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# **Gendered Impacts of Natural Disasters through the Lens of Ecofeminism and Social Vulnerability: A case study of Haiti**

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## **Abstract:**

This bachelor thesis investigates the intricate relationship between natural disasters and gender impacts. Focusing on the intersectionality of vulnerability, socio-economic challenges, and institutional weaknesses, this study draws on empirical research and theoretical concepts like ecofeminism and social vulnerability. Using Haiti as a case study, this thesis analyses the aftermath of climate-related disasters, exploring connections between gender norms, socioeconomic disparities, and environmental issues, facilitating a comprehensive examination of the neglect of gendered impacts in disaster response and recovery efforts. Recognizing and addressing the gender dimensions of disasters is crucial for fostering equitable and sustainable responses globally. This thesis advocates for policy interventions that prioritize gender, ensuring an inclusive approach to global disaster management strategies and policies.

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## 1. Introduction

The aftermath of natural disasters affects individuals on a social, cultural, and political level (Ariyabandu & Wickramasinghe, 2003; Mileti, 1999; Quarantelli, 1994). Both individuals and institutions play a crucial role in determining the extent to which communities will experience the impact of the disaster and its consequences (Enarson, 2004; Enarson & Morrow, 1998).

Blaikie et al. (2014) emphasizes the human aspect of disasters, arguing that societal structures and power dynamics are as much a cause of disasters as the natural environment. In Haiti, the historical account of political instability, economic challenges, and deeply rooted gender inequalities lays the foundation for a profound realization: vulnerability is not just a consequence of natural disasters but an exacerbation of pre-existing inequalities. Therefore, an intersectional analysis is crucial for understanding the effects of natural disasters on marginalized demographics, exploring the interconnectedness of race, class, and gender (Crenshaw, 1991).

In the discourse on environmentalism, ecofeminism emerges as a potent lens, combining climate change, gender equality, and social justice into a holistic perspective that transcends traditional ecological analyses. While ecofeminism aligns with feminist goals to eradicate sexism, it extends beyond to critique power structures, asserting that the logic of domination justifying gender, race, and class oppression is applied to justify the domination of nature. This ideology challenges prevailing male-centric hierarchies, advocating for a transformative shift. This bachelor thesis aims to outline the complex relationship between gender and environmental disasters, drawing insights from empirical studies and theoretical frameworks. The paper argues for a combined approach, using ecofeminism and social vulnerability, to examine women's vulnerability in the context of pre- and post-natural disaster conditions, emphasizing the bidirectional relationship between the environment and humankind. Utilizing a case study approach, the thesis further examines the aftermath of climate-related disasters such as hurricane Matthew and the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, unraveling the correlation between gender norms, socioeconomic inequalities, and environmental problems. Through this analysis, the thesis aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the gendered dimensions of disasters and advocate for gender-sensitive policies in disaster risk management and strategies.

## **2. Methodology**

In accordance with the requirements for this bachelor's thesis, I carried out a literature review using secondary sources, gathering information through published works of literature, including research papers, reports, and articles in journals. The decision to focus on this specific topic was driven by the growing recognition of the interlinked relationship between gender and climate change impacts. There are two main limitations to the approach I have taken in this study. Firstly, as a desk study, this thesis does not include any primary research, which means I have to rely on the primary and secondary research of others. However, there is extensive literature on the topics explored in this thesis, which have allowed me to conduct a thorough literature review. Secondly, it is important to note that I do not have personal experience in Haiti, and I am relying solely on secondary sources, which limits my understanding of the country. As a white woman living in Norway, my privileged position may hinder my grasp of intersectionality and direct oppression, influencing my stance in the text and my comprehension of the topics and case study. This was a challenging issue to mitigate, as the majority of relevant studies that I found on Haiti were conducted by white, European, or American researchers. However, to ensure a more holistic understanding, I prioritized works on ecofeminism and black feminism written by Haitian writers and focused wherever possible on reports that work in close cooperation with gender networks formed by local Haitian women. By doing so, I aim to mitigate my lack of personal experience as much as possible.

## **3. Theoretical Frameworks**

This thesis employs two theoretical concepts to explore gendered impacts of natural disasters: ecofeminism and social vulnerability. These frameworks are outlined below

### **i. Ecofeminism**

Ecofeminism, as an ideology and approach, interconnects climate change, gender equality, and social injustice (Hutner, 2011), forging a holistic perspective that transcends traditional ecological analyses. Echoing feminist goals to eradicate sexism, ecofeminism uniquely integrates environmentalism and environmental justice into its core tenets. Coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne, the term "ecofeminism" encapsulates the understanding that the disenfranchisement of women, people of color, and the impoverished is inseparable from the

degradation of the natural world, both stemming from patriarchal dominance (d'Eaubonne, 2022). This dominance, rooted in the devaluation of feminine attributes, marginalizes various groups, prompting ecofeminism to advocate for a transformative shift from a system of domination to one grounded in care, nurturing, and love (Hutner, 2011). Ecofeminism contends that the prevailing system establishes a male-centric hierarchy with dualities, fostering societal inequality and privileging men (Öztürk, 2020). The male-dominant order introduces dualities such as male/female, culture/nature, human/nature, white/black, unconscious/conscious, logic/emotion, and soul/body, where the former holds dominance over the latter. This hierarchical structure attributes superior qualities to men, associating them with culture, consciousness, logic, and spirit, while women are linked with nature, unconsciousness, emotion, and the body. The symbiotic connection between women and nature reinforces the naturalization of women's fertility and the feminization of nature's fruitfulness (Öztürk, 2020). This narrative perpetuates the idea that women's reproductive abilities are a natural condition, with motherhood portrayed as their most inherent duty. The normalization of women's domestic roles and dependence on men reinforces their objectification within society, while nature, seen as productive and generous, serves the patriarchal system with its renewable resources.

It is important to include various perspectives in the analysis of ecological issues as these cannot be fully understood without understanding the interconnectedness of systems of oppression. In the current discourse on environmental issues, a tendency exists to divorce ecological problems from social justice concerns, neglecting the profound inequalities that concern the exposure of certain groups of people to ecological degradation and climate change impacts (Mallory, 2013). Environmental justice principles, as argued by Robbins et al. (2014), emphasize fair treatment and involvement for all, irrespective of race, ethnicity, or gender. Conversely, environmental injustice manifests in the disproportionate exposure of minority communities to harmful conditions and unequal environmental protection. Women, often recognizing their dependence on the natural world and the impacts its destruction has on the quality of their life and their children's lives, play a crucial role in environmental justice activism (Kirk, 1997). While the majority of women view their identity as women to be integrated with their racial and class identities, most express no desire to isolate themselves from the men within their communities. Given the severity and broad nature of environmental concerns, collaboration across race, gender, and class is required. This is exemplified by iconic examples of ecofeminism such as the Feminist Peace Movement, Antitoxic Waste Movement, and the Chipko Movement, also known as the tree-hugging movement (Rosendo

& Kuhnen, 2019). Ecofeminism extends beyond examining women's connection with nature; it also critiques power structures, arguing that the same logic of domination justifying oppression based on gender, race, ethnicity, or class is applied to justify the domination of nature (Warren, 1990). Its strength lies in analyzing how women and nature face mutual degradation through patriarchal capitalist systems (Mallory, 2013), making this approach crucial in addressing ecological and social harm perpetuated by conventional systems. However, ecofeminism faces criticism for its Western-centric origins, accused of homogenizing women and neglecting race and class issues (Hunt, 2014). Some argue it overly prioritizes gender over other dimensions, potentially reinforcing gender norms. Efforts to include contributions from women of color aim to bridge this gap, acknowledging the need to understand the inseparability of race, ethnicity, and gender (Kirk, 1997). Critics also emphasize the importance of white women using their privilege to advance social justice and fostering alliances with women and men of color.

The belief that women are more environmentally conscious than men is grounded in the concept of women being socialized as family nurturers, cultivating a 'motherhood mentality' since childhood (Mohai, 1992). Gender socialization is a process through which individuals internalize gender roles, norms and expectations related to their sex (Stockard, 2006). Being influenced by societal, cultural, and institutional factors, this process plays an important role in shaping the way individuals view themselves and others with regard to gender roles and behaviors. These beliefs are further reinforced by women's roles as homemakers and mothers in adulthood, while men are typically socialized as family protectors and providers, particularly in formal workforce roles (Momsen, 2004). However, empirical studies have not definitively established whether women are more environmentally concerned than men. Environmental attitudes may be influenced by the nature of the issues, with subtle problems being less immediately noticeable. The cultural belief that women should possess environmental awareness is another manifestation of the gendered mental burden (Wallis, 2023). Similar to other gendered societal expectations, the sense of guilt women may experience for not contributing enough to environmental efforts appears to be acquired. It represents a logical yet unfair extension of the anticipated responsibilities of managing domestic duties, predominantly caring for children, and providing emotional support, all while receiving lower pay. This thesis will primarily utilize ecofeminism's strength in analyzing power dynamics and oppressive patriarchal systems. By highlighting the ways in which women and nature have been historically marginalized and exploited, ecofeminism sheds light on the underlying power structures that perpetuate social and ecological injustices.

Furthermore, its emphasis on intersectionality allows for a comprehensive understanding of how multiple forms of oppression intersect and reinforce one another within patriarchal systems.

## **ii. Social Vulnerability**

Disasters are caused by the combination of a natural hazard and an existing vulnerability (Wisner, 1993). Vulnerability analysis is indispensable in sustainability research, encompassing physical, social, economic, and environmental factors that heighten a society's susceptibility to disasters (Yang et al., 2018; Llorente-Marrón et al., 2020). The study of social vulnerability explores variations in individuals' abilities to prepare for, respond to, and recover from the effects of natural hazards. Although disasters pose a threat to all affected, specific groups become more susceptible due to social and economic disparities, with age, gender, social class, and ethnic identity exacerbating vulnerability to natural disasters (Llorente-Marrón et al., 2020). Notably, gender is identified as a significant determinant of social vulnerability (de Loyola Hummell et al, 2016; Enarson, 2000; Ahmad, 2018), affecting factors such as socio-economic status, educational interruption, workplace, cultural barriers, and exposure to violence (Neumayer & Plümper, 2007). The gender impact of natural hazards, such as earthquakes, hurricanes, and floods, mirrors women's societal positions (Momsen, 2004). Women, with less access to resources and representation in decision-making, often suffer more in disasters but can also play crucial roles in coping and recovery if allowed (Jiggins, 1986). Xiao & McCright (2012) further argued that women, often more economically disadvantaged and exposed to environmental hazards, develop distinct value orientations and heightened risk perceptions. Gender is an important component of vulnerability theory because it also acknowledges that, due to social and cultural factors, men and women may experience and react to the effects of climate change in different ways. Following disasters, women may resort to high-risk activities like prostitution for survival, as they experience greater economic repercussions (Duramy, 2014), while men often migrate alone in search of employment.

In a world shaped by gender divisions, the impact of climate change is far from gender neutral. Particularly in vulnerable regions, climate change affects women more harshly due to prevailing gender norms that restrict their access to information, preparedness, and escape mechanisms during climate-related disasters (UN Women, 2022). Women, often reliant on natural resources yet lacking sufficient access to them (Reggers, 2019), carry an unequal



responsibility for sourcing essentials like fuel, water, and food, particularly in low- and lower-middle-income nations where agriculture forms a significant part of the labour market. This added burden frequently leads to girls dropping out of school to assist their families, perpetuating the cycle of inequality (UN Women, 2022). Factors like travelling with children and adhering to dress requirements hinders women's ability to move. Modest clothing is often impractical and creates barriers in being able to flee danger swiftly (Shabib and Khan, 2014). As a result, obstacles are created that make it difficult for them to take care of themselves while trying to survive. In Bangladesh, a predominantly Muslim society, cultural norms prohibit many women from interacting with unfamiliar men or being in public without a male relative (Momsen, 2004). It is considered a woman's duty to safeguard her home and children, meaning that in times of disasters they will often seek shelter later than men due to a fear of social retaliation. Seeking shelter early might be seen as a transgression of gender norms or a challenge to the existing hierarchy (Ayeb-Karlsson, 2020). Women who prioritize their safety may face verbal or physical abuse, social exclusion, or criticism from community members or authorities. In flooded areas, women often receive assistance last as men rush to grab supplies, pushing women aside (Momsen, 2004). To ensure women receive adequate disaster assistance, there is a need for more women doctors and volunteers, as well as women-specific aid provisions like clothing, breast pumps for nursing mothers who lost their babies, diapers, and safe and private sanitation facilities. During environmental disasters, women's vulnerability is heightened due to their social status and gender roles, as exemplified by the floods in Bangladesh in 1991, in which an estimated 85 percent of the people killed were women and children (Momsen, 2004).

Intersectionality provides a framework for understanding how relationships of power influence both privileged and vulnerable social positions (Walker et al., 2019). It looks at how power dynamics and social characteristics, such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, geography, and age, affect how individuals experience climate risks in different contexts (Kaijser & Kronsell, 2014; Thompson-Hall et al., 2016). Moreover, it sheds light on how human activity shapes local responses to climate hazards. Individuals and communities don't experience vulnerability in isolation. Instead, their unique intersecting social identities create distinct layers of vulnerability. For example, let's consider migrant women employed in agriculture. They face gender-specific vulnerabilities, including unequal pay, restricted healthcare access, and hazardous working conditions (Corrado, 2017; Palumbo & Sciarba, 2018). However, their migrant status further amplifies this vulnerability, and leaves them more susceptible to exploitation due to the absence of legal protections and social support (Gálvez et al., 2012).

To address vulnerability effectively, we must identify the underlying causes of inequality and marginalization. Only by doing so, can we transform political and social structures to reduce the likelihood of responding to climatic threats in ways that reinforce unequal power dynamics (Björnberg & Hansson, 2013; Gaard, 2015; Kaijser & Kronsell, 2014). Rather than just identifying the most negatively impacted individuals or groups, future studies should concentrate on understanding why some of them are more affected than others (Tschakert et al., 2013).

#### **4. The Case of Haiti**

To further examine the impacts of gender on social vulnerability, this section will discuss the after-effects of disaster management in the case of Haiti. Historically, Haiti has grappled with deeply rooted issues, including a legacy of poverty, institutional weaknesses, and a history of gender-based violence. The persistent socio-economic challenges, coupled with recurrent natural disasters, create a multifaceted backdrop for studying the intersectionality of vulnerability. Using Haiti as a case study allows for an in-depth exploration of how gendered impacts have been neglected in disaster response and recovery efforts. The examination of both successes and failures in addressing gendered vulnerabilities can provide valuable lessons and insights for developing more effective, inclusive, and gender-responsive climate policies and disaster management strategies globally.

##### **i. Historical Context**

Haiti is the world's oldest black-led republic, established in 1804 after gaining independence from France (Sadiq, 2014). It borders the Dominican Republic, as well as the Caribbean Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean. Haiti has a history marked by political instability, violence, and catastrophic disasters. The nation has gone through more than 20 constitutions and governments since 1804, which has caused political and economic alienation (Padgett & Warnecke, 2011). The imposition of sanctions by Western powers has resulted in a substantial external resource shortage and impeded the Haitian government's capacity to concentrate on economic growth (Harper, 2004). As a result of this, Haiti has become one of the poorest states in the Western world (Shah, 2010). Throughout its history, Haiti has established a number of development objectives, such as increased GDP, decreased poverty, AIDS prevention, improved governance, and higher education (Padgett & Warnecke, 2011; Sider et

al., 2023). However, because of Haiti's unstable political situation, these objectives have not been met. Haitian development faces many challenges, including government corruption, economic inefficiency, inadequate infrastructure, and poor health and educational outcomes (Sider et al., 2023). Although economic recovery is linked to both political and social recovery, the social sphere has received less focus, which has led to the persistence of hierarchical power structures and gendered socioeconomic outcomes (Padgett & Warnecke, 2011).

## **ii. Pre-Existing Gender inequality**

Haiti is marked by significant inequalities. In 2018, adjusted indicators revealed a 40.5% decline in the Human Development Index (the measurement of a country's performance in health, education, and income), with inequalities of 32.2% in life expectancy, 37.3% in education, and 50.4% in income (Llorente-Marrón et al., 2021). Haiti ranked 150th in the world in 2018 for men-to-women inequality, with a Gender Inequality Index of 0.620.

Haitian society exhibits a highly gender-stratified structure with intersecting factors such as class, race, city/town differences, and religious cleavages (Charles, 1995). Despite playing an important role in Haitian society and their local economies, women and girls are frequently viewed as second-class citizens, continuing to experience severe inequalities in various aspects of their lives (Janson, 2021). Although they make up 54% of the population, women face limited access to basic needs, political and social exclusion, whilst playing diverse roles in creating wealth and managing poverty (Charles, 1995). Gender roles, household relations, and conjugal patterns reinforce women's subordination, emphasizing their 'place' in relation to home and domesticity. Societal expectations further hinder women's equal participation in the labor market and broader society. According to the World Bank *Gender Data Portal*, in 2022 women and men had a similar labor participation rate (62.1 % for women, and 69.2 % for men). However, majority of jobs in Haiti's informal sector (e.g. home-based workers) are still held by women, highlighting the absence of possibilities for women in the official sector (Padgett & Warnecke, 2011). Moreover, women often find themselves confined to roles as homemakers and caretakers, limiting their opportunities for employment and active engagement outside the domestic sphere. "Time poverty" in this sense is a serious problem for women in societies such as Haiti, where men perform little to no unpaid domestic work (Padgett & Warnecke, 2011). The burden of caregiving, compounded by societal expectations, casts a shadow on women's equal participation, with research revealing a

negative correlation between the number of children in a woman's home and her likelihood of engaging in the labor force, a phenomenon notably absent in the case of men (World Bank, 2023). Additionally, women make less money than men, and so are more likely to need to increase their economic activity in the informal sector, which further exacerbates their time poverty (Padgett & Warnecke, 2011).

At the same time, the representation of women in Haiti is significantly impacted by intersecting factors of race and class, further diminishing their ability to advocate for change and hold the Haitian government accountable. If analyzed through an ecofeminism lens, this compromised representation is seen as a consequence of broader systemic issues, including the perpetuation of gender norms deeply rooted in heteronormative structures that persist within the community. The domination of women is the result of patriarchy and capitalism. Haiti's interconnected systems of oppression are embedded in historical, cultural, and societal frameworks, contributing to the complex dynamics shaping women's experiences (Horton, 2015). Traditional expectations have perpetuated distinct gender roles, delineating the spaces and responsibilities assigned to men and women. Furthermore, the legacy of colonization has left enduring imprints on gender relations in Haiti (Boisvert, 2001). The influence of European norms, often characterized by rigid gender roles and patriarchy, has intertwined with the indigenous Taino and African cultures, forming a unique combination of obstacles (Deagan, 2004). Slavery, a dark chapter in Haiti's past, also played a pivotal role in shaping gender dynamics (Maynard-Tucker, 1996). The harsh conditions of slavery forced men and women into distinct roles, with women often relegated to domestic duties while men worked in the fields. Although the abolition of slavery brought about newfound freedom, the entrenched gender norms endured, influencing societal expectations regarding women's roles today (Maynard-Tucker, 1996). Against this backdrop, the persistence of gender socialization in Haiti can be seen as a response to both historical legacies and contemporary challenges. Currently, these roots intertwine with the evolving narrative of climate challenges such as natural disasters, creating a layered system of inequalities that not only marginalizes women but compounds their vulnerability in the face of environmental crises. As explained by the vulnerability theory, natural hazards alone do not define events as disasters; instead, pre-existing social conditions determine their impact on the population (Banford & Froude, 2015).

### **iii. Susceptibility to natural disasters**

Haiti's susceptibility to natural disasters is an enduring challenge, as the nation faces recurrent cyclones, tropical storms, landslides, floods, and earthquakes (UN Women, 2022; Slagle & Rubenstein, 2012). In 2008, hurricanes Ike, Fay, Hanna, and Gustav, destroyed 60% of Haiti's agricultural harvests, killed over 1,000 people, and damaged numerous houses (Slagle and Rubenstein, 2012). Hurricane Matthew devastated Haiti in October 2016, causing widespread destruction of homes, hospitals, roads, crops, and lives (Campbell et al., 2016). On January 12, 2010, a 7.0 magnitude earthquake hit Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince, killing 316,000 people and injuring 300,000 more (Archibold, 2011; Bellerive & Clinton, 2010). The earthquake destroyed 105,000 homes and displaced 1.3 million people. The Haiti earthquake has been described as the worst natural disaster in the Western Hemisphere (Weisenfeld, 2011), with experts estimating the total damage at between \$7.2 and \$13.2 billion (Lacey, 2010). Out of 200 countries in the world, Haiti ranks first when it comes to climate change vulnerability (Slagle & Rubenstein, 2012). The country's susceptibility to disasters arises from its geographical position on the hurricane-prone island of Hispaniola, in the central hurricane belt, and along the Enriquillo-Plaintain Garden Fault between the Caribbean and North American tectonic plates (USGS, 2010). Natural disasters have left an indelible mark on the country, both in terms of immediate destruction and long-term consequences (Campbell et al., 2016). The repercussions extended beyond physical infrastructure, severely affecting health and protection systems.

### **iv. Gendered impacts of natural disasters**

In the aftermath of these crises, a gendered dimension emerges. During the distribution of labor, women would often bear the brunt of additional responsibilities, undertaking the arduous tasks of searching for help, securing water, and caring for their children amidst the chaos (UN Women, 2022). Concurrently, men experience a reorganization of authority dynamics within the family as they grapple with the compromised needs of their families (Bradshaw, 2013). Reductions in material resources due to disasters may lead to an increased reliance on violence, as a means of persuasion when alternative resources are scarce (Goode, 1971). Similarly, women may experience constraints in personal resources, leading to dependency on partners and potential limitations on independent living (Weitzmann & Behrman, 2016). This realignment reflects not only the physical strain on women but also the

reshaping of power structures, which is particularly evident in the case of gender-based violence.

Gender-based violence (GBV) refers to any harmful act or behaviour that is perpetrated against someone based on their gender (Terry, 2007), and is rooted in gender inequality and power imbalances. In the context of climate change, gender-based violence becomes a significant concern due to the exacerbation of existing inequalities and vulnerabilities. This is partially a result of the disintegration of social and protective structures, coupled with the restricted access to resources and decision-making authority that women often contend with. These factors contribute to a heightened sense of insecurity and desperation.

In Haiti, violence against women is a multifaceted issue influenced by factors such as low levels of education, unemployment, and entrenched masculinity norms (Campbell et al., 2016). The prevalence of physical and sexual abuse is alarmingly high, with 12.2% of Haitian women between the ages of 15 and 49 reporting such experiences in 2018 (USAID, 2020). While gender-based violence is unfortunately common, the impact is exacerbated by natural disasters, placing women and girls at an increased risk of violence. A research team visited Haiti from 2011 to 2013 to study gender-based violence against internally displaced women following the 2010 earthquake (Campbell et al., 2016). Interviewing 200 displaced women, they found that experiences of gender-based violence were extremely high, with 71% experiencing violence before the earthquake and 75% experiencing violence in its aftermath. Notably, intimate partners and ex-partners emerged as the primary perpetrators of abuse against women, not strangers exploiting chaotic and lawless times in the country. Abused women reported perceptions of worsened mental and physical health compared to non-abused women, with high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) identified among victims of intimate partner violence (Campbell et al., 2016). The association between gender-based violence and higher stress levels, breakdowns in law enforcement, exposure to high-risk environments, and the exacerbation of existing gender inequalities underscores the urgent need for comprehensive intervention strategies (Thurston et al., 2021). While it remains true that both men and women can become victims of violence and insecurity, it is crucial to emphasize the disproportionate impact on women and girls. Physical displacement resulting from climate-related disasters can lead to overcrowded and poorly lit temporary shelters (UN Women, 2016), increasing the risk of sexual and physical exploitation. Loss of community support systems, such as disrupted social networks and weakened community institutions, can further contribute to an increase in vulnerabilities, as the usual mechanisms of protection and

support may no longer be in place (Caridade et al., 2022). Loss of livelihood is a common consequence, often exacerbating desperation and poverty, prompting women and girls to resort to risky behaviors such as transactional sex to meet their basic needs (UN Women, 2016). This exposes them to further exploitation and abuse, perpetuating a cycle of vulnerability.

Consequently, the recurrent disasters in Haiti have resulted in the loss of status and dignity for women, with their trauma exacerbated by the harsh conditions in what are often described as "inhuman" camps and shelters (Horton, 2012). The media, politics, and societal stereotypes have played a detrimental role, further damaging women's aspirations for dignity and respect. According to Horton (2012), these negative portrayals are part of a broader pattern of racialized and inaccurate depictions, particularly of the impoverished black majority in Haiti, perpetuating stereotypes of aggression, disorder, and a lack of social and cultural skills. These damaging representations not only compound the intersectional challenges faced by women in the aftermath of disasters but also pose significant obstacles to their post-disaster recovery. By isolating them from potential support networks, these stereotypes limit their opportunities to voice grievances and may even delegitimize their claims for assistance, resources, and inclusion (James, 2004). Post-disaster relief efforts in Haiti have consistently excluded women, despite the integration of gender frameworks into NGO policies (Pittaway et al., 2007). Women face challenges dealing with male-dominated relief agencies, loss of essential services, increased gender-based violence, and complex bureaucratic processes in the post-disaster period. The contributions of women, such as their roles as caretakers and organizers of informal networks, often go unrecognized and undervalued, overshadowed by the acknowledgment of men in search and rescue and reconstruction efforts (Horton, 2012). Due to the extensive scope of environmental issues, cooperation across divisions is necessary. Recurring natural disasters cannot be fought in isolation. If Haiti is to develop effective response and recovery strategies, more than half of its population cannot be excluded. Ecofeminism emphasizes the importance of integrating diverse perspectives - ones that know not to write off gendered or social aspects when dealing with climate-related disasters.

Disasters, while capable of disempowering, also carry the potential for empowerment (Horton, 2012). Social and physical disruptions can upend traditional gender roles, offering women opportunities to challenge norms, interact with external agents, and acquire new skills. In Montserrat, a Caribbean Island hit by a hurricane causing extensive property damage, a shortage of construction workers led to young women acquiring skills as tilers and plasterers

(Momsen, 2004). This short-term demand facilitated a shift in the traditional division of labor, providing women with a valuable, long-term skill. Disaster response and recovery efforts provide platforms for women to actively engage in the management of temporary shelters, health clinics, and community centres, fostering organizational and leadership skills. Despite under-recognition and devaluation, women have played crucial roles in networking, community survival, and supporting social and political movements (Horton, 2012). As women navigate new roles and interact with external actors, they become catalysts for challenging preconceived notions of their capabilities, thereby contributing to transformative shifts in gender dynamics within their communities.

#### **v. Institutional challenges**

Haiti faces significant challenges for women, ranging from gender-based violence, unemployment, financial issues, to insufficient representation in decision-making. For the economically disadvantaged women in particular, the 2010 earthquake and hurricane Matthew have only made these challenges more difficult to overcome. However, these problems are not just the result of social issues; they are also a result of institutional and structural flaws within the administrative framework (Janson, 2021). Amidst numerous challenges, the persistent lack of data on women's status and roles poses accountability issues (Padgett & Warnecke, 2011). Recognizing women's rights and improving documentation are pivotal steps to legitimize the political state and set the tone for Haitian development. Prior to the earthquake, Haiti grappled with stark poverty, with 80% of its population living in impoverished conditions, ranking 149th out of 182 nations in the 2009 UN Development Programme Human Development Index (Horton, 2012). The country's structural inequalities are reinforced by its neoliberal model, further undermining the medium- and long-term well-being of Haitian women and the poor majority. Foreign donor funding policies, promoting private, NGO-run parallel agencies, have undermined the Haitian government's capacity, particularly after the 2010 earthquake (Pittaway et al. 2007). These policies also exhibit a "gender-blind" nature, implying that women's concerns are overlooked unintentionally (Padgett & Warnecke, 2011). This highlights the need to examine past policies, create long-term strategies, and evaluate evidence-based programs. The following section will look at two reports that have underlined the various challenges women and girls in Haiti have to face. These reports not only increase awareness of gender issues but also advocate for female empowerment, emphasizing the need to address existing disparities and promote inclusivity and equity in Haitian society.



## **vi. Policies on Gender Inequality**

In 2020, Haiti has developed a gender equality policy aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 5, aiming to achieve gender equality by 2030. This report highlights the role of women and girls in Haitian society and the efforts of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to promote gender equality and empower women. Through its SANTE project, USAID provides essential maternal child health services, nutrition, HIV/AIDS, and reproductive health services, significantly enhancing women's access to vital healthcare, including prenatal and maternity services, post-natal care, and the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV. As of August 2019, USAID-supported microfinance institutions were serving 1.2 million clients, 55 percent of which were women, with the aim of increasing women's financial literacy, access to credit and other financial services. This, alongside USAID's Political Leadership Academy and National Gender and Elections Strategy, continues to contribute to women's empowerment through capacity building and training initiatives, ensuring their participation in Haiti's electoral process. While recognizing the significant contributions of women to the local economy and society, the report reveals a sobering reality of gender-based violence (GBV) in Haiti, with one in three Haitian women (aged 15 to 49) reporting having been the victim of sexual or physical abuse (USAID, 2020). Moreover, the report identified schools as frequent sites of inappropriate physical contact and commercial sexual exploitation of girls. According to girls between the ages of 13 and 17, schools were the second most frequent location for unwelcome physical contact, emphasizing the need for safe spaces in schools. Lastly, legislation criminalizing rape and domestic violence was only put into effect in 2005, and the penal code has remained unchanged since 1835. Due to this, women and girls frequently encounter unequal legal protection, with instances of sexual harassment often going unaddressed and victims being unfairly held responsible for acts of rape and abuse (USAID, 2020). While USAID's advocacy against GBV is noted, obstacles to enacting key legislation, exacerbated by political crises, underline the complex socio-political context impacting progress. Although positive strides have been made, sustained efforts are required from a multitude of stakeholders to address persistent challenges and promote comprehensive gender empowerment in Haiti.

A more disaster-based gender analysis was conducted by UN Women in collaboration with CARE, the Ministry for the Status of Women and Women's Rights, and the Department of Civil Protection, in light of the earthquake that struck Haiti in 2021. It was designed to

comprehend the complex impacts of disasters on different demographic groups, guiding short-term humanitarian responses and medium- to long-term recovery efforts (UN Women, 2021; CARE, 2021). The gender analysis identified several notable differences in the impact of the earthquake on men and women. In terms of household responsibilities, women bore the excess workload, engaging in activities such as searching for assistance, water, and childcare. Decision-making dynamics within households varied, with joint decisions being most common, but a significant proportion still led by men alone. Access to healthcare was limited for women, and the lack of sanitation facilities disproportionately affected them due to specific hygiene needs. The analysis also emphasized increased risks of violence, especially sexual violence against women and girls, in the chaotic post-earthquake environment. Most of these differences have been identified in the aftermath of prior natural disasters in Haiti, however, the strength of this gender analysis lies in its comprehensive scope, encompassing a range of factors beyond just gender, including disability, age, and socioeconomic conditions (UN Women 2021; CARE, 2021). By adopting this multidimensional approach, the study recognizes the intersectionality of vulnerabilities, acknowledging that individuals experience disasters differently based on various identity markers. This aligns with contemporary understandings of gender as a complex, intersectional phenomenon. Furthermore, the collaboration with key governmental and non-governmental entities such as the Toya Foundation, OCHA, UNAIDS, WFP, UNDP, UNICEF, and others, demonstrates a commitment to inclusivity and local expertise (UN Women 2021; CARE, 2021). By involving the Ministry for the Status of Women and Women's Rights and the Department of Civil Protection ensures that the analysis is grounded in the context of the affected population and considers the perspectives of those directly involved in disaster response and recovery. However, this report also comes with certain flaws. The recommendations could be more specific in outlining actionable steps and implementation strategies. While focusing on women's leadership and socioeconomic programs is commendable, ensuring practical measures and accountability mechanisms are in place is essential for effective execution. The report does mention the need to address structural problems but does not provide a clear roadmap for achieving legal protection and changing gender norms. Overall, a more detailed and actionable plan would strengthen the report's impact, contributing to not only addressing the immediate aftermath but also fostering resilient, gender-responsive recovery in the long term.

## **vii. Disaster and relief efforts**

As exemplified by the above-described gender analysis, it is important to move beyond a singular focus on emergency response programs and invest in holistic solutions to rectify gender inequalities and safeguard women's rights in Haiti (Janson, 2021). Haitian women's organizations, such as YWCA Haïti and Solidarité des Femmes du Nord-Est (SOFNE) highlight that many critical issues for women's longer-term well-being fall beyond the scope of the NGO sector and require state intervention. YWCA Haïti primarily focuses on education, health, and leadership, encouraging women to participate in the reconstruction of their communities (YWCA Haiti, n.d.), while SOFNE works to raise awareness of gender issues and violence in Haiti, advocating for policies that protect women and girls. All policy decisions must take a comprehensive approach to women's issues. Applying a theoretical framework, such as ecofeminism, in the analysis of policies could be advantageous. As the subjugation of women is a social construct rather than a biological determinant, the potential for change exists, and ecofeminism serves as a platform for such transformation. In the face of escalating environmental destruction and deeply rooted oppressive power structures, exploring alternative solutions becomes crucial for the well-being of communities, land, and the earth itself. For a very long time, Haitian women have experienced systemic violence against them based on their gender, alongside cultural and legal discrimination (Charles 1995; Fouron & Schiller 2001; Gammage 2004). When implementing relief efforts in Haiti, healthcare professionals should encourage healing, respect, trust, and confidence (Campbell et al., 2016). It is of great importance to incorporate plans to combat gender-based violence into humanitarian guidelines. After a natural disaster, women's health treatment should be balanced to consider their history of abuse, privacy, and security. Women and girls must have equal access to humanitarian assistance, especially the most vulnerable among them, such as female heads-of-households, pregnant or lactating women, widows, and women with disabilities (UN Women, 2016). Lessons learned from past disasters remind us that this equal access cannot come at the expense of anyone's safety. In the response following the 2010 earthquake, the voices of Haitian women civil society were absent from the Government's Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA), which addressed gender in only one of its eight themes (UN Women, 2016). The limited representation of women in leadership roles further diminishes the likelihood of comprehensive addressing of gender-specific issues by governmental bodies. Engaging crisis-affected women as leaders and participants and counting in their specific needs in all areas of humanitarian response is nothing less than a human rights obligation. Organizations representing women in Haiti are shifting their efforts

from immediate crisis response to strategic gender interests (Horton, 2012). They concentrate on matters including gender inequalities in Haiti's legal code, education, and reforming the police and court systems. Women leaders interviewed by Horton (2012), emphasized the importance of recognizing and supporting the strengths and capacities of Haitian women, not just through income-generating projects but also through consciousness-raising, leadership development, advocacy, and engagement with civil society and the state. Empowering marginalized communities is crucial to ensure that everyone's inputs and needs are not overlooked. Advocating for social and political issues at both local and national levels following natural disasters becomes pivotal for creating enduring networks of women (Anderson, 1994). This advocacy is not only a means of amplifying women's voices but also serves as a mechanism for holding governments and organizations accountable for their responsibilities.

#### **viii. Ecofeminism in Haiti**

The complex weave of ecofeminism, feminism, and empowerment in Haiti unfolds against the backdrop of historical struggles and unique narratives that have shaped the socio-environmental landscape. While Françoise D'Eaubonne's seminal work, *Le Féminisme ou la Mort (Feminism or death)*, aimed to unite ecology and feminism in a new environmental philosophy in 1974, its resonance extends beyond theoretical realms (Brice, 2021). Despite the co-optation of ecofeminism by white feminist movements, ecofeminist ideas have long been central to Haitian women, gender non-conforming femmes in literature, agrarian labor, and activism in the Caribbean. In Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert's (2015) analysis of Marie Chauvet's *Fonds des Nègres* in "All Misfortune Comes from the Cut Tree," Chauvet's work is recognized for delineating gendered ecological relationships in Haiti. During her writing era, prevailing literary works primarily emphasized the establishment of Haiti as a sovereign nation, often overlooking the adverse effects of nationalism on both the land and its people. Her ecofeminist perspectives revealed how our actions upon nature harm us, emphasizing the need to reject militarized nationalism and instead work towards the regenerative use of nature (Brice, 2021). Examining housing and property ownership, Chauvet (1991) urges a reevaluation of fundamental alienation features within the household. Private property, essential in the nation-state, perpetuates militaristic histories, reinforcing oppressive power dynamics. Ecofeminism serves as a vital counterforce to the neoliberal and imperial visions of *home*. Haitian ecofeminism aligns itself with Black ecofeminist resistance, resisting state

violence and fostering communal values that transcend white supremacy and carceral geographies (Brice, 2021). It represents a language, policy, and consciousness that challenges state-defined spaces of belonging, promoting marginalized community wellness. By centering the experiences and knowledge of marginalized communities, Haitian ecofeminism recognizes the interconnectedness between social and environmental justice. It seeks to dismantle the structures that perpetuate inequality and advocate for a more inclusive and sustainable future. Through its approach, it strives to create spaces where all individuals can thrive and contribute to a collective vision of liberation.

## **5. Conclusion**

Examining Haiti's experience with disasters through the lens of social vulnerability and ecofeminism exposes a succession of historical, social, and economic challenges. The historical narrative of political instability, economic struggles, and deeply entrenched gender inequalities sets the stage for a stark realization: vulnerability is not only a consequence of natural disasters but an exacerbation of pre-existing disparities. Furthermore, the combined approach, when analyzed within the Haitian context, lays bare a disconcerting reality. The legacy of colonization and slavery, far from being historical relics, continues to cast a long shadow on contemporary gender dynamics, perpetuating distinct roles and limiting women's agency.

Natural disasters in Haiti, rather than being mere environmental phenomena, become lenses through which the fault lines of gender inequality come into sharp focus. The prospect of increased violence due to resource scarcity and the shifting landscape of authority underscores the vulnerability of women in the face of disasters. Gender-based violence emerges not only as a consequence of disasters but as a pervasive issue deeply ingrained in societal structures. Beyond the rhetoric of emergency response programs, a call for holistic solutions becomes necessary. Gender relations in the Caribbean are characterized by a "Patriarchy by Absentia," (Momsen, 1993) where patriarchy persists alongside female-headed households and economic independence for women. Despite their active engagement in political processes, women remain undervalued, revealing the limitations of political structures in acknowledging and accommodating their roles. Haiti needs interventions that not only rectify gender inequalities but actively challenge the structural and institutional flaws that perpetuate them.

Existing feminist groups and women's organizations struggle due to structural weaknesses, lack of resources, and unclear perspectives on gender subordination (Charles, 1995). The absence of a feminist movement at the national level in Haiti is notable and the lack of a unified national platform and insufficient research exacerbate the challenges, leaving women's issues inadequately addressed in societal debates. Efforts should transcend tokenistic measures to recognize and support the inherent strengths of Haitian women. The critical lens should be turned towards the neoliberal model and foreign donor funding policies, which are often touted as avenues for development but paradoxically undermine the nation's capacity to address its own challenges. The discussion around Haiti's vulnerabilities should not end with only acknowledging the problems but extend to a critical scrutiny of the proposed solutions. Integrating gender into public policies and disaster recovery and relief efforts is not a panacea. A closer examination of how these integrations are implemented and the tangible impacts on gender equality is lacking. The absence of specificity in policy documents raises questions about the sincerity of the commitment to gender-responsive approaches. Ultimately, the case of Haiti, fraught with complexities, challenges us to question not only the immediate responses to disasters but the broader socio-political frameworks that perpetuate vulnerabilities. A critical perspective forces us to confront uncomfortable truths and demands more than just incremental changes. Shedding light on the societal norms shaping women's behaviors in their daily lives preceding the various disasters provides a starting point for comprehending the intersections of vulnerability experienced by Haitian women. Recognizing the existence of discriminatory gender structures predating the disasters, which became more evident in their aftermath, underscores that the victimization of women is not a recent phenomenon in Haiti. A conceptualization of women's responses to disasters through an intersectional lens, highlights that marginalized communities endure more adverse consequences compared to those possessing greater social capital.

As the impacts of climate change extend globally, there is an increasing need for a holistic shift in our perspectives on the environment and our connection to the planet. It takes self-reflection, a shift in one's own beliefs, proactive compassion, and, above all, hope for a better future to build movements and alliances. Ecofeminism emerges as an alternative framework for ecological thinking and social coordination, offering the promise of solidarity among women, individuals facing oppression, and those who empathize with their struggles. It necessitates a transformative reconsideration of policies and practices that authentically empower women, men, and marginalized communities, disrupting the existing norms and cultivating a more resilient and inclusive future.

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