Statement by Marie Kattia Dorestant Lefruy on behalf of the BAI & the Rezo Fanm BAI

Pre-Session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on Haiti
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Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

My name is Marie Kattia Dorestant Lefruy. I am the co-director of the *Bureau des Avocats Internationaux*, a public-interest law firm promoting human rights in Haiti for over 30 years. Our work includes providing free legal assistance to women and girls seeking justice after experiencing sexual violence. And, together with a network of approximately ten grassroots women's organizations, known as the Rezo Fanm BAI, we support survivors of gender-based violence and advance women's rights more broadly.

I speak today based on our collective experience and with our shared voice to expose the blatant violations of women's rights in Haiti. Not only have the recommendations made during the last UPR cycle on these issues not been followed, but the situation has grown materially worse.

GBV is a question of when, not if, for Haitian women and girls. During the reporting period covered by this UPR cycle, armed gangs have weaponized sexual violence, including especially collective rape. In the absence of an effective State response, incidence has been catastrophic and continues to rise. Just 16 providers reported an average of 37 cases per day between April and June of this year. Not even home is safe and victims range from little girls to old women.

But it is not just sexual violence. Other forms of GBV, including political, economic, psychological, and familial violence, as well as exploitation and harassment, are endemic, if often invisible. We have estimates that 50 to 70% of Haitian women and girls have experienced GBV, though few report due to stigma, fear of reprisals, social normalization, and a sense of futility, which means that any available numbers are undercounts.

This level of harm and the public erasure of survivors is the product of State failures that violate women's rights. In my experience as an attorney for survivors of GBV, obtaining basic support or justice is like chasing a mirage. Medical and psychological care, shelter, and economic support are vastly inadequate (and almost entirely provided by local organizations with international assistance, not our government). Access to justice is almost nonexistent: survivors receive no protections and experience gendered procedural barriers and a stigmatizing and abusive judicial system that rarely prosecutes or convicts perpetrators. At the BAI, we have over 350 cases that cannot move forward because the survivors cannot identify the perpetrators and the State is failing to perform adequate investigations.

This violence – and the silence and inaction by authorities that further betrays survivors – are the direct consequence of structural inequalities that are themselves a violation of women's rights.

Women are discriminated against and marginalized in all aspects of public and private life, including education, economic activities, and government. We are told we don't belong and denied equal opportunities and resources like financing. We are held back by gendered expectations of family care. And we experience sexual harassment, exploitation, and violence when we participate anyway – whether it is demands for sex from teachers, employers, and church leaders; or political violence directed at women who attempt to vote, run for office, or otherwise advocate for our rights. The results are gendered poverty and dependencies that increase vulnerability to domestic violence, sexual exploitation, and external stressors like the present crisis.

The State, including transitional governments, has been complicit. Women have been extremely under-represented in or excluded from positions of authority. Our distinct needs have been marginalized in policy-making and budgeting. Serious failures to protect against and combat GBV are just one of the resulting harms.

If there is not a concerted effort to ensure that women's leadership and distinct needs are being adequately considered in responding to the crisis or planning for any elections, the result will be a deeper entrenchment of harms against women and girls.

For these reasons, we urge your delegations to recommend the following to the Haitian government – and I encourage you to see the more detailed written contribution jointly submitted by the BAI and 15 other organizations:

1. Center women's rights as a policy and funding priority across all of government and ensure that gender-specific considerations are a core part of all policymaking, including with respect to security, economy, and elections.
2. Include women on an equal and empowered basis in all elements of public life, including especially in leadership positions, and invest in robust education and sensibilization campaigns to confront discrimination.
3. Ensure protections from, investigation of, and accountability for GBV in all its forms, including as perpetrated by government authorities and international actors.
4. Implement and fully fund medical, psychosocial, economic, and legal services for GBV survivors, including in displacement sites, which should meet minimum standards of safety, sanitation, privacy, and protection.

Ladies and gentlemen, I urge you to stand in solidarity with the women and girls of Haiti.