

Haiti Policy House

[Donor Wall](#) [Home](#) [Publications](#) [Events](#) [About Us](#)

[Contact](#)

[Donate](#)

The Weaponization of Sexual Violence in Haiti: Impunity, Gangs, and Resistance

Sep 23 - Written By Guest Author(s)

Author: *Dr. Lovesun Parent*



In this May 31, 2019 photo, a girl carries water six months after a massacre in La Saline, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, where at least 70 were killed and several women raped during a weeklong attack starting Nov. 13. (AP Photo/Dieu Nalio Chery)

Sexual and Gender-based Violence as a Weapon of Control

Colonial Legacies and Normalization

Institutional Collapse and Global Complicity

Survivor Agency and the Path Forward

Executive Summary

Sexual violence in Haiti is not new, but its scale and brutality have reached devastating new levels. Once employed by paramilitary regimes as a method of political repression, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) has now become a systematic tool of control used by non-state armed groups (NSAGs) operating in a context of near-total state collapse. Today, rape is not only a weapon of terror but also a means of enforcing territorial dominance, silencing dissent, and restricting access to humanitarian assistance.

The rise in conflict-related sexual violence reflects a crisis shaped by both historical legacies and contemporary political failures. From the colonial exploitation of enslaved women to the Tonton Macoutes under the Duvalier regime, women's bodies have long been sites of domination and punishment. These patterns of violence were further entrenched by a justice system plagued by impunity and the chronic underfunding of public health and legal services. In 2024, more than 6,500 cases of gender-based violence were reported, with women and girls comprising the majority of the victims. These figures likely understate the full scale of the crisis, as survivors often remain silent due to fear, stigma, and lack of police presence in gang-controlled zones.

“This article asks, how has sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in Haiti evolved from a tool of state repression to a strategy of territorial control by armed groups, and

what are the implications for survivor-centered justice and international accountability?”

In exploring this question, the article traces the historical trajectory of SGBV in Haiti, analyzes the structural and political conditions that fuel its escalation, and highlights the work of Haitian grassroots movements that are on the front lines of response and resistance.

Historical Roots: Colonialism, Repression, and the Normalization of SGBV

Key moments showing how gender-based violence became embedded in Haiti’s political and social history.



1492–1804

Colonial Rule

Enslaved women faced rape and forced reproduction as systemic control.



1957–1986

Duvalier & Tonton Macoutes

Paramilitary forces used sexual violence to punish dissent.



1991–1994

Coup Era

Rape deployed as a weapon to intimidate Lavalas supporters.



2005

Legal Reform

Rape recognized as a crime, though enforcement remains weak.



2004–2017

UN Peacekeepers

Reports of sexual exploitation and abandoned children.



2010–2012

Earthquake Camps

Insecure camps saw spikes in rape and exploitation.



2018–2020

Urban Massacres

Rape used in La Saline and Bel-Air attacks during turf wars.



2021–Present

State Collapse

Gangs weaponize SGBV to govern and control neighborhoods.

Sexual and gender-based violence in Haiti cannot be understood apart from the country's foundational experiences of colonialism, racial capitalism, and state repression. Haitian women, especially those of African or Afro-descendant heritage, have been victims of gender-based violence since the beginning of slavery under French and Spanish rule. Enslaved women were subjected to rape, forced reproduction, and systemic exploitation in a plantation economy that dehumanized them as both laborers and breeders. Colonial sexual violence served not only to discipline enslaved populations but also to reinforce a power structure that associated whiteness, masculinity, and power with the right to dominate.

This legacy of gendered violence was carried forward through successive regimes, most infamously under the dictatorship of François “Papa Doc” Duvalier and his paramilitary force, the Tonton Macoutes. Established in 1959, the Tonton Macoutes employed sexual violence, including rape and public humiliation, to penalize perceived political dissent and instill fear within communities. Women connected to activists or opposition figures were often specifically targeted to assert control over both the family unit and the political resistance. Though the regime ended in 1986, its tactics and culture of impunity continue to echo in the practices of modern gangs.

The post-Duvalier era brought new forms of political instability that further entrenched sexual violence as a tactic of repression. After the 1991 military coup that ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, paramilitary groups, including numerous former Macoutes, perpetrated systematic sexual violence and intimidation against women in communities supportive of the Lavalas political movement. A 1994 Human Rights Watch report

documented the use of rape as a “**weapon of terror**,” often coupled with interrogations about women’s political affiliations. These assaults were not random; they were targeted, strategic acts intended to fracture movements and suppress dissent.

In the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, thousands of women and girls were displaced into makeshift camps lacking adequate protection. Reports of rape, transactional sex, and exploitation emerged within weeks, occasionally perpetrated by fellow camp residents and, in certain instances, aid workers. The lack of security in these camps mirrored the broader failure of the international community to prioritize gender-based protections in humanitarian response. According to Doctors Without Borders, more than 250 cases of sexual violence were documented in just a few months following the disaster.

To be clear, the abuse was not isolated to Haitian actors. From 2004 to 2017, the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) became a source of further harm. United Nations (UN) peacekeepers were accused of sexually exploiting Haitian women and girls, fathering children they later abandoned. These actions exacerbated the trauma of previous violations and reinforced the perception that foreign intervention, even under the guise of protection, could perpetuate the very abuses it claimed to end. Despite growing awareness, few perpetrators were held accountable, and survivors were left with little recourse, deepening the normalization of SGBV as a fact of Haitian life.

The historical factors of colonial violence, dictatorial repression, political exploitation, and humanitarian neglect have normalized sexual violence in both private and public spheres, not limited to Haiti. This normalization exemplifies what UN Secretary-General António Guterres refers to as a global “age of impunity,” wherein states and actors “violate international law” and neglect the fundamental rights of their citizens, fostering conditions where violations such as sexual violence remain unaddressed. These same forces have established the foundation for the contemporary use of sexual violence by armed groups in Haiti, not merely as a random act of brutality, but as a deliberate strategy of territorial dominance and social control. It is imperative to confront this past to resolve the current crisis. **Comprehending this legacy is not merely a matter of historical reflection; it is a necessary step in the process of dismantling the systems that allow sexual violence to function as both a tool of oppression and a currency of power in the present day.**

Analysis

Weapon of Power and Control: The Role of Armed Groups and State Collapse

The United Nations reports that the utilization of sexual violence in Haiti today is not an accident but a deliberate strategy implemented by armed groups to establish control over territories, subjugate populations, and enforce compliance in the absence of state governance. With the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in 2021 and the subsequent collapse of effective national leadership, Haiti has entered a new phase of lawlessness. Heavily armed criminal groups, including the G9 coalition led by former police officer Jimmy “Barbecue” Chérizier, now control over 80 percent of Port-au-Prince. Their use of rape, gang rape, and sexual slavery has become an institutionalized method of domination.

In Haiti, the armed groups, which are commonly referred to as gangs, frequently deploy sexual violence during turf wars and territorial raids, using it not only as a punishment but as a tactic of terror designed to forcibly displace communities. Women and girls are often targeted in their homes during gang incursions or kidnapped from the street and raped in retaliation for perceived allegiance to rival factions. In some documented cases, gang members deliberately rape women and girls in front of family members, weaponizing humiliation as a tool of psychological warfare.

The control exerted by these armed groups extends beyond physical violence. In displacement settings, often informal camps set up in schools or temporary shelters, women face heightened exposure to sexual exploitation due to a complete lack of protection infrastructure. UN Women reports that in camps assessed in 2024, fewer than 10 percent of women had access to health services. Some were coerced into sex work in exchange for food, shelter, or relative safety. In these spaces, rape is often used as a means to control access to humanitarian assistance, reinforcing a system where sexual violence becomes transactional and normalized.

What distinguishes the current phase of SGBV in Haiti is not only its frequency but also its calculated use as a means of governance by armed groups operating in a political vacuum. The formation of gang alliances such as G9 and G-Pèp has turned sexual violence into an operational weapon. In multiple documented attacks, including those in

La Saline (2018), Bel-Air (2019), and Cité Soleil (2020), rape was employed alongside mass killings and arson. Between May and July 2020, at least 18 women were raped in a coordinated assault by G9-affiliated gangs during an effort to consolidate control in Cité Soleil. These actions were not spontaneous but rather calculated attempts to instill fear, weaken community solidarity, and assert dominance.

The collapse of Haiti's legal and security institutions has only deepened this crisis. The Haitian National Police (HNP), outnumbered and under-resourced, is unable to protect civilians or pursue justice. With only 15,500 officers for a population of over 11 million, Haiti's police-to-population ratio is among the lowest in the region. Moreover, the Port-au-Prince Juvenile Court has been nonoperational since 2019, denying minors, many of whom are survivors or perpetrators of gang-related violence, access to legal recourse.

In this climate of impunity, many survivors choose silence. In areas controlled by NSAGs, reporting sexual violence can invite further harm. As one teenage survivor told Amnesty International, "There is no police... the only chief in town are the gang members." In these areas, sexual violence has become so commonplace that it is no longer seen as an unusual occurrence but rather as a regular part of life under gang control.

This section of Haiti's SGBV crisis reveals a more profound truth: sexual violence has become a form of governance. In the vacuum left by the state, NSAGs have created their own rules, in which women's bodies are used as leverage, currency, and conquest. Until there is a comprehensive strategy that dismantles both the culture of impunity and the gendered logic of control, these patterns will persist.

Structural Failures and International Complicity

The SGBV crisis in Haiti is not merely the result of individual acts or NSAG dynamics. It is also the product of profound domestic and international structural failures that have eroded systems of protection and accountability. Weak institutions, under-resourced legal frameworks, and uneven international engagement have allowed sexual violence to flourish with near-total impunity. From a legal framework perspective, Haiti did not legally recognize rape as a criminal offense until 2005. Before this, sexual assault was treated as a moral transgression rather than a prosecutable crime, reflecting broader societal patterns of victim-blaming and gender discrimination. Even after legal reform,

enforcement remains inconsistent due to gaps in policing, forensic capacity, and judicial independence. Survivors often face a justice system that is dismissive, retraumatizing, or inaccessible. With judicial strikes paralyzing courts nationwide, survivors of all ages are effectively locked out of formal recourse.

International responses to this crisis have often been insufficient, delayed, and sometimes even harmful. MINUSTAH, which was deployed from 2004 to 2017, left a legacy of sexual exploitation and abuse. UN peacekeepers were accused of fathering hundreds of children with Haitian women and girls, then abandoning them without support. Investigations into these abuses were limited, and survivors were largely denied justice or reparations. This failure tarnished the credibility of international protection mechanisms and deepened local distrust of foreign actors.

More recent international interventions have similarly failed to address the gendered dimensions of the crisis. While the United States, Canada, and CARICOM countries have pledged support for the Kenyan-led Multinational Security Support (MSS) mission, there are concerns that this deployment lacks robust gender safeguards. As one civil society leader noted, “If gangs lose control of certain neighborhoods, it may actually leave some women and girls more vulnerable—not less—if no alternative protections are in place.” Despite calls from UN Women and others to embed a strong gender component in the MSS, implementation remains unclear.

Global donors and humanitarian agencies have also struggled to align their funding with on-the-ground needs. International NGOs receive a disproportionate share of funding compared to Haitian women's organizations, even though these groups offer essential services such as medical care, trauma counseling, shelter, and legal aid. A 2024 UNFPA mapping assessment found that only a third of women-led service providers in Haiti had sustained funding for emergency relief or dignity kits. Without long-term support, these community-based groups risk collapse just as needs are peaking.

Finally, deportation policies by neighboring countries exacerbate vulnerability. The United States and the Dominican Republic have continued forced returns of Haitian migrants, including women and children, into a context where SGBV is widespread and protective infrastructure is nonexistent. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security announced plans to terminate Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Haitians, setting more

than 500,000 people up for potential deportation. Although a federal judge has temporarily blocked the policy, the threat remains. These deportations undermine human rights commitments and reflect a troubling externalization of the crisis, treating SGBV in Haiti as a domestic issue, rather than one shaped by global power dynamics, racialized neglect, and decades of international policy failures.

Taken together, these structural failures and international blind spots have contributed to an environment where sexual violence is not just possible, but it is predictable.

Combating this crisis will require more than tactical policing. It will demand systemic change: funding survivor-led efforts, centering Haitian expertise, and rebuilding the state with justice, not just security, in mind.

Survivor Resistance and Local Response

In the face of overwhelming violence, displacement, and neglect, Haitian women and girls are not merely victims; they are leaders, organizers, and first responders. Their efforts counter the failures of the state and international community by serving as a model for locally grounded, survivor-centered responses. Despite chronic underfunding and insecurity, these organizations continue to provide vital services, including psychosocial counseling, medical referrals, and emergency shelter. A 2024 UNFPA and GBV Sub-Cluster mapping identified 24 women's rights groups actively supporting survivors across Haiti, often in areas where international NGOs and UN agencies cannot safely operate. Many of these initiatives are community-based, informal networks formed by women who themselves have experienced or witnessed violence. Their deep local knowledge and trust make them uniquely positioned to respond quickly and sensitively.

This resistance is not new. Haitian women's organizations have long been central to national movements for justice and democracy. They fought to criminalize rape in 2005, campaigned for the creation of the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Women's Rights (MCFDF), and secured a constitutional quota mandating 30% representation of women in public office. During the post-earthquake crisis in 2010, women-led coalitions provided essential services in displacement camps and documented cases of sexual violence that national and international institutions otherwise ignored. That legacy of advocacy and mutual aid continues today, even under life-threatening conditions.

Yet the risks for those providing services to survivors are immense. Many Haitian women's rights defenders operate in gang-controlled areas, with limited security protection. Some have received direct threats for speaking out, while others have been forced to relocate for their safety. One organization in Port-au-Prince described using "mobile safe spaces" to move discreetly between sites and avoid drawing attention from gangs. Others have trained survivors to serve as peer advocates, distributing information about GBV services in informal networks and building support from within the community itself.

Mental health care remains one of the most critical and underfunded areas. Nearly 70 percent of displaced women and girls in a 2024 UN Women assessment reported psychological distress, yet only 10 percent had access to any form of health service. Haitian women's organizations have responded by integrating trauma-informed care into their programming, often relying on volunteer psychologists, traditional healing practices, or informal support groups led by survivors. These initiatives offer rare spaces of collective healing in an environment saturated with violence and fear.

Women's economic empowerment is also emerging as a critical pathway to protection. In displacement camps where nearly 90 percent of women report having no income, many women's groups are running microenterprise trainings, vocational workshops, and cash assistance programs to reduce the vulnerabilities that can lead to survival sex or coercion. Still, these efforts are limited in scale due to restricted funding and a lack of international support for women-led humanitarian responses.

Too often, Haitian women are portrayed only as passive recipients of aid. This framing erases the reality that they are among the most active and effective responders to the SGBV crisis. As one local advocate put it: "We're not just collecting data or handing out kits. We're trying to protect our sisters, our neighbors, our daughters, from being broken by this violence." The international community must go beyond token consultations and shift funding, decision-making power, and recognition to these frontline actors.

Recommendations: Rethinking Protection and Justice

The scale and systematic nature of SGBV in Haiti demand more than emergency responses. What is needed is a total reimagining of how protection and justice are

defined, delivered, and sustained, especially in contexts of chronic fragility and displacement. To do so requires grappling with the historical roots of this crisis, the limitations of current interventions, and the transformative possibilities emerging from Haitian-led resistance.

- **First**, protection must be understood as more than the physical presence of armed actors. For many Haitian women and girls, so-called “security forces” have historically been complicit in harm, from the Tonton Macoutes and military attachés to abusive UN peacekeepers and corrupt local police. Protection, then, must be redefined to prioritize trust, autonomy, and consistent access to rights-based services: housing, healthcare, legal redress, and safe mobility.
- **Second**, justice cannot be limited to prosecution, particularly when the judicial system is barely functional. Survivors consistently cite fear of retaliation, lack of police presence, and social stigma as reasons they do not report assaults. Even when perpetrators are known, they often act with impunity, protected by gang alliances or political patronage. A survivor-centered justice model must prioritize healing, truth-telling, community accountability, and social reintegration; measures that Haitian women’s organizations are already implementing.
- **Third**, donor strategies must shift from episodic emergency aid to sustained investment in Haitian civil society. Local women-led organizations have demonstrated unmatched reach and cultural fluency in supporting survivors, yet they are persistently sidelined by large INGOs and bypassed in direct funding. Multi-year, flexible funding should be the norm for frontline actors doing this work under the most extreme conditions.
- **Fourth**, gender must be embedded as a core principle in all humanitarian and political responses. As of August 2025, Haiti’s Transitional Presidential Council includes only one non-voting woman representative, despite women bearing the brunt of the crisis and leading grassroots responses. Inclusion must go beyond optics. It must mean women are resourced, respected, and central to decision-making in state rebuilding, international negotiations, and displacement management.
- **Fifth**, international security missions such as the MSS must learn from past failures. Any foreign presence must operate under strong human rights safeguards, with

built-in GBV prevention and response protocols. International partners must avoid replicating harmful models of militarized aid or imposing externally defined solutions that overlook Haiti's complex gendered realities.

- **Sixth**, diaspora engagement must be recognized as a strategic and underutilized dimension of protection and justice. The Haitian diaspora has long contributed to national development through remittances, advocacy, and service delivery, but these efforts remain largely informal and disconnected from donor strategies. Diaspora networks, especially those led by women, can amplify survivor voices, mobilize resources, and bridge the gap between grassroots actors and international institutions. Yet, as documented in prior research, development donors have largely failed to establish formal mechanisms for engaging diaspora stakeholders in crisis response. Incorporating the diaspora as active partners, not just philanthropic bystanders, could enhance accountability, sustainability, and cultural relevance in SGBV programming.
- **Finally**, global actors must confront their own complicity. The normalization of SGBV in Haiti is not only a local or cultural issue; it's a political one, influenced by centuries of colonial rule, predatory debt, failed interventions, and racialized neglect. Reimagining justice for Haitian survivors must begin with listening to them, trusting their expertise, and supporting their vision for a country where violence is no longer the cost of survival.

Conclusion

The rise of sexual and gender-based violence in Haiti is not an isolated phenomenon; it is the culmination of deep historical injustices, compounded by state collapse, international neglect, and structural inequality. From the Duvalier dictatorship to post-earthquake displacement camps, from gang rule to failed international missions, Haitian women and girls have borne the brunt of violence without adequate protection, justice, or redress. This article has shown how SGBV has evolved from a political weapon to a widespread tactic of territorial control and economic coercion, weaponized both by armed groups and systemic failure.

Yet amid the devastation, Haitian women have never stopped resisting. They lead community-based shelters, run psychosocial support programs, document abuses, and advocate for legal reform, often with little to no external support. Their work illustrates not only what must change but also what is already working.

To address this crisis, several urgent shifts are needed:

- Redefine protection as survivor-centered, community-led, and rooted in long-term safety and dignity, not just a militarized presence.
- Reimagine justice beyond courtrooms to include healing, truth-telling, and accountability mechanisms that reflect Haitian realities.
- Center Haitian leadership by investing directly in women-led organizations with flexible, multi-year support.
- Embed gender in all responses, ensuring Haitian women are not symbolic participants, but power-holders in political transitions, security operations, and recovery efforts.
- Confront international complicity, acknowledging how colonialism, structural racism, and failed interventions have reinforced conditions of gendered violence in Haiti.

The question is no longer whether SGBV in Haiti can be addressed. It is whether we will finally center the solutions that Haitian women have always known and fought for with everything they have.

The Author



Dr. Lovesun Parent

Dr. Lovesun Parent is a longtime advocate for justice, equity, and the rights of women and marginalized communities. For nearly 20 years, she has led programs around the world that support survivors of violence, strengthen local leadership, and ensure communities have what they need to thrive. Her academic work focuses on engaging diasporas to drive meaningful change in global development. Dr. Parent is the Executive Director of Libraries Without Borders US, where she helps expand access to books, the internet, and learning programs in underserved communities.

Haiti Policy House is a not-for-profit institution focusing on Haitian public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan. Haiti Policy House does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

© 2025 by Haiti Policy House. All rights reserved.

Help fund research that makes a difference for Haiti

☐ \$50.00☐ \$100.00☐ \$250.00☐ \$365.00☐ \$500.00☐ Custom Amount

One-Time Donation

**Total****\$50.00****Donate**

< Financial Forensics for
Credible Elections in
Haiti

Before and After:
Mapping the Impact of
Gang Violence on
Port-au-Prince >

Haïti Policy House, Inc.

1100 13th Street NW PMB 0803

Suite 800

Washington D.C. 20005

