Humanitarian. “I heard several voices [in my head] while I was looking for a place to do it. Some voices told me to kill myself; others told me that life was not over. I finally got dressed and left.”

Three months later, she found out that she was pregnant and decided, despite her beliefs, to terminate her pregnancy.

“I said I cannot be pregnant... I am in a country where I will find no support. I already have three children without a dad, so I was forced to make a sacrifice. I drank a liquid that led me to lose the child. I almost died, and everything is a problem. I had to do things I never agreed with in my life.”

Tamara still struggles with the medical consequences of her self-managed abortion. Nègès Mawon has helped her by providing medication. But women victims of sexual violence in Haiti find no protection. Nor do their children.

One night in November 2022, she recalled how the mayor of Tabarré – the municipality that has jurisdiction over Hugo Chávez Square – decided to evict the people living there and close the square. Civil protection brigadiers and police officers didn't give them much time to take their belongings. Tamara lost the little she had.

The state, she said, didn't help after this happened: "Some people received 5,000 Haitian gourdes (\$35.5), while I received a coupon for food, but no money. Why?"

Last February, Tamara suffered a new blow when her nine-year-old daughter was raped on her way to buy water in Cité Soleil. Two gang members held her down tightly, while a third raped her.

"Since she was a victim, she has not been the same anymore. She has seemed absent; sometimes, she sits alone. When I call her, she reacts only when I am close to her," Tamara said. "At the clinic, she has seen a psychologist, but I still need psychological support [for her] and support for her schooling."

To this day, she hasn't filed a police report for any of the rapes. She says she doesn't want "to face the bandits", that she has been able to manage, even though it is sometimes difficult, especially since she is living back in Cité Soleil

"I'm having a hard time. I can't eat. I can't send my children to school and I can't even cross the entrance to my neighbourhood," she said.

Every time she needs to go near dèyè mi, or go through that area to exit Cité Soleil, she is terrified.

Last time she tried to go through dèyè mi despite her fear, she was sexually abused again. Gang members stopped her at 11am and forced her to take all her clothes off.

"I thought they were going to rape me," she said.

But they didn't. Instead, they told her to stay face down on the pavement with her legs apart, for hours. The sun was hitting hard.

"They made me lie down with my vagina directly on the ground, which was very hot," Tamara said. "They told us they had raped us enough times, and that since we have AIDS they had decided not to".

Tamara did not contract AIDS, but for gang members, bringing up STDs is another way to aggress women, by denigrating them.

"At around 2pm, they told us we could leave and go give infections to other thieves", Tamara recalled. "Since then, I haven't felt well. I can't bear all this anymore."

Data difficulties: Even assessing the scale and needs is hard

Data on gender-based violence, and rape by gang members specifically, is very limited in Haiti because attacks so often go unreported. However, a recent UN study and records kept by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) do shed some light on its scale, at least in the capital.

The [study](#), which surveyed 591 women and girls from in and around Cité Soleil in December 2022, showed that areas with lower levels of gang warfare registered fewer cases of GBV and that sexual violence was concentrated in the Brooklyn neighborhood, where the three survivors interviewed by The New Humanitarian come from. The area was the scene of intense gang conflict in 2022.

Eighty percent of the women and girls who participated in this research had been victims of one or multiple forms of sexual violence by one or more perpetrators. In 33% of the cases, the assailants were described as bandits, gang members, or kidnappers. Fourteen percent of the victims were only 10 to 18 years old.

Eighty-four percent of the study respondents did not report the attacks they were victims of. When the perpetrator was a stranger, most said that they believed, "it would put them in danger from the gangs, including risk of death; that they did not trust the local authorities, fearing retaliation; that they did not know where or how to report; or they felt in general that there was no state presence".

Forty percent of the women and girls interviewed said they did not have access to healthcare after their assault; the reasons for that were either that there was no staff, that the health services were too far away, that reaching them was too dangerous, or that they did not want to be identified. The vast majority of those who had access to healthcare (83%) said it had been beneficial. Sixty-nine percent of respondents said they most would want to see a psychologist, psychotherapist, or psychiatrist.

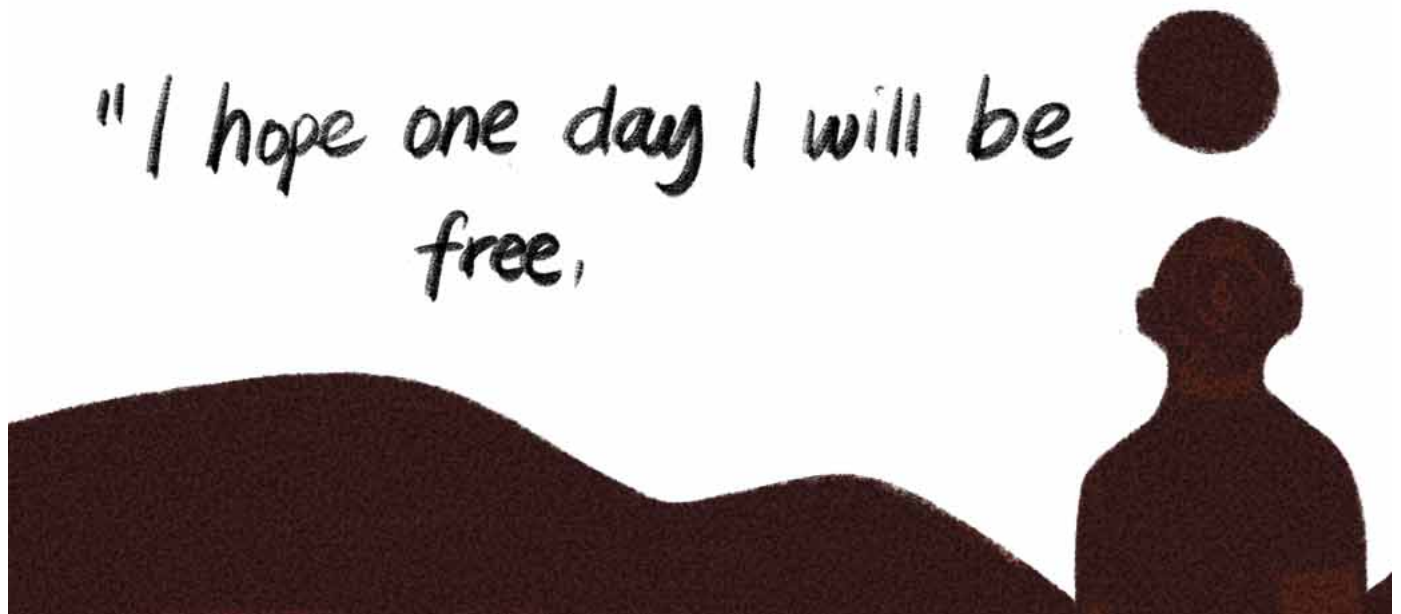
Read more: How one feminist organisation is supporting rape victims

The three survivors interviewed by The New Humanitarian have all received support from Nègès Mawon, one of the few Haitian NGOs assisting victims of rape. The feminist organisation assigns rape survivors a sponsor who takes them to medical services (MSF, AHF Haiti, and Zanmi Lasante) for medical care, treatment, or follow-ups. The sponsor, who is usually a survivor of sexual violence herself, helps them with the legal process as well. If the victim doesn't want to report the rape, the information is sent to the National Network of Human Rights Defense (RNDDH) to keep a record of each case and document it, in the hope that the information could still be used for prosecution if the justice system improves. Nègès Mawon also has a psychologist available for the victims and provides them with the money for transportation to reach its offices, or to get to the different centres giving them support. Between May 2022 and March 2023, the organisation registered [652 cases](#) of women and girl rape victims in just four neighbourhoods of Port-au-Prince, including Cité Soleil. Fourteen of them became pregnant as a result of the rape, eight had complications from self-managed abortions, 90 contracted STDs, and nine were murdered.

MSF also has alarming statistics. In the first five months of 2023, the organisation assisted 1,005 survivors of sexual violence in Port-au-Prince – almost twice the number they registered during the same period of 2022. Michele Trainiti, MSF's head of mission in Haiti, told The New Humanitarian that the profile of perpetrators has changed. While victims used to be predominantly assaulted by someone from their family or intimate circle, now only 20% of the perpetrators belong to that category.

MSF records, however, do not entirely reflect the reality, Trainiti explained. "The trend is increasing, but we don't have access everywhere in Haiti, and the patients also have challenges in accessing our services," he said. "Our data has to be taken only as the tip of the iceberg; it does not reflect the extent of the needs, which are way higher."

Daniela Mohor reported and edited from Santiago, Chile. Edited by Paisley Dodds and Andrew Gully, with illustrations by JC, the artistic name of an illustrator from Myanmar.



JC/TNH