

EXCLUSIVE: Surge in use of rape against women and rivals by Haiti gangs

'I was never a victim until then.'



It was love at first sight for Madeline*, who first met Baptiste* at a church retreat in Haiti's southern port town of Les Cayes in 2002. As infatuated teenagers, they eventually wed and settled in the Caribbean country's capital, Port-au-Prince.

With a growing family and unsteady work selling bottled sodas and food staples, the couple could only afford to rent in [Cité Soleil](#), a seaside shantytown where [armed groups](#) have turned streets into battlegrounds.

The gang violence became so intense [in July](#) of this year that Madeline and Baptiste made the agonising choice to send their six children away to a shelter, for safety. Days later, the pair awoke in the middle of the night to find the neighbourhood in flames.

Grabbing what belongings they could, they fled toward Carrefour Lanmò, or "Crossroads of Death" – an intersection frequented by armed groups. They made it through, Madeline recalled, but an armed gang stopped them afterwards and dragged them onto a sidestreet.

Baptiste was pushed to the ground and beaten before a tyre was thrown around his neck and he was set on fire. His last words were: "Can't you see that we are poor?"

Madeline, meanwhile, was raped by more than a dozen gang members. After they were done, she was told to run, forcing her to abandon Baptiste's body.

"I was never a victim until then," Madeline, 35, told The New Humanitarian, as she recounted the July events in September, shortly after being treated for a sexually transmitted disease she contracted during the gang rape.

Haitian women and children are not just being caught up in the country's spiralling gang wars – they are increasingly being targeted for rapes, torture, kidnappings, and killings by the 200 armed groups that now control [60% of the capital](#). On top of the daily struggle to survive, many are being left with trauma or injuries from attacks. Some, like Madeline, have also been left to fend for their families on their own.

Their plight has been compounded by a lack of safe shelters or refuge. More than 96,000 people have been [displaced](#) by the gang violence, but neither the Haitian government nor the international community have mandated formal displacement sites – centres set up during previous bouts of instability or disasters.

Dozens of women and girls have been raped at some of the 33 makeshift displacement camps, according to the Haiti-based Bureau des Avocats Internationaux (BAI), a legal group trying to assist some of the women who have been attacked.

As part of The New Humanitarian's ongoing Haiti coverage – and in an effort to gather data to better understand the extent of the problem – reporters spoke to more than a dozen victims, as well as aid workers, civil society groups, rights groups, and government officials who said they are struggling to keep up with the unprecedented surge in cases.

Getting official numbers on sexual or gender-based violence in Haiti has never been easy, but the recent gang violence has compounded the problem. Women are often too afraid to report it, and many traditional reporting points such as [hospitals](#), women's centres, and police stations have now shut because of the violence.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), which still operates a clinic in the capital, told The New Humanitarian it recorded some 32 cases of rape or other gender-based violence in just two days in September. *MSF, however, noted that most of the cases have been domestic violence or cases where the victims have known the perpetrators.

“Speaking about 10 cases means there are 1,000 unreported; speaking about 100 means that there are 10,000,” said Lara Chlela, a focal point for the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse with UNICEF.

Before gang violence took root, MSF would see between three and four patients a day who reported such abuse, according to Honorine Uwaringenz, the medical charity’s team leader at the clinic. On average, 130 victims of gender-based violence are now being seen each month. Of those, 100 are rape victims.

Even armed female police officers have been targeted in attacks. On 7 April 2021, Guerline Joseph was kidnapped and tortured for three days, according to a [report](#) from the [Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti](#) (IJDH).

Armed groups have proliferated since the [assassination](#) of President Jovenel Moïse in July 2021 and, despite the rampant violence, a [political solution](#) has yet to materialise. Haiti’s de facto leader, Ariel Henry, has called for foreign troops to intervene, but nearly 100 civil society groups want a “Haitian-led solution” and oppose a foreign intervention.

Some government officials have also been accused of ties to gang members. The United States recently [sanctioned two Haitian senators](#) for their ties to gangs, and the involvement of armed groups in the illicit drug trade.

Weapons of war

In the same wave of violence that drove Madeline and Baptiste from their home in July, Nathalie* – then six months pregnant and already a mother of four – said she was raped by armed men as she returned from searching for purified water near Deyè Mi, a crossing between two rival gangs in Port-au-Prince.

Since the attack, Nathalie has put three of her four children into an orphanage in Hinche, a town in central Haiti.

“It’s not that I don’t love my children,” Nathalie told The New Humanitarian, explaining that she feared her two boys and youngest daughter could be [recruited into the gangs](#) if they stayed. “I just couldn’t handle the situation anymore.”

Julienne did not report the rape, fearing retaliation from gang members.

In many of these marginalised neighbourhoods like Cité Soleil, young boys and girls are raised by guns and violence. With [more than 60% of the population unemployed and nearly 77%](#) living with less than \$2 a day, [much of the youth turn to gangs](#) as a means of survival.

In reality, many members of armed groups have little agency over their own lives, driven into membership by the lack of economic opportunities, their authority reinforced by the [neglect of these neighbourhoods](#) by the Haitian state.

Watch → [Stolen future: Haiti’s gangs and its children](#)

The wave of gang violence has prevented women from reporting such cases. MSF, for example, recorded roughly 980 cases of sexual violence in 2021 – a 23% drop from 1,275 cases in 2020, and one Uwaringenz attributes to women not being able to report cases to police or fearing retribution.

Armed groups outnumber police in some areas of the capital, and many police stations have been burned and looted for weapons.

“You are supposed to give those [rape] complaints to the gang leader in the area,” said Rosy Auguste Ducena, programmes manager at the National Human Rights Network (RNDDH), one of the groups collecting information on such cases.

In addition to the rampant violence in the capital, gangs have also [established footholds in other densely populated urban areas](#), such as the northern city of Cap-Haïtien, where armed men [killed a 70-year-old priest last year](#).

Gangs have also used sexual violence as a weapon against communities they accuse of collaborating against them, sometimes targeting women associated with rival groups for rapes or killings.

Other women have been forcibly recruited or have reluctantly joined for protection or work, earning money by collecting information or stealing from homes, according to women who have fled gang-controlled areas and others working in such places who spoke on condition of anonymity out of security concerns.

Some women have formed their own gangs or affiliated with others, often with deadly consequences.

In April 2022, 17 women who called themselves Baz Koko Fè or “Iron Pussy” and were affiliated with a gang called Chen Mechan, or “Evil Dogs”, were allegedly raped and killed by the 400 Mawozo gang, according to the National Human Rights Network.

“Their entire world has shrunk to the space that [is] totally controlled by the gangs. There are effectively no paths beyond this world, and so the only way to make a living is to engage in this insular world that was created,” said Sasha Filippova, senior staff attorney at [Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti](#), which partners with BAI on legal cases.

No formal camps

Madeline, who was reunited with her six children shortly after Baptiste’s killing, now sleeps among some 3,000 people living in the Plaza Hugo Chávez, an open-air public park in the capital a short walk from the international airport.

Ever since a young girl was raped by a gang member who walked into the camp, she says she sleeps with her legs draped over her five daughters.

Although the alleged perpetrator was caught, the family asked that he be released, too fearful that he or other gang members would target the family, Madeline said, adding that the little girl hasn’t spoken since the rape.

[Spontaneous displacement sites](#) have mushroomed across the capital, but since none are official sites, services and support have been sporadic. In some of the camps, more than 60% of the displaced are women and girls.

“It’s too out of control to allow for a proper response.”

Giuseppe Loprete, a former country director of the UN’s migration agency (IOM) who left Haiti in September, said the conditions are unimaginable.

“It’s too out of control to allow for a proper response,” Loprete said.

The IOM added that any decision about informal displacement sites or the creation of formal sites would be made by Haitian authorities.

Lawyers have been assisting women who have reported rapes, sexual assaults, or exploitation at the [Carrefour site](#) – a gymnasium that once held more than 1,000 people but closed in July – according to Mario Joseph, who heads BAI.

In more than 30 testimonies, some alleged abuse was at the hands of local aid workers or government officials, according to Joseph, who said neither UN agencies nor the Haitian government are taking action to address the problem. He added that because of insecurity, they have not been able to follow up with the women.

So far, formal displacement centres are being seen as a last resort, Jerry Chandler, the general director of Haiti’s civil protection agency, told The New Humanitarian.

“The orders I have is to make sure that people are not encouraged to be in these shelters or camps,” Chandler said, suggesting they didn’t want people to become dependent on resources offered in camps that were hard to provide.







Ricardo Arduengo/REUTERS

A woman cooks inside her makeshift tent in the Plaza Hugo Chávez, a public square in Port-au-Prince where she is seeking shelter from gang violence, on 16 October 2022.

The agency saw its budget cut in half this year to just \$417,000, even though the country is still coping with tens of thousands displaced by an August 2021 earthquake that killed more than 2,200 people in the country's southern peninsula.

Although there has been little appetite for another UN peacekeeping mission in Haiti – some [10,000 cholera deaths](#) were linked to the last one – aid organisations have been one of the few lifelines for women, providing food and medical care despite challenges.

The UN, meanwhile, has [struggled to fund](#) its operations, with UN envoy Helen La Lime warning of a “[humanitarian catastrophe](#)”.

According to UN figures, some 4.9 million of Haiti's 11 million population are already in need of humanitarian aid, and those numbers are expected to increase.

“We're in a crisis situation right now,” said Filippova, from IJDH. “It's very important for aid as a general rule not to bypass the state, but the government is unwilling to provide it. I think providing safe spaces with meaningful assistance is really, really critical.”

‘Multidimensional crisis’

Angélika* said she lost all four of her children to gang violence, including her daughter, who was raped and killed in July.

Some victims and humanitarian workers told The New Humanitarian that some gang leaders use their authority to take the virginity of any young girl in his territory.

And while rape is [a daily occurrence in many of these disadvantaged](#) neighborhoods, the increase of armed groups heightens their vulnerability to physical attacks.

“Women's bodies are weaponised,” said Ducena, of the National Human Rights Network. “It's a symptom of the trivialisation of rape.”

“We are in a multidimensional crisis in Haiti,” said Pascale Solages, co-founder of the women's rights organisation, Nèges Mawon, who had to flee Haiti last year because of threats and now works with Haitians in New York. “When you are in a political, economic, and social crisis, the women pay a really high price.”

Solidarite Fanm Ayisyèn (SOFA), a Haitian organisation that provides medical, legal, and social support to survivors of abuse in gang-controlled areas, told The New Humanitarian their services have also been curtailed by the violence, which has contributed to [fuel shortages](#) and amplified [humanitarian needs](#).

“When you are in a political, economic, and social crisis, the women pay a really high price.”

Such levels of gang violence haven't been seen in Haiti's history, but women have long fought for rights and protections.

Rape was originally used as a [weapon of control](#) before Haiti gained independence in 1804, largely by colonial powers that enslaved the population and pillaged the land.

It has only been recognised as a crime in Haiti since 2005, and although Moïse was set to adopt a raft of new measures that would have given women more protections – including the legalisation of abortion – no new changes can be adopted until elections.

“Women need everything right now... water, food, safe shelter, psychosocial medical care, and prophylactics to prevent pregnancy and the transmission of sexual diseases,” said Filippova. “And it's urgent. The situation is getting worse, not better.”

**Names have been changed for security reasons.*

*(*This clarifies that MSF noted that most of the cases they have seen have been domestic violence or cases where the victims have known the perpetrators. This clarification was published on 21 November 2022.)*

Additional reporting in Port-au-Prince by Andre Paultre. Edited by Paisley Dodds.

