

## **STATEMENT OF THE COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN ON THE SITUATION IN HAITI**

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women expresses its deepest sympathy and solidarity to the Government and people of Haiti affected by the devastating earthquake of 12 January 2010. The Committee also extends its condolences to the families of United Nations staff as well as the three prominent Haitian women's rights activists, Myriam Merlet, Magalie Marcelin and Anne Marie Coriolan, who perished in the earthquake.

The earthquake which hit the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, has caused tremendous hardship, injury and loss of life among the general population. Whilst relief workers are struggling to provide aid to the people of Haiti and whilst the situation remains dire for everyone, women and children are particularly affected by the crisis. The Committee calls for the inclusion of a gender perspective in all humanitarian relief efforts so that the specific needs of women may be adequately addressed.

Whilst women and men are important resources in delivering assistance and rebuilding societies following natural disasters, the responsibilities of women are greater on account of their roles as caretakers of children, the elderly, the disabled, the injured and other survivors. Whilst the strength and resilience of women are in high demand following such emergencies, they cannot adequately fulfil these roles if their basic needs are unmet and if decision-makers ignore them. If women are to look after the needs of others, their own safety, dignity, health and nutritional concerns must be met as well. Understanding the gender dynamics in communities is a crucial element for effective humanitarian relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction. The Committee calls upon all humanitarian relief agencies to bolster the strength of women by identifying and meeting their specific needs.

Given the specific environment in which the humanitarian crisis is unfolding, the Committee urges that women's access to food distribution be addressed through innovative and diverse strategies and attention paid to women heads of household, injured women, the elderly and disabled and other vulnerable groups in the community. The urgent need to establish special contingencies for women in post-earthquake intervention is underlined by images of men fist-fighting over UN-delivered food.

The Committee is deeply concerned by the real prospect of epidemics caused by overcrowding and poor sanitation. The trauma caused by this devastating catastrophe cannot also be underestimated. The Committee stresses that it is important to address the specific needs of women and provide gender-sensitive health care services.

The Committee is alarmed by the threat to law and order. With the collapse of the prison in Port au Prince, many of the incarcerated have come back into the neighbourhoods they once terrorized. Sexual violence is common in humanitarian crises and may become acute in the wake of a national disaster. In a time of heightened stress, lawlessness and homelessness, women face an increased threat of

violence and will find it harder to support themselves, the children, the elderly, the injured, the disabled and other survivors who are in their care.

The protection of human rights of women is as important as providing immediate medical attention, food and shelter. The Committee urges emergency assistance teams to put in place a coordinated security system and to take all necessary measures to protect women and children and the most vulnerable.

The Committee urges that a gender perspective be included in the assessment, design and implementation phases of humanitarian relief in order for it to be effective and to restore the dignity of the affected population in general and women in particular. The Committee also stresses the need to ensure that the needs and capabilities of women are taken into consideration in all sectors and clusters of the emergency response as the role of women in early recovery is critical to effective implementation and long term sustainability. The Committee therefore urges the international community, United Nations agencies and all humanitarian relief agencies to involve women at all stages of emergency management programmes, in both the planning and implementation processes so that they can bring valuable perspectives and contributions to the emergency response.

The Committee extends its appreciation to the international community which stands united in its resolve to help Haiti overcome this catastrophe. As the social and economic reconstruction is about to begin and humanitarian assistance moves to the recovery and reconstruction phases, the Committee urges that women fully participate in the decision-making process and that sustained efforts be centred on the long-term development needs of women and men of Haiti.