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Stand in Solidarity With the Women of Haiti

Rep. Frederica S. Wilson
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Take a moment to imagine life in constant fear of sexual violence.

Imagine trying to survive without police protection, without adequate housing, without the ability to petition the courts for justice. Contemplate life without access to medical care to meet your basic physical needs following an assault -- let alone your need to recover from the mental and emotional trauma.

If this sounds like life hundreds of years ago and a world away from the United States, take a moment to consider that it's reality right now, just a two-hour flight from my Congressional District.

It's the reality of gender-based violence right now in Haiti.

But, thankfully, through smart policy and the strength and courage of Haitian women, it's a reality that's within our power to change.

After the January 2010 earthquake -- which claimed up to 220,000 lives and ruined nearly 3 million more livelihoods -- Haiti experienced a striking increase in the incidence of gender-based violence. In a recent study, 14 percent of earthquake-affected households reported at least one member being victimized by sexual violence since 2010. Nearly half of the victims are girls under 18, and many cases involve the use of weapons, gang-rape and death threats for seeking help from authorities. These threats, coupled with a lack of police presence and equipment, have created a situation of impunity for violent offenders. This undermines the integrity of Haiti's legal system and denies women and girls their most basic dignity.

The crisis of gender-based violence is a symptom of the broader challenge Haiti faces in the wake of the worst natural disaster in memory. Approximately 293,000 homes were destroyed or badly damaged, leaving 1.5 million people in insecure living situations including camps with high levels of violence. Nearly 80 percent of the schools in Port-au-Prince were rendered unusable, leaving young people with limited opportunity and no place to spend their days. Almost 25 percent of civil servants in Port-au-Prince were killed, leaving the nation with a staggering need for government capacity including judicial officers and police.

Through the determination and grace of the Haitian people and smart assistance from the Obama administration and international NGOs, Haiti is beginning to rebound. The majority of the rubble -- once plentiful enough to fill a line of container ships across the Caribbean -- has been removed. More than 1.1 million Haitians have moved out of tent camps. At least 470,000 temporary jobs have been created. More than 200 new schools have been built.

Yet core challenges -- including gender-based violence -- remain severe.

I am introducing a resolution calling attention to the plight of Haitian women and -- more importantly -- calling for action on their behalf.

With its "Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence," the Obama administration is on the right track. Congress and the administration must ensure robust funding for these initiatives,

including the U.S. Agency for International Development's Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Policy, to meet the continuing need. I urge Haiti's own government to continue its important efforts to implement the findings of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which were issued in response to increased levels of sexual violence in camps for internally-displaced persons. Through the crucial work of institutions like the Ministry of Women's Affairs, I know that Haiti can develop and implement a comprehensive plan to protect and empower women.

For me this issue is personal. I have seen the tent cities firsthand. As a mother, grandmother, educator and former school principal, I feel the anguish in my bones.

But I also feel the hope.

Let's work together to ensure that no woman in Haiti, in this hemisphere, or in this world has to bear the indignity of sexual violence.