

# Dwa Fanm Brings Vagina Monologues to New York's Haitian Community



A NEWSLETTER FOR WOMEN, MEN AND CHILDREN WHO BELIEVE IN  
RESPECT, DIGNITY AND RIGHTS FOR ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS.

# Fanm Vanyan

(Brave Woman)

Over the past year, women and children in Haiti have increasingly become the target of kidnappings, rape, and beatings. According to a survey published in the August 2006 edition of *The Lancet*, approximately 35,000 women and girls were victims of sexual assault in Port-au-Prince during the 22-month reign of the interim government that was put in place following the unseating of President Aristide in early 2004.

These sexual assaults are not just random crimes, but rather deliberate means of social oppression used to sow fear and reap control over the crime victims, most of whom are poor women. Nearly three years after the ousting of President Aristide in February 2004, the majority of Haiti's population continues to live in poverty and fear, as armed groups remain active throughout the country. Despite the increasing political strife and violence, international attention on Haiti has waned over the past two years. The *Lancet's* findings, for example, received scant notice by the international community.

As part of our strategy to continue to highlight the struggles of Haitian women and the dangers they are facing amidst heightened economic strife, Dwa Fanm will join thousands of others around the globe as a participant in the V-Day 2007 Worldwide Campaign. As part of this campaign, we will stage a production of Eve Ensler's award-winning play, "The Vagina Monologues," at the Brooklyn Museum of Art on March 17th.

Dwa Fanm has enlisted Emeline Michel, Edwidge Danticat and Colin Powell's daughter, Linda Powell, to

With this groundbreaking event, we have new hope that our plea to the public to help stop the beatings, rapes and kidnappings of women, girls and men will garner the attention it deserves.



V-Day, founded by playwright and activist Eve Ensler is a non-profit seeking to end violence against women worldwide. This year, V-Day's campaign theme is "women in conflict zones." To spotlight the violence against women and girls in Haiti, Eve asked Dwa Fanm to help bring "The Monologues" to Haiti as well as to New York City's large Haitian immigrant population.

The March 17th production of the play will serve as a precursor to Haiti's debut of *The Monologues* on April 3<sup>rd</sup>. "The Vagina Monologues" made its debut in 1997 as an off-Broadway play that explores female resilience, strength and sexuality through a series of stories that are at times funny, sad, and shocking. While V-Day has reached 20 countries—

from the USA to China—it has never been taken to Haiti. In April 2007, V-Day and Eve will travel to Haiti for the first time, bringing benefit performances of "The Monologues" to Port Au Prince, as

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*Where...do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home...Yet they are the world of the individual person: the neighborhood...the school or college...the factory or office...Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity...Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.*

—Eleanor Roosevelt

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**FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR:**

**2007 has been declared The Year of the Rights of the Girl-Child** by the United Nations and Dwa Fanm is front and center in the movement to promote and protect the rights of children—especially the rights of girls in the Haitian community.

Being comparatively “voiceless”, children generally do not have the political platforms available to adults to articulate and claim their rights. So today, Dwa Fanm adds another voice in an effort to amplify other voices on behalf of girls around the world and calls for an END to battery, the trafficking of girls and *restaveks*, sexual exploitation, exposure to HIV/AIDS, genital cutting, prenatal sex selection and femicide, and a wide range of other physical and sexual violations.

Dwa Fanm believes the rights of women and children are mutually reinforcing. The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979 is an internationally binding instrument that protects the human rights and fundamental freedoms of women. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which focuses on the inalienable rights of children, followed in 1989. The two conventions are sister treaties, linked in moving communities towards full human rights. They set the standards for an equitable world in which the rights of every human being—female and male, old and young—are respected.

In practice, however, neither convention has been fully implemented. While giving lip service to equality, governments often fail to invest often limited public resources in women and children or to challenge discriminatory customs, attitudes and beliefs and, as former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said, "The principle of ‘all children, all rights’ is still much too far from being a reality."

It is with this in mind that Dwa Fanm, in collaboration with New York University’s Center for Human Rights and Global Justice, will launch a Documentation Project on Personal Security as Human Rights and is thankful to long time human rights activist Barbara Schulman for helping to design this crucial grassroots initiative.

During 2007, Dwa Fanm will launch as part of Girls Empowerment, a documentation project to assess where and when in their daily routines girls are subjected to threats to their personal security. This "personal safety human rights audit" will be used to bring attention to the security of girls and young women in Black immigrant (and by extension, other) communities throughout the city, and to develop policy initiatives and advocacy strategies that will seek to correct these

**OUR MISSION**

**Dwa Fanm** (meaning “Women’s Rights” in Haitian Creole) is a Haitian women’s rights organization committed to empowering all women and girls with the freedom to define and control their own lives. Through service, education, advocacy and grassroots programs, Dwa Fanm works to end discrimination, violence, and other forms of injustice here and abroad.

## RAPE IN HAITI CRIMINALIZED NO LONGER AN ACT AGAINST HONOR

On January 5th, Dwa Fanm hosted an afternoon reception with Haiti's Minister of Women's Issues & Women's Rights, Marie Laurence Lassegue. Ms. Lassegue addressed a group of women (including Manhattan Deputy Borough President Rose Pierre Louis, Dwa Fanm staff, and members of its board of directors) and discussed the Ministry's role in advancing women's rights in Haiti.

The Ministry of Women's Affairs and Women's Rights is a fairly recent addition to the State, having been created in 1995 by then President Aristide. Despite its short history, over the past several years the Ministry has achieved a number of accomplishments in combating violence against women. Haiti has 15 government Ministries and Ms. Lassegue explained that the work of the Women's Ministry traverses the work of each of the others. The Women's Ministry, for example, advocates for greater placement of girls in primary and secondary school, as well as campaigns for women's issues within the context of public health.

In the last two years, the Ministry's efforts have yielded positive results, which include new policies that now make it possible for rape victims to obtain medical certificates documenting the assault from any city clinic without a fee. Prior to this change, women had to pay a \$45 fee for this certificate and could only obtain it from one hospital in the capital, Port-au-Prince. Needless to say, very few women sought medical help in cases of rape prior to this change in law. In addition to this new policy, the Ministry successfully advocated for a government decree, issued in 2005, which made rape a criminal offense, rather than a "crime against a person's honor," as it was previously described by law. According the Minister, the first rape case was prosecuted in Haiti in 2006. The ability of a perpetrator to use social status and

Ms. Lassegue also talked about a number of "affirmative action" policies that have been implemented recently to ensure women's representation in parliament, local government, and within the police force. The Ministry is also currently working on legislation that would promote fair wages through the implementation of a minimum wage for domestic workers. Throughout the roundtable, Ms. Lassegue was extensively questioned about the escalating violence against women in Haiti. The *Lancet* medical journal, for example, recently published a study that found that 35,000 women and girls were sexually assaulted in Port-au-Prince during the 22-month period following the coup of 2004. The Minister explained that the high rates of violence are partly to blame on the economy, "deportees" looking for quick money, and a population desensitized by both personal and mass trauma. Ms. Lassegue also blamed a weakened police force that is severely underpaid and lacks basic crime fighting tools, such as police cars and the gas needed to operate them.

When asked what the Haitian Diaspora and other concerned individuals could do to help ameliorate the current state of affairs in Haiti, Ms. Lassegue urged the Haitian ex-patriots to remain accurately informed about Haiti's issues and support the work of women's rights groups within the country through funding and media attention. She also advises women activists to "write what you've contributed to all human struggles, because the history books are full of stories written by men for men. It is rarely acknowledged that the women too, were there." Dwa Fanm will be in further discussions with the Minister regarding specific steps the



Dwa Fanm Executive Director Farah Tanis, Minister Laurence Lassegue, and Dwa Fanm Program Director Barbara Victome

### DWA FANM'S GRASSROOTS PROGRAMS

Since our formation in 1999, Dwa Fanm has developed our programming in direct response to the needs of women and girls in the Haitian community. Dwa Fanm's five core programs are: Tonal Lavi ("Life's Roof"), our emergency shelter, transitional housing, and social services program for domestic violence survivors; Jistis Pou Fanm ("Justice for Women"), our legal program serving domestic violence and immigration cases; Fanm Vanyan ("Brave Women"), our economic empowerment program; Kay Timoun, ("Children's House") our children's services program; and Vwa Fanm ("Voices of Women"), our international advocacy, grassroots organizing and community education program.



## SURVIVOR ADVISORY BOARD SPEAKS

*"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."* Margaret Mead

Being undocumented means that I am faceless and nameless"

Change! What does change mean to a group of women who have been hurt, not just by their partners, but by the system? What does change mean to a woman who is struggling economically?

Change is what ensures her tomorrow will be better for her. Change means that her children will be given the opportunities she herself did not have. In order to effect positive change, she will dedicate herself and all that she has to make the changes necessary to determine her future.

In November, the Dwa Fanm Survivor Advisory Board (SAB) resumed its activities after a brief hiatus. SAB welcomed a new board dedicated to ending domestic violence in our commu-

One member explained how, after leaving her abuser for a shelter, she discovered that her immigration status prevented her from qualifying for most government assistance available to victims of domestic violence. "Being undocumented means that I am faceless and nameless," she said. After shedding a tear or two, we put ourselves to work to give voice to those who have lost theirs due to domestic violence. Immigration is a key component of SAB's 2007 work plan, as it is an overarching issue for most members of Dwa Fanm. As one of our campaigns, the SAB had collaborated with The New York Immigration Coalition in pushing the *Equal Access to Housing Services Act - Intro 61*. The Act would require Housing Preservation & Development to translate all application forms, correspondence, and notices issued by the agency into the top nine languages spoken by people living in New York City, including Creole.

SAB welcomes members who are interested in protecting women's rights. Please join us at our meetings on Wednesdays at 10 am. For more information, contact 718-230-4027, or email

## PLEASE GIVE YOUR SUPPORT!

There are many ways for you to join with Dwa Fanm in securing equal rights for all women everywhere. You can become a member, give a gift, donate gifts in-kind, or volunteer your time.

Please visit [www.dwafanm.org](http://www.dwafanm.org) for more information.

YES! I want to partner with Dwa Fanm to help empower Haitian and black immigrant women.

I understand my gift is tax deductible.

\$25  \$50  \$100  \$1000 \$  Other

My payment is in the form of:  check  credit card.

If remitting by credit card, please complete the form below.

Please return your tax-deductible gift to Dwa Fanm with this form and mail to Dwa Fanm, PO Box 23505, Brooklyn, NY 11202.

Thank You!



BUY TICKETS TO THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES AT  
[WWW.DWAFANM.ORG](http://WWW.DWAFANM.ORG)