

Women In International Security

Policy Brief

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Gendered Implementation of the Global Fragility Act: A Case for Haiti

Marvin Dee Mathelier and Tahina Montoya

The Global Fragility Act (GFA) and its subsequent Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability (SPCPS) constitute a fundamental shift in the way the U.S. government will act to address the root causes of violence in fragile states and stabilize conflict-affected areas.¹ Given bipartisan support and congressionally mandated funding, the GFA is designed to produce a coordinated strategy that builds on lessons learned and prioritizes building partnerships with local communities and civil society actors. In terms of implementation, the GFA requires a whole-of-government approach and interagency process with regular reporting mechanisms applied to five high-priority countries over a ten-year period.

In Spring 2023, four years after the passing of the GFA, the U.S. State Department released a 10-Year Strategic Plan for four priority countries and one priority region. Haiti is one of the SPCPS-designated priority states, along with Libya, Mozambique, and Papua New Guinea, as is the region of Coastal Western Africa (which includes Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, and Togo).² The SPCPS specifically links the U.S. Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) to its work, recognizing that the root causes of violent extremism are gendered and thus intimately linked to structural inequalities and discriminations that must be addressed to reduce state fragility.³ Haiti's own 10-Year Strategic Plan identifies severe gender inequality and Gender-Based Violence (GBV) as elements that undermine Haiti's stability.⁴

With the SPCPS specifically calling attention to drivers of conflict that are deeply gendered, this policy brief argues that country implementation plans *must* consider a whole-of-government

(WOG) approach that integrates a gender perspective. Haiti's implementation plan must also recognize Haiti's complex history and how it has contributed to the gendered dimensions of Haiti's current violence—political, economic, cultural, and structural—and integrate these factors into the tailored approach emphasized in the GFA's strategic documents.

The policy brief begins with an assessment of current conditions in Haiti and then turns to the question of why current conditions are so intractable. Using Haiti as a case study, the policy brief shows how consideration of a country's history and gender-specific issues are factors that must be considered when developing tangible solutions, as doing so is necessary to promote long-term stability. The policy brief then presents a set of recommendations that can strengthen the Haiti implementation plan and programmatic objectives in critical areas: formalize the informal sector workforce to empower women, reform education policy, increase support to the Ministry of Women's Affairs, and mobilize the Haitian diaspora in support of U.S. assistance to Haiti.

Haiti: The Current Situation

In addition to the 2020 COVID pandemic, 2021 was a devastating year for Haiti. Multiple protests and demonstrations have since occurred in response to high inflation and rising food and gas prices. The poverty-stricken country also saw an alarming increase in criminal and gang activity, a sign of the weakening authority and the incapacity of the Haitian National Police to control the gangs. Tensions escalated when, on July 7, 2021, a group of 28 foreign mercenaries broke into the home

of President Jovenel Moïse and assassinated him.⁵ Only five weeks later, on August 14, 2021, a 7.2 magnitude earthquake hit the southern coast of Haiti, causing billions of dollars worth of infrastructure damage and affecting the lives of over 1.2 million people.⁶

In the wake of these political, economic, and social crises, human rights violations over the past two years have escalated and accelerated. Women and children are particularly vulnerable. The number of kidnappings and abductions has tripled since 2021 as gangs use women and children for financial gain or tactical advantage.⁷ Of the 5.2 million Haitians requiring humanitarian aid (nearly half the population), three million are children.⁸ Severe malnutrition and cholera outbreaks are overtaxing a failing healthcare system, and gender-based violence is rampant.⁹

It is estimated that gangs control 90% of the capital, Port Au Prince, instilling fear through the use of violent tactics such as kidnapping, rape, and murder to control areas.¹⁰ Occasionally, to further aggravate the populace, and in an attempt to oust Prime Minister Ariel Henry from power, these gangs block off access to fuel and goods, preventing access to other parts of the country.¹¹ This further exacerbates food shortages that, if left unchecked, can lead to a man-made famine.¹² The international community's hesitancy to get involved has left citizens with few choices, leaving many to combat gangs on their own. Some citizens have retaliated by taking extreme actions of their own, such as burning gang members in the road as a deterrent.¹³

On October 23, 2023, after intense pressure from both the Haitian government and human rights organizations, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) approved a Kenyan-led security mission to help the Haitian National Police combat gang violence. However, on October 24, 2023, Kenya's High Court blocked the deployment of Kenyan police to Haiti after a petition was filed challenging the government's deployment decision, and Kenya's parliament has yet to schedule a debate on the issue, a ruling the High Court is expected to make on November 16.¹⁴⁻¹⁵

Roots of Systemic Failure

For Haiti, the current violence that handicaps efforts to stabilize the country and protect at-risk groups has roots in Haiti's tumultuous history, which has been shaped by foreign intervention and occupation, crippling debts, weak governance structures, and devastating natural disasters.

Independence and Struggle: 1800-1900. Haiti became the first free Black republic on January 1, 1804, when a band of slaves raised an army to defeat France. To recoup and compensate for its economic losses, the French demanded reparations totaling 150 million francs (\$20-30 billion in today's currency). Debt payments consumed over 80% of Haiti's revenues for the subsequent 122 years.¹⁶ The fear of political contagion from Haiti's successful slave rebellion led countries, including the United States, to withhold recognition of Haiti's sovereignty or offer any support for the young country.¹⁷

U.S. Occupation: 1915-1934. The U.S. occupation of Haiti was designed to quell the political and economic turmoil plaguing Haiti and, through a campaign known as the Banana Wars, to protect U.S. financial assets and economic growth in the Western Hemisphere. Many atrocities and human rights violations, including torture, forced labor, and religious persecution against voodoo practitioners occurred during the U.S. occupation of Haiti.¹⁸ Additionally, under the guise of protecting Haiti's financial assets, the U.S. took custody of over \$500,000 from Haiti's national bank, roughly equivalent to \$15,351,300 billion in current dollars.¹⁹ The loss of these funds had significant impacts on the country's economic development and stabilization, and especially on Haiti's social fabric and education system.

Despite promoting the goal of creating 1,074 schools in Haiti, the U.S. built only 306, much lower in comparison to schools constructed by the U.S. in Cuba (2,600) and the Philippines (1,000). For children in those countries, this support resulted in a significant increase in access to both schools and education.²⁰ Rather than develop schools to promote education for *all* Haitians, the U.S. provided agricultural training for predominantly black Haitians, while their mixed-race peers continued their education at the limited and exclusive French-based curriculum schools in Haiti.²¹ This specifically limited black Haitians' ability to acquire critical skills and knowledge, further widening the education and socio-economic gaps for black Haitian children.

The Duvalier Regime: 1957-1986. The 30-year reign of terror of François and Jean-Claude Duvalier that led to the killing of over 50,000 men, women, and children contributed to a massive exodus of Haitian citizens.²² This "brain drain" of highly educated and skilled Haitians had a devastating effect on the country's social and economic development and placed the country in a perpetual cycle of poverty. Haitian citizens continue to struggle while members of the Haitian diaspora secure more economic growth and send remittances back to Haiti, often the only

income many families have. Women, in particular, were severely affected by the impacts of emigration and economic crises, as most were forced to work almost exclusively within the informal sector. Statistics show the staggering cost: in 2021, the World Bank reported that “vulnerable employment” among Haitian women had reached 83.5%.²³

2004 and Beyond: 2004 ushered in a crushing series of humanitarian, political, and economic crises that continued to disproportionately impact women and children in Haiti. This began with the second coup of Haitian President Bertrand Aristide on February 29, 2004, which in the wake of Aristide’s ouster led to the establishment of the UN peacekeeping mission *Mission des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en Haïti* (MINUSTAH). Peacekeeping forces worked with the Haitian National Police to support police efforts to reduce violence. Unfortunately, trust in MINUSTAH evaporated as tensions grew. Corruption and GBV were endemic; serious incidents of sexual abuse by UN peacekeepers against local citizens occurred, but few were held accountable for their actions.²⁴ A severe cholera outbreak traced back to a sewage leak from a MINUSTAH base resulted in the loss of over 10,000 lives, and the UN was slow to accept responsibility.²⁵ The withdrawal of MINUSTAH troops in 2019 left much destruction, loss of life, and a glaring security gap, creating an opening for gangs to take control of the country.

Finally, with more than 96% of its population exposed to hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes, Haiti has become even more vulnerable to natural disasters. A 2010 earthquake killed 222,570 people, injured over 300,000, and displaced 3.5 million Haitians.²⁶ In 2016, Hurricane Matthew killed around 250,000 people and wiped out 120% of its GDP.²⁷ The destructive earthquake that hit Haiti on August 14, 2021, was followed two days later by Tropical Storm Grace, causing massive flooding and landslides and worsening the already desperate conditions on the ground.²⁸

All these systemic issues and intractable problems, combined with a lack of faith in the government, have forced Haitians to fend for themselves. For women, this meant relying increasingly on the informal sector, primarily selling goods on the street and making the hard decision to use their financial resources to feed their children, pay for medical bills, or decide which of their children was most eligible to go to private school.²⁹ This overwhelming conundrum created a practice with serious repercussions for poorer Haitians. With little money to send their children to school, a legalized form of child labor or slavery called *Restavèk* developed. With the creation of this system,

limited resources drove many families to send their children to other, presumably wealthier, families who had the relative means to provide education, shelter, and food in exchange for their children’s service.³⁰

Current Impact on Women and Children

Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

With the ongoing turmoil in Haiti, marginalized groups such as women and children continue to be disproportionately impacted. GBV and violence against women and children are used as a deterrent to control a community. A Health Policy Watch study that evaluated the use of rape as a weapon of war in Haiti stated that “80% 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. 14% of the victims were only 10 to 18 years old.”³¹

Unemployment Rate & Informal Work Sector

Haiti’s unemployment rate is currently 15.73%.³² Women make up 62% of the labor force, and nearly half of the Haitian women are heads of households, but they do not work in the formal sector. Women constitute more than 75% of the informal economy in Haiti, where they sell produce and other items on roadsides to support their families with no benefits, health insurance, or other job protections.³³

Lack of Representation in Politics

Unsurprisingly, women’s political representation in Haiti is negligent. In 2019, women constituted only 2.54% of the Haitian parliament, though as of January 2023, there is no functioning parliament at all in the country.³⁴ Haiti established a Gender Equality Policy in 2014 and the Haitian Ministry for the Status of Women and Women’s Rights (MCFDF) in 1994.³⁵ Nevertheless, the plan has not been effectively implemented, and the MCFDF faces chronic underfunding (0.01—0.05% of the national budget), government and parliamentary hostility, and little political will to change the status quo.³⁶

Restavèk System

As noted, a modern version of child slavery known as *Restavèk* remains prevalent in Haiti. Studies have shown that male and female children who have been “*restavèks*” (more than half of whom are girls) likely never attended school and are more prone to experience sexual, physical, and emotional violence

in childhood than non-restavèk children (see Figure 1).³⁷ Some children do return home, but with few options available to them, many turn to prostitution, join gangs, or become beggars, which only continues the poverty-stricken cycle in Haiti. The Haitian government has attempted to crack down on this practice, but many families continue to resort to the only means they can afford to feed their children and families.

Access to Education

Education in Haiti is valued but not accessible to all since 85% of schools in Haiti are private schools.³⁹ Families understand the power and opportunities an education can bring and, if they have the means, are willing to pay more than 40% of their income to send their children to school.⁴⁰ In families with multiple children, children may skip a year to let their siblings go to school or, as is often the case, preference is given to boys under the assumption that it will be easier for them to find jobs. Parents often have no money to pay for their daughter’s education, and it has been known that some girls ask their male counterparts for money in exchange for sex in hopes they will make enough money to afford an education.⁴¹ Additionally, while the global average for “mean years of schooling” is 8.7 years, Haiti’s is a mere 5.6 years, placing it 124th out of 150 countries.⁴²

An Opportunity for Change: The Global Fragility Act

The U.S. 10-year Strategic Plan for Haiti identifies key factors that contribute to Haiti’s fragility (including the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse and increased criminal gang activity)

and delves into gender-specific issues that continue to contribute to the countries’ instability, namely, GBV and gender inequality that disproportionately impacts women and girls. It specifically highlights the creation of a working group that consulted 230 individuals from different facets of the Haitian government and civil society. But gaps remain.

It is particularly important that a detailed implementation plan arising from interagency discussions successfully integrate a gender perspective. However, a growing list of documents referenced for GFA implementation (see Figure 2) has made an already complicated effort more onerous.

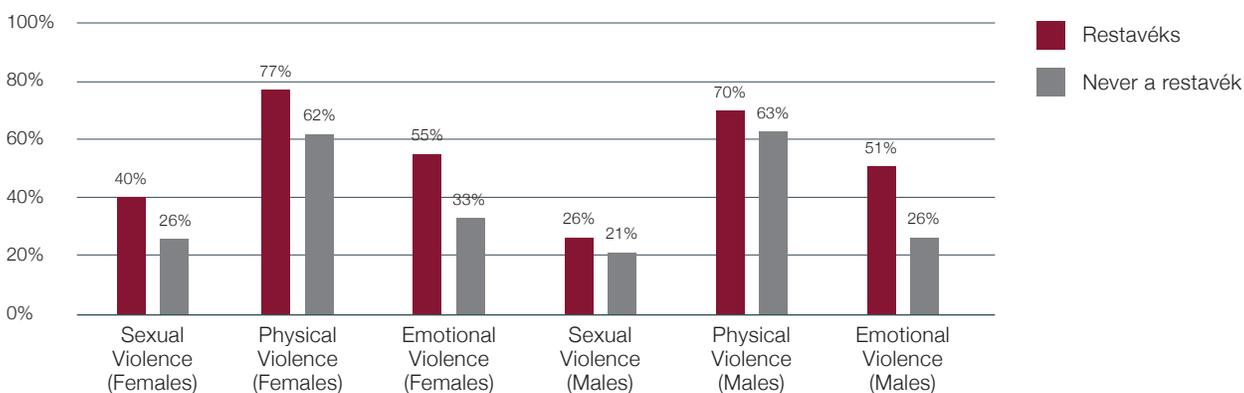
Despite multiple failed attempts by Haiti and the international community to address existing complex conflict dynamics, the Global Fragility Act and its 10-Year Strategic Plan for Haiti offers an opportunity to course-correct if implemented with a gender-sensitive lens *alongside* the people of Haiti. We offer four tangible recommendations that help codify how gender-conscious GFA implementation could look like in Haiti. They provide a unique and crucial approach to stabilizing Haiti’s fragile situation through the lens of gender-centric solutions.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Increase Women's Economic Agency in the Workforce

Through the support of the DoS, DoD, and USAID under the GFA, the Haitian government should create a joint coalition with the Haitian Ministry of the Economy, local government officials,

Figure 1: Restavèk vs Non-Restavèk Children³⁸



and local NGOs to develop a pilot project for supporting the women-led informal sector. While most plans would center their efforts in the capital, specifically in Port-au-Prince, this plan is better suited for development and implementation in Cap Haitian, the second-largest city in the country. With over 190,000 people, Cap Haitian is in the northern tip of Haiti and has thus far been shielded from the violence currently engulfing key cities in Haiti. Through monitoring mechanisms and data collection, a pilot case will provide lessons learned for implementing programs tailored to support women’s agency in more fragile and conflict-ridden environments. This approach has positive multiple effects, and it will address the persistent insecurity women face socially and economically and help ensure they are in a space that enables economic growth for their families and encourages career development.

Recommendation 2: Enhance the Ministry of Women’s Affairs

While the Haitian government has established laws addressing gender equality, policymakers are noncompliant with the laws.⁴³ Enhancing the capability of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs is needed to oversee and enforce these laws, though it is doubtful the Haitian government will extend the resources and staff to support the Ministry’s work. International assistance can provide financial support for the Ministry’s activities, such as developing education and gender awareness programs for men, women, and children or building women’s economic empowerment. Collaboration among diverse international stakeholders that provide training, business advice, and increased access to financial resources or that work to build women’s business leadership and ownership in emerging markets will strengthen the Ministry’s capacity to empower more women.⁴⁴

Recommendation 3: Education for Children

Education is the key driver to economic growth within a country. A highly educated and skilled labor force will increase the quality of work in all sectors and will contribute to increased income, tax revenue, and better-quality public education. To get there, with the help of GFA entities, Haiti should establish an education initiative similar to the approach conducted in the High Performing Asian Economies (HPAE) that includes Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China.⁴⁵ Although different in culture, government structure, and region, these countries were able to shift from developing countries to leading economies within half a decade. With high rates of investment in education, the governments were able to reallocate funds towards human capital such as schools and other necessary training, which helped each respective economy grow. This is a challenge for Haiti—not just because of government instability and scarce resources for education, but because of structural inequalities in the education system itself that must be eliminated to spur greater economic growth in the country. Nevertheless, making progress towards quality universal education must be a political priority.

Recommendation 4: Mobilizing the Haitian Diaspora

Despite significant international assistance to Haiti—\$13 billion between 2011 and 2022 alone—Haiti remains an impoverished failed state.⁴⁶ Earlier efforts have failed for many reasons, among them, poorly managed projects, local capacity limitations, corruption, and a political and economic elite complicit in gang violence and unwilling to implement structural changes to address state instability. An approach that has not been optimized is leveraging the Haitian diaspora to advance development-driven, long-term solutions for Haiti, with the diaspora working hand in hand with the U.S. government and Haitians on the ground. Outside of the Haitians on the ground, there is no other

Figure 2: U.S. Government Documents: WPS and GFA

December 2017	The United States Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017
June 2019	The United States Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security
December 2019	Global Fragility Act
December 2020	The U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability
December 2020	2020-2024 The USAID Strategic Framework: Haiti
April 2022	Announcement of GFA Priority Countries and Regions
March 2023	U.S. Department of State Integrated Country Strategy
March 2023	Publication of Country and Regional Plan Summaries

group that understands the complexity and issues within the island nation or that contributes more to Haiti's GDP: around two-thirds of Haiti's GDP comes from remittances, showing that the Haitian diaspora not only influences but drives and deeply cares about Haiti's success.

The Global Fragility Act and the 10-year strategic plan for Haiti can lead to novel implementation approaches by incorporating members of the diaspora while engaging with Haitian civil society organizations, and do so with the intent to leverage Haitian diaspora expertise. This includes engaging with organizations like the U.S. National Haitian Elected Officials Network (NHEON), a U.S.-based organization of Haitian-American politicians who can be an additional voice and liaison between Haitian citizens and U.S. organizations working towards implementing the GFA. We also recommend exploring the opportunity to grant voting rights to Haitians living abroad. While Haitians living abroad are eligible for dual citizenship, they cannot currently vote in Haitian elections. Doing so would insert a diversity of views and weaken the ability of corrupt politicians to manipulate voters, in the hope that diaspora voters would help to push the Haitian government to be more accountable to its citizens.

Conclusion

While Haiti's history has contributed greatly to its current situation, and prior policies (with the best of intentions) have failed to alter Haiti's current state, the Global Fragility Act is, undoubtedly, currently the best option to address fragility in Haiti. Though a challenge, cooperation between U.S. government agencies working with Haiti's citizens and the diaspora to develop and implement the above-listed recommendations would contribute to addressing key concerns of GBV, employment, education, and safety, *all of which* are discussed in the guiding frameworks that have been identified as key documents for GFA implementation in Haiti. Despite the delay in implementation, the GFA is a policy that provides a significant opportunity for change. If implemented *alongside* the people of Haiti in a gender-sensitive way, the GFA can address fragility in innovative ways that will work for Haiti and its people.

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About the Authors

Marvin Dee Mathelier is a Haitian American and is a subject matter expert in Haitian history, culture, and current affairs. Additionally, with over 15 years of service, Marvin is a Major and Civil Affairs Officer in the United States Marine Corps Reserves. He has deployed to Haiti twice to assist in humanitarian aid, development efforts, and security cooperation missions. Marvin continues to support the Haitian community locally in Boston, as he is spear-heading the opening of the first Haitian Cultural Center in New England. Marvin is a 2023 Pat Tillman Scholar and is currently pursuing his master’s in public administration at Columbia University’s School of International Public Affairs.

Tahina Montoya is a multi-lingual, International Affairs Strategist and Women, Peace, and Security Expert with experience working at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels in the United States and abroad. Tahina is a DoD Gender Advisor and Political/Military Analyst in the Air Force Reserves, a WIIS Defense Fellow, and a 2023-2024 National Endowment for Democracy Penn Kemble Fellow. She is a Doctoral Candidate at Georgetown University and an adjunct professor at George Washington University’s Elliott School for International Affairs.

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WOMEN IN
INTERNATIONAL
SECURITY

WEB | www.wiisglobal.org

EMAIL | info@wiisglobal.org

1250 Connecticut Ave, NW, Suite 700

Washington, DC, 20036