

## **“A city in the Sand. Women in Politics for the Transformation of Haiti: The Story of a Coaching Program for a New Leadership”**

Nadine Puechguirbal and Nava Almog

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On May 29, the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) organized a panel discussion on “The political involvement of women in post conflict-societies: the experience of Haiti”. This event celebrated the launch of “A city in the Sand,” a book written by Nadine Puechguirbal and Nava Almog, on an innovative approach to women’s political empowerment.

“A city in the Sand” describes the coaching program implemented in 2006-2007 by the MINUSTAH Gender Unit to support the participation of Haitian women in politics. Directed by Nadine Puechguirbal, the Gender Unit designed this program after taking into account the complex social, economic and cultural factors that hinder women’s access to the political realm. The adopted coaching method is unique since it focused on giving exclusive attention to every participant. Nava Almog, an international consultant, coached 19 women who learned to identify their personal/organizational strengths and weaknesses, manage their work teams, and set achievable political goals and priorities.

While most training programs usually involve groups passively attending workshops, each participant in the MINUSTAH coaching program worked with the coach in one-on-one activities. This approach fostered women’s creativity and full participation in both collective and individual training sessions.

WILPF had the opportunity to interview Sylvia Fabien Moise and Coty Beauséjour in New York after the book launch. Sylvia is one of the 19 participants: she ran for the 2006 legislative elections in Haiti and presently coordinates FEPOCHAH, a Haitian platform for women engaged in politics. Coty Beauséjour, a man working for women’s rights, is the national coach of the Gender Unit’s training program. The following is an interview in which they shared their experiences:

### **WILPF: What were the benefits of the Coaching Program?**

**Sylvia:** The MINUSTAH Gender Unit training gave me and other women confidence. In Haiti, it is our tradition that the man should stand at the front and women must be submissive to him. So even those of us who had participated in an election would always remain subdued during campaigns, due to this social norm. This program also helped me define my own priorities; I used to do many things for the community thinking I could manage doing them all at the same time. Now, I plan better and apply more self-discipline in my daily political activities. In addition, receiving the coach’s advice enabled me to acknowledge my weaknesses as well as to optimize my strengths. The program as a whole has given me extra self-confidence and this is a very important part for me. Before, I did not believe much in myself. I used to take for granted the idea that the man is the boss and the woman follows. Sometimes one accepts the situation without even being aware of it..

**Coty:** The professional experience working with the MINUSTAH’s Gender office is very special to me: I feel it was a privilege because I truly began to understand my own country through learning more about the reality of Haitian women. I began as an apprentice, since I did not know anything about coaching before. Nava Almog coached me for almost two years and I became the intermediary between the Gender Unit and the participating women.

Through this experience, I understood that we cannot truly speak of democracy in Haiti without the political contribution of women. It is not legitimate to talk about democracy as long as 52% of the population does not have adequate representation in the political sphere. Since women have so little experience in politics, they usually have a poor understanding of the political rules. Most

of the participants in our coaching program have had unsuccessful experiences during their campaigns because they did not have sufficient assessment or knowledge of the Haitian political system. Often, they did not have the capacity to integrate into their strategies the fact that sadly, electoral flaws are part of our political system.

Women do not believe in themselves due to gender inequalities and exclusion from the decision-making levels. They experience a lack of self-esteem and do not give other women much credit and support in politics. The coaching program aims at addressing this specific issue. A woman can act, take initiative and dare changing the order of things only when she has gained self-confidence.

During the individual coaching sessions, women learned to reflect upon themselves and identified their mistakes in order to make progress. They learned to work in a more pragmatic manner by defining achievable objectives and delegating responsibilities, setting a time table for their goals and systematically self-evaluating their actions. With a clear medium and long-term vision for Haiti, women learned to apply their creativity and self-confidence to accomplish concrete actions.

### **WILPF: What kind of obstacles do Haitian women face in order to participate in the political decision-making process?**

**Sylvia:** When I started working with politics on the field, I realized women's concerns were mostly economic issues. In order to give economic independence to the women of my community, I set up an initiative for them to access credit at a 2% interest rate. Each meeting was intended to teach them how to be financially independent, but it also served as an opportunity for me to educate them on their rights and to give them the necessary tools to be more politically active.

There are many obstacles to women's participation in politics, the most important of which is the lack of attendance to political meetings. It is fairly easy to gather women for meetings on social development issues yet it is very difficult for them to attend political meetings. Men try to prevent them from doing so since they know their situation will change if women are informed and trained. To assist women in becoming economically self-sufficient means giving them a chance to break free from their dependency on men. Another reason is their low level of education since most women have dropped out of school early.

Furthermore, society generally considers that women do not have anything relevant to accomplish in politics. Most people see women as not entitled nor capable of being leaders. Politics is male-dominated and considered 'dirty'; a woman in politics is therefore doing something that is out of her role. We must make efforts to abolish the idea that women have nothing to do in politics.

### **WILPF: What are women's specific contributions to politics?**

**Sylvia:** Traditionally, women are in charge of domestic work. Now we are trying to show them that they have another role to play, on the governmental level. We also told them it was not a fight between men and women, but rather a struggle for us to enter public institutions and learn about our rights.

**Coty:** The social structure in Haiti conditions women to choose different economic activities than men, to internalize certain values such as *affectivité*/sensitivity, motherhood and reproduction-related qualities. Men internalize ideals such as war, competition and virility, all of which are related to strength and power. Women are relegated to the private sphere, which is invisible, while men have power and control over public and political activities.

Still, paradoxically, this highly gender-polarized social structure gradually led women to build up a strong sense of awareness toward social issues. More than half of Haitian mothers are heads of single parent households. From an early age and usually on their own, they learn to multi-task; looking after the children, devoting time to their own studies, maintaining source of income etc.

As a result, women have a lot of experience in management. This very position enables women to have a broad vision of society's- both women's and men's - needs.

There is no doubt that when there are more women in politics, we will have less political violence and social injustices. The national budget will be better distributed among different social groups within the country.

I understand that men's participation is crucial to reach gender equality. Men, as much as women, have a responsibility to differently educate the young generation of men. Boys should be taught to participate and share in household duties. They have to understand the importance of equality between men and women.

As a Haitian man, I can see some resistance from many men to accept gender equality. Yet I think men should understand their own interest in establishing this equality. The patriarchal system places men in a situation where they have to bear the burden of virility and the consequent responsibilities that they are expected to fulfill. Equality will bring a relief to men in terms of social and family obligations. Equality will bring more happiness to the relationship between men and women. But as you know, all that is new generates resistance, even when the change is for the best interest of the people.

### **WILPF: What is the future of the Coaching program?**

**Coty:** This program is a very innovative one; it had never been done before in Haiti. Therefore it should be continued with the promoting and training of new female coaches. These individuals will in turn coach others in order to further increase the participation of women in politics.

We hope this coaching program can be implemented in other countries. I visited the DRC through an exchange program with the MONUC mission there. I found many commonalities with Haiti: it is a country in democratic transition, which experienced a conflict that had a destructive impact on the social and political system. The women engaged in politics in the DRC had the same problems as Haitian women: their campaigns were unsuccessful because of a lack of self-esteem, poor organizational skills and an inappropriate understanding of the political system at large.

**Sylvia:** Although this program gathers women from different political views, we are all from the same country and therefore have common interests to protect. That's why it was easy for us to work together within the Gender Unit's training. Before this program, Haitian women engaged in politics were isolated. In order for us to unite and share our experiences, we decided to create FEPOCHAH ("Women in Politics in order to change Haiti") a common platform for women coming from different regions and political backgrounds.

I would like it very much if women in politics from other countries reach out to us so we can share our common experiences.

*Article conducted and translated by Karine Jeannet with editing assistance of Brienne Pena*

To download the book, please visit:

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