



# Women vendors' work histories in Port-au-Prince: what lessons can be learned for research and action?

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**SUMMARY:** *This paper reports on interviews with women street vendors in a poor neighbourhood of Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti. It describes the reasons why the vendors undertake this work, their income sources prior to becoming vendors, the importance of vending and, for some, other sources of income for family survival. It evaluates the significance of two notions often considered self-evident for women in such contexts: family assistance and community solidarity. It also analyzes the impact of gender relations on the vendors' access to work and on the possibilities of obtaining better livelihoods.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

**IN HER REVIEW** of research on women, gender and the urban environment, Caroline Moser stated that, despite remarkable changes in research conducted over three decades:

"...the vast majority of urban development research and policies still does not mention women. Research that does still tends to be conducted by women, and to be dominated by a WID (women in development) 'Women and the city', approach, rather than by gendered analyses of urban development processes..."<sup>(1)</sup>

She also pointed out that "...there is a considerable challenge ahead, not least of all, to listen to women themselves."<sup>(2)</sup> This paper accepts the challenge and explores the work histories of a group of women vendors in a Port-au-Prince street who sell basic foodstuffs (fruit and vegetables, cereals, condiments). This activity was chosen for study because it is undertaken by the majority of low-income women in Port-au-Prince and this marketing sector has always been the domain of women in Haiti.<sup>(3)</sup>

1. Moser, C. (1993), *Women, Gender and Urban Development; Challenges for the 1990s*, Urban Research in the Developing World, research project sponsored by the Ford Foundation, Social Research Centre, American University in Cairo, page 34; see also Moser, C. (1995), "Women, gender and urban development policy: challenges for current and future research", *Third World Planning Review* Vol.17, No.2, pages 223-236.

2. See reference 1, Moser (1993), page 34.

3. Neptune-Anglade, M. (1986), *L'autre moitié du développement*, Editions des Alizés, Port-au-Prince; also Corten, A. and M.B. Tahon (1989), *L'état faible. Haïti et la République Dominicaine*, CIDIHCA, Montréal.

4. See, for instance, Bisilliat, J. and M. Fieloux (1983), *Femmes du Tiers-Monde: travail et quotidien*, Le Sycomor, Paris; also Boserup, E. (1983), *La femme face au développement économique*, Presses universitaires de France, Paris. Since many articles cover these questions, it is impossible to cite them all here.

5. See, for instance, Moser, C. and L. Peake (editors) (1987), *Women, Human Settlements and Housing*, Tavistock Publications, London and New York; also Perlman, J.E. (1987), "Misconceptions about the urban poor and the dynamics of housing policy evolution", *Journal of Planning Education and Research* Vol.6, No.3, pages 187-196; and Schlyter, A. (1988), *Women Householders and Housing Strategies; the case of George, Zambia*, the National Swedish Institute for Building Research, Lund.

6. See reference 3; also Edouard, M. (1989), "Femmes et relations familiales en Haïti", "Femme et démocratie en Haïti", *Forum libre* No.2, Port-au-Prince.

Other authors have suggested that this is also the case in many other countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America.<sup>(4)</sup>

This paper begins with a brief presentation of the context in which Haitian women currently live and work, followed by a discussion of the theory and methodology used in the study. Three main themes, drawn from the results, will be presented and used to evaluate feminist planning approaches and principles. The first addresses the history and origin of trade activities by Haitian women, the evolution of their economic situation, and the importance of this economic activity for their families and themselves. The second theme focuses on aid offered by the woman's family, friends and the local community. Researchers often claim such aid is crucial, especially for women. The paper will also address the question of whether these women live and work on the same street, since several urban planning researchers - most of whom are feminist researchers<sup>(5)</sup> - have indicated such proximity would facilitate women's tasks. The third theme analyzes the impact of gender relations on access to work and better livelihoods for the women interviewed. Several researchers have pointed to the devastating effects of these unequal relations on women - in particular, Neptune-Anglade, Corten and Tahon, and Edouard have mentioned the restrictive nature of gender relations in Haiti.<sup>(6)</sup> It limits women's access to land ownership, confines them to employment ghettos, leaves them with entire responsibility for child care, in no way obliges their companions to provide financial assistance and gives them no right to the companion's inheritance (since legal unions are rare).

Before proceeding any further, *plaçage*, the type of conjugal union prevalent in Haiti, needs some explanation - see Box 1.

In this paper, the concept of work history refers to accounts from the point of view of women's experiences through space and time, with emphasis on everyday practices. These histories were collected through interviews with a small sample of women vendors. The final section of this paper provides recommendations that might prove useful to the women themselves, to researchers, and to planners and policy makers.

## II. THE WOMEN OF PORT-AU-PRINCE: DE FACTO HEADS OF HOUSEHOLD IN A CRITICAL URBAN CONTEXT AND A POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CRISIS

**TABLE 1 PROVIDES** a synopsis of the situation of women in Port-au-Prince. The last national census was in 1982 so current statistics come only from partial surveys, most of which were undertaken for international organizations. The population in 1982 was 800,000 according to the 1982 census, but this is considered an undercount - and an estimate based on census data, aerial photographs and sample surveys suggested a population of 1.5 million by 1988.<sup>(11)</sup> Estimates for 1998 vary between 1.5 and 2 million inhabitants.

7. Vieux, S.H. (1989), *Le plaçage, droit coutumier et famille en Haïti*, ACTT, Paris, page 9. All translations are by the author.

8. Terré, F. (1989), "Préface" in Vieux, S.H. (1989), *Le plaçage, droit coutumier et famille en Haïti*, ACTT, Paris.

9. See reference 7, page 128.

10. See reference 7, page 139. However, it must be noted that this description is not without controversy. Although no publications are known to criticize the statements of Vieux, African women attending a recent seminar contested the purported African origin of this type of relationship.

11. Fass, S.M. and C. Roy (1989), *The Housing Process in Port-au-Prince, Haiti*, Final Report USAID, Regional Housing Development Office.

12. See reference 11.

13. Manigat, S. (1992), "L'urbanisation de Port-au-Prince dans les années 1980. Economie et conditions de vie des Port-au-Princiens. Rapport de recherche No.2", presented as part of the project: *L'urbanisation de la Caraïbe dans les années 1980*, Portes, Alejandro (coordinator) Johns Hopkins University, Department of Sociology, Baltimore.

14. UNICEF (1993), *Rapport préliminaire sur la situation des femmes et des enfants en Haïti*, rapport non publié, Port-au-Prince.

### Box 1: *Plaçage*

#### *Plaçage:*

**"...is a structured union that corresponds to a customary marriage. It cannot be compared to concubinage or various forms of consensual unions or common-law unions..."<sup>(7)</sup>**

**"...is a polygamous union undoubtedly imported from Africa to Haiti, where it was 'creolized' under various influences and where it is, for 80 per cent of the population, the means to start a family."<sup>(8)</sup>**

**"This union implies an obligation for the man to provide for the essential needs of the household(s)."<sup>(9)</sup> "But the man's earnings are his own, and completely out of reach of the woman."<sup>(10)</sup>**

**This union has no legal status and everything is left to the willingness of the man to assume family responsibilities. Pressure from the extended family may come into play. Resulting from a rural world and a history marked by slavery, this type of union does not recognize a woman's right to own land or housing. Her use of them is ensured only as long as her conduct is deemed irreproachable by the "companion" and both of their families. One right accorded her is the sale of produce she has grown on the land she occupies - hence women's dominance of this type of commerce even today and even in the city. She must use this money for the maintenance of her children and companion. Upon her companion's death, she has no right of inheritance although *plaçage* does allow her to keep her home as long as their sons allow it. Although such polygamy is governed by custom, it is rarely advantageous to women. An understanding of *plaçage* reveals the precarious situation in which women find themselves, especially in a city where it is difficult for the extended family to ensure the respect of customs (notably those concerning the companion's obligations). Finally, in the current state of economic deterioration, jobs for men are rare and even the "willing" companion might not always be able to help his *placée* (or *placées*).**

Port-au-Prince's accelerated growth is fairly recent. It began in the 1950s, as a consequence of the Duvalier administration's policy of concentrating administration, revenue collection, industry and services in Port-au-Prince.<sup>(12)</sup> However, Manigat suggests that it was also a consequence of the rural policy applied during the US American occupation.<sup>(13)</sup> Between 1950 and 1982, the average population growth rate was 5.17 per cent a year.<sup>(14)</sup> Accounting for more than 60 per cent of the total urban population and the great majority of its industrial activity, Port-au-Prince is the primary city of Haiti.<sup>(15)</sup> On a national scale, how-

**Table 1: Women in the City of Port-au-Prince**

<p><b>Port-au-Prince:</b> one of the Caribbean's largest and fastest-growing cities. Estimates for 1988 suggest a population of 1.5 million inhabitants.</p> <p>More than 50 per cent live in neighbourhoods with the following characteristics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Average income: less than US\$ 70 per month</li> <li>• Average household size: 5.5 people</li> <li>• Average area per household: 11 square metres</li> <li>• No connection to the public water supply system</li> <li>• Most of the population are tenants (house or land)</li> <li>• Squatting became common only after 1986</li> </ul> <p>Most heads of household are women:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are 130 women to every 100 men</li> <li>• 70 per cent <i>de facto</i> heads of household are women</li> <li>• More than 50 per cent of conjugal unions are of the <i>plaçage</i> type described in Box 1</li> </ul> <p>Women's work is concentrated in the least remunerative occupations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Micro-retail of fruits and vegetables</li> <li>• Domestic work</li> <li>• Employed in sub-contracting industries</li> </ul> <p>The economic crisis of the 1980s brought:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing dependence of families on the earnings of women</li> <li>• Impoverishment and a dramatic loss of jobs</li> <li>• The economic blockage since 1991 has caused an increase in contraband</li> <li>• Greatest impact on poorest women</li> </ul>
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**SOURCES:** This table has drawn on the following sources: Anglade, G. (1990), *Cartes sur tables - itinéraires et raccourcis. Cinq ans de jalons 1977-1981*, Editions Henri Deschamps/ERCE, Port-au-Prince/Montréal; CPFO (1989), *Characteristics of Street Food Vending Establishment in the Industrial Area of Port-au-Prince*, research report, Port-au-Prince; CRUT (1990), *Rapport partiel phase 1: La logique de l'emplacement*, report presented to the Ministère des affaires sociales and to UNICEF - Haïti, Port-au-Prince; Fass, S.M. (1988), *Political Economy in Haïti: the Drama of Survival*, Transaction Books, New Brunswick, New Jersey; Fass, S.M. (1990), "Land tenure and informal housing processes in Haïti", paper presented at the 32nd Annual Conference of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning, Austin, Texas; Fass, S.M. and C. Roy (1989), *The Housing Process in Port-au-Prince, Haïti*, Final Report USAID, Regional Housing Development Office; Neptune-Anglade, M. (1986), *L'autre moitié du développement*, Editions des Alizés, Port-au-Prince; Ruc, D. (1988), "Les femmes triment et Haïti est debout", *Croissance des Jeunes Nations* No.307. The table has also drawn on several field studies that we carried out in Haïti between 1986 and 1994: see Blanc, B. and A. Bayard (1995), *Les stratégies de survie des femmes dans les cités poulaïres de Port-au-Prince*, discussion paper 2-94, "Série recherche", Groupe inter-universitaire de Montréal villes et développement, Montreal; and Blanc, B. and F. Dansereau (1995), "La diversité des stratégies résidentielles et professionnelles des familles démunies: un défi pour les politiques d'intervention dans les quartiers sous-intégrés" in Polèse, M. and J. Wolfe (editors) (1995), *l'Urbanisation des pays en développement*, Economica, Paris, pages 133-149.

15. See reference 14.

16. See reference 14; also Saint Dic, J.C. (1989), "Les satellites urbains", *Chemins critiques* Vol.1, No.3, pages 14-33.

17. Tardif, F.C. (1992), *La situation des femmes haïtiennes*, Comité Inter-agences Femmes et Développement, Système des Nations Unies en Haïti, Port-au-Prince.

18. PNUD - Programme des Nations Unies pour le Développement (1991), *Rapport mondial sur le développement humain 1991*, Economica, Paris.

19. There are various different estimates for the actual figure.

ever, the rural population is still larger than the urban population.

Women comprise the majority of residents of the *bidonvilles*.<sup>(16)</sup> Due to the scarcity of agricultural land, the agrarian crisis and the nature of gender relations (see above), large numbers of low-income women have migrated to Port-au-Prince to seek work. The imbalanced sex ratio in Port-au-Prince and Haïti as a whole<sup>(17)</sup> is partially due to the high levels of male emigration to other countries.

Haitian women have one of the world's highest labour force participation rates although their education level and state of health are amongst the lowest.<sup>(18)</sup> Since Haïti is one of the world's poorest countries,<sup>(19)</sup> it is evident that the majority of Haitian women endure difficult, uncertain and low-paid work. Only 7.7 per cent of the country's working population is employed in the modern, organized sector (manufacturing, services and public administration) with the rest of the active population working in the so-called informal sector.<sup>(20)</sup> In Port-Au-Prince in 1989, 20 per cent of the active population worked in the formal, or mod-

Tardif 1992 (see reference 17) suggests that it was US\$ 179 in 1989. The World Bank estimate for 1995 was for US\$ 250, with an annual average decline of 5.2 per cent a year between 1985 and 1995 - World Bank (1997), *World Development Report 1997*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York.

20. Paul, G. (1989), "L'importance du secteur informel", *Forum libre* No.3, Port-au-Prince, Haïti, pages 11-29.

21. PNUD (1990), *Coopération et développement - Haïti - rapport 1989*, November.

22. See reference 3.

23. See reference 17, page 152.

24. CPFO - Centre de promotion des femmes ouvrières (1989), *Quelques aspects des conditions de travail des ouvrières du secteur de la sous-traitance en Haïti*, rapport de recherche, Port-au-Prince; see also reference 3, Corten and Tahon (1989).

25. CPAU - Commission permanente d'urgence (1992), *Regroupement Interpod. Aide d'urgence. Lignes stratégiques. Axes d'intervention, document final*, Port-au-Prince, page 94.

ern, sector but this percentage decreased during the political and economic crisis of the 1990s.<sup>(21)</sup>

In 1982, the majority of women were employed in commerce, particularly in the sale of provisions. Neptune-Anglade commented that "...in Haiti, commerce is feminized."<sup>(22)</sup> Women vendors involved in the sale of provisions fall into four general categories:

- peasant women who sell their produce in the markets;
- "madam Saras" - intermediaries who purchase wholesale produce in the countryside or elsewhere and sell to various wholesalers and retailers;
- "re-sellers" in urban centres (who can be stationary or mobile); and
- the cooked food sellers, who sell meals they have prepared or obtained from others.<sup>(23)</sup>

Re-sellers (who will be termed "women vendors" throughout the rest of this paper) form the largest group. They usually operate with little capital, selling either in one of the official markets (of which there are 23 in Port-au-Prince), on nearby streets or in one of the small informal neighbourhood markets.

Women also have a strong presence in the service and manufacturing sectors. However, the fall of the Duvalier government in 1986 was the start of a decline in the sub-contracting industries in the toy and sporting goods sector that had previously employed more than 20,000 workers. This sector of activity employed mostly women due to the low pay and poor working conditions.<sup>(24)</sup> The 1991 economic blockade placed on Haiti after the September 1991 military coup against President Aristide led to an almost complete halt in manufacturing. Most of the male workers did not find new jobs while women switched to domestic service for the wealthier population and/or became small-scale merchants. Although data has not been quantified for this situation, it has been confirmed by several informants. Living conditions for these small-scale women vendors is quite precarious. The CPAU (*Commission Permanente sur l'Aide d'Urgence*) pointed to the effects on low-income women of the economic embargo:

"Sixty per cent of merchants pawned personal possessions during the economic crisis - their children's poor health (malnutrition, illness) was the major impetus... All those surveyed are gravely affected by the current crisis. There has been a 70 per cent drop in production and commercial activity."<sup>(25)</sup>

The economic blockage or economic sanctions were decreed by the Organization of American States after the September 1991 coup against President Aristide and these were suspended only in September 1994.

Finally, a note about the development of Haiti's *bidonvilles*. Before the fall of Duvalier, squatters were relatively rare in Port-au-Prince as access to land was controlled by the president's

26. See reference 16, Saint Dic (1989).

27. See Moser, Caroline O.N. and Linda Peake (1987), "Introduction" in Moser, Caroline O.N. and Linda Peake (editors) (1987), *Women, Housing and Human Settlements*, Tavistock Publications, London and New York, page 6; also Moser, Caroline O.N. and Caren Levy (1986), *A Theory and Methodology of Gender Planning: Meeting Women's Practical and Strategic Needs*, DPU Gender and Planning, Development Planning Unit, University College London, London.

28. Peake, L. (1992), "Femmes, villes et développement; stratégies de recherche, stratégies d'action", presentation at a workshop, 19 March 1992, Institut d'urbanisme, Université de Montréal, Montréal.

29. See reference 28

30. See reference 13.

31. Reinharz, S. (1992), *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York.

associates, including several powerful families and members of the police and army who had acquired or seized land with the consent of the government. Squatting was rare because police stations were positioned throughout Port-au-Prince, especially in the vicinity of the very poor neighbourhoods.<sup>(26)</sup>

### III. METHODOLOGICAL OBJECTIVES AND PRINCIPLES

#### a. Why a Gender Planning Approach?

**TABLE 1 HIGHLIGHTS** the considerable difficulties that low-income Haitian women face in ensuring the survival of their families. In addition, the highly restrictive nature of male-female relations leaves most of these women virtually alone to face family responsibilities. This has a direct impact on how to get them to speak and feel comfortable talking to interviewers. Thus, the gender planning approach<sup>(27)</sup> was considered; this analyzes the needs of women not only within their functional or social dimensions (e.g. type of housing, types of services required for them to fulfill their traditional roles as mothers and breadwinners, "practical needs") but also through a consideration of everything that limits their access to housing, services and work because of their gender ("strategic needs"). In theory, such an approach does not ignore other important issues such as class and race. Finally, besides gender analysis, the gender planning method identifies two other relevant specific procedures: gendered participation and gendered entry strategies.<sup>(28)</sup> The latter goes beyond developing proposals with women, to also finding the means of ensuring that these proposals are visible and taken into account by decision makers. In this respect, "...gender planning is a contextually specific political activity and requires an entry strategy."<sup>(29)</sup> In this case, this involved working with grassroots groups and specialists who are ready to accept this operational and political dimension. The methodology described below reflects this policy.

#### b. Methodology

Why a micro-spatial study of a special group when extensive preliminary studies are rare? In a context where an unstable political climate and covert repression makes people apprehensive about voicing their opinions, it appears difficult to undertake probabilistic macro-studies.<sup>(30)</sup> A more flexible approach must be adopted to interviewing, adapted to circumstances and dependent on confidential intermediaries. But, independent of the context in Haiti, like other researchers,<sup>(31)</sup> an in-depth approach (lengthy, semi-directed interviews) with a small sample was considered appropriate for gaining access to the experience of women.

The work was supported by GRHAP (*Groupe de recherche haïtien d'action pédagogique*), a local non-governmental organization established in St. Martin, a *bidonville* in central Port-au-

Prince, whose director is sensitive to the situation of women and to gender relations in general. A small informal market situated along a street in St. Martin was chosen for the study. Such a contained spatial unit in a specific neighbourhood where one is accepted allows a faster understanding of local social dynamics.

Eighteen women vendors of basic products from this street were interviewed for two to three hours each. A social worker who lived in the street was present at the interviews and he also recruited the initial contacts who, in turn, suggested other women vendors to interview. The fact that the presence of this escort might have influenced the responses of the women vendors was taken into account in the analysis. We stopped after 18 interviews because the information gathered was becoming repetitive and, of course, bias was introduced because the sample was not random. However, the principal goal of the research was not statistical validity but, rather, an understanding of the personal experiences of women vendors.

The interviews were recorded and translated word-for-word from Créole into French. The research was grounded on a systematic review of the literature (summarized above), several field studies (between 1986 and 1994) and meetings with most of the organizations and researchers involved in this field in Port-au-Prince.

#### IV. THE INTERVIEW SITE: CHARLEMAGNE PERALTE STREET

**CHARLEMAGNE PERALTE STREET** is situated in Vieux St. Martin, a district that is located close to the large Croix des Bossales market, and the business and government centre. The district developed during the 1950s after the inhabitants of a poor neighbourhood from the coast were relocated there.<sup>(32)</sup> As in other neighbourhoods, access to land was controlled by the police and the *macoutes*, members of the civilian militia.<sup>(33)</sup> It was here that some of the squatting which has occurred in Port-au-Prince recently took place. The district is very built-up with approximately 20,000 residents in 1976 and perhaps more than 30,000 today, and with densities of 1,500 to 2,000 inhabitants per hectare. Vieux St. Martin resembles the Upper Belair district<sup>(34)</sup> but with even higher densities. It is crossed by narrow passages, some of which connect main and secondary thoroughfares. Charlemagne Peralte Street can be considered a secondary artery since it is about five metres wide, has gutters and includes a bridge spanning Rockefeller Canal. The repair of Charlemagne Peralte Street dates back to a pilot rehabilitation project carried out in the northern section of St. Martin.

Primarily residential until 1986, Charlemagne Peralte Street filled with a mix of small businesses and makeshift dwellings after a fire occurred in its northern section. The proliferation of small businesses is principally linked to two factors: the economic crisis of the 1980s which favoured the growth of a type of activity that is open to women with little available capital; and

32. Fass, S.M. (1988), *Political Economy in Haiti: The Drama of Survival*, Transaction Books, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

33. See reference 32.

34. See Laguerre, M.S. (1982), *Urban Life in the Caribbean: A Study of a Haitian Urban Community*, Schenkman Publishing Co., Cambridge, Mass.

the more permissive climate for squatting that developed after 1986. These led to a saturation of traditional vending spaces and busy markets and streets. Whenever a well-located site becomes available, it is immediately overrun. This situation is common in many areas of Port-au-Prince.

## V. INTERVIEW RESULTS

### a. Socio-demographic Profile of the Women Vendors

**TWO-THIRDS OF** the women vendors interviewed were between 26 and 35 years old. The youngest was 20, the oldest 54. Eleven of the 18 respondents said they had a male companion. Only six of these companions worked and only "rarely". Ten of the women vendors were from the south of Haiti, two from Port-au-Prince and the rest came from other parts of the country.

Laguerre has written on the tendency for people from the same region to cluster together in the poor neighbourhoods of Port-au-Prince.<sup>(35)</sup> Most of the women vendors are in-migrants. In terms of fertility, three of the women vendors who were at least 20 years old had no children whilst the average family size for the others was 3.4. In addition, two women vendors were pregnant at the time of the interview.

35. See reference 34.

### b. Increasing Vulnerability due to the Economic Crisis in the 1980s and to the Economic Embargo (after the 1991 military coup)

From the histories of the women vendors, one can clearly see the extreme deterioration in their economic situation. Although the economic crisis has affected everyone, the degree of impoverishment varied, notably with regard to funds available for businesses. It seemed, however, that the richer merchants understated their assets. Some respondents refused to answer questions about their assets; this may have been due to the presence of the local escort but information about assets is always hard to determine. To summarize, two of the women vendors had, what is for Haiti, significant funds - the equivalent of US\$ 66; in general, these vendors sold products such as cereal, canned goods and oil. Four had between US\$ 5-10, four others had less than US\$ 5 and eight respondents declined to answer.

Prior to the economic embargo, several women vendors had different, more profitable, occupations with sales being a secondary activity. For example, three women had previously been seamstresses (and one of them was also a labourer). Ten had sold other goods which netted more income (hardware, prepared food). The lack of clients had required them to shift to the sale of essential foodstuffs. One had been a teacher and two others had been full-time domestic workers. Two of the vendors, who had been selling the same type of goods prior to the embargo, were now selling much less. One of the women vendors noted that the sale of vegetables is difficult and not very profitable since one must get to the market early to buy vegetables and



they spoil quickly. A profit of 25 cents on the sale of a few tomatoes and some peas that had cost US\$ 1 was the only possible daily income for two of the women vendors. They said that this was sufficient for them to eat and feed a child but problems arose if the child fell ill: "When I sell a pot of peas, I buy juice so the child can take his medicine (paid for by his father), then I suffer - I don't eat."

Three of the vendors wash clothes for richer people to obtain a bit more money. Eleven of them live in houses on the street. Those with small children do not bring them with them while vending, as is done by many street vendors in Africa. The street is very dusty and crowded and the vendors have little time to go back home to take care of their children because selling is so difficult that they cannot leave their spot for long. In this sense, the proximity of employment to residence is an advantage but they do not sell very much on the street. Many of them, especially the poorest, would like to move to another location. One commented that "...if I had money, I wouldn't sit here, I'd rather go into town (the central market or downtown) and I'd sell other stuff." Another said that "...if I had to sell something else, I'd go to town. But in town, every spot is taken...you have to walk if you don't have a spot and it's bad for your health..."

### c. Family and Friend Support: Essential but Restrictive

The history of the women street vendors' establishment in Port-au-Prince also reveals the importance of family support. Fourteen of the 16 women who migrated to Port-au-Prince when they were young were accompanied by an aunt or an uncle, rarely a father. Other aunts or uncles gave them lodging. Cohabitation of this type is often difficult for a young woman not only because of her host's economic demands or difficulties but also due to the cramped quarters: "I came with my *tonton* (Créole diminutive for uncle), I stayed with his wife, she acted badly to me and I left for another *tonton*'s." Five of the 11 women vendors who lived on the street have been there only for a short time and are living with female friends or relatives. Others sell from the property of an acquaintance or relative and live in neighbouring districts.

Family lives are circumscribed in terms of space; women reported that several extended families live on the same land, where each has built a more-or-less makeshift shelter. This urban courtyard or *lakou* cannot be seen from the street as the entrance is hidden by corrugated metal. This paper will not describe the few amenities available in most of these dwellings nor the unsafe conditions of the majority; these have been fully described by Fass.<sup>(36)</sup> As noted earlier, although the cost of housing has increased, the urban fabric has become denser and the quality of housing even more critical than in 1980. Women vendors suffer from this situation but can do nothing to change it and have become resigned to it. One woman vendor, with eight children and living in a two-room shack assembled from pieces of wood, said: "You're in a house that's not very nice but you've got it, so you get used to it."

36. See reference 32.

Assistance from the immediate family is also essential for access to street-vending. Even women who had not always been street vendors had learned how to sell at a very young age, either on their own (seven respondents) or from their mother or an aunt (nine respondents). The women vendors speak only Créole. They generally had not attended school although three of them had taken sewing classes and another was a teacher. Four vendors had been helped by their fathers to get started. One had been helped by her husband, three by female friends, three had used their savings or had sold property. One had benefited from a loan from a collective savings association and six others did not answer this question.

After starting up, it is the family who lends money although, currently, some women have to call upon pawnbrokers or usurers. None of the women had benefited from a bank loan although one had obtained a loan from an NGO. Outside the family, support can come from members of the same Christian or voodoo cult; little detail was provided since the women interviewed were reticent about discussing anything to do with voodoo.

One female vendor explained how the funeral of a relative was a financial hardship (a very common occurrence in Haiti):

“One of my aunts up and died - my godmother. I left my stuff there (her inventory)...They took the little money I had and they did the burial. I quit spice-selling (too expensive), I borrowed some coins and with a small nest-egg I was able to buy (vegetables for resale).”

#### d. Community Strategies

At the street level one cannot really discuss community strategies. The relatively more affluent residents resent the poor who are identified as those inhabiting makeshift dwellings and operating smaller businesses. However, it seems that there are alliances between “rich” and “poor” members of the same family. Women do help one another through savings associations, sales and general aid but only if they know each other well. One feels in some families a latent mistrust of other families. This might be due to the local situation in St. Martin, where the *macoutes* have always exercised control<sup>(37)</sup> and still do so. Repression was covert during the period when the interviews were done; some people had to flee from the neighbourhood and mistrust of the families associated with the *macoutes* was therefore greater.

#### e. Gender Relations

The topic of the companion was often a delicate one to raise during the interviews. Eleven women had a companion but were not married. With the exception of three of them, who appeared to have been *plaçées* with the same man for a long time, all the others had had several companions and had children from the different men. As is the custom with *plaçage*, the women ex-

37. See reference 32.

pected their companions to respect certain obligations. According to custom, men are held responsible for the rent, furniture and children's school fees. It seems that a number of the men cannot fulfill their commitments because they have lost their jobs. Others have never met their obligations.

As the men often have several companions and father children with them, their obligations are difficult to meet. One vendor explained: "When my mama was living, papa had two women, he had lots of kids with the other woman and ten with mama." However, we found one household in long-term *plaçage* and two other relationships where the man did his best to assume his responsibilities to assist his family. A man who fails to turn over money to his mate is under no obligation to explain why. In the same way, household chores are entirely the woman's responsibility.

The sexual division of labour is reflected in space: it is the men who own the concessions for selling lottery tickets, the second-hand shops and the major stores. It is rare to see a man selling vegetables or replacing his mate when she is sick because that is not his job. One can see the negative effects of this strict sexual division of labour on the family economy. Most of the women seem to endure these inequalities as inescapable. Some women pity the men, saying that it is more difficult for males because they are better educated and consequently cannot accept work considered demeaning. The lowest income women, in contrast, must supplement their incomes by doing laundry for other women although this is considered dishonourable. These women endure very long work days (from 5 a.m. to 10 p.m.), especially when they have to buy vegetables in the market. Sixteen of the 18 women interviewed travel on foot. Five of them told us they were ill.

The women vendors' histories show that access to property is passed down through the father or the uncle. One of the women built her dwelling on an uncle's land, another has the use of her father's lodgings, others rent (land or housing) or are allowed to stay with their families or friends. In general, the mother has nothing to leave her daughter. On the other hand, it is the mother who initiates her daughter into street-vending and who passes on to her daughter this often precarious situation (if there is very little capital). Typically, an adult daughter comes to the city while the mother remains in the hinterlands. It is up to the daughter to help her; often the mother is poorer than the daughter. If, for the most part, women facilitate other women's access to work space, this access is subject to final control by men: the owners, the police, the usurers, the *macoutes*. The women fear theft during their supply trip to the central market. One of them told us she had been robbed of all her money and raped during such a trip.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

**WHAT LESSONS CAN** be learned from the women vendors' experiences? First, although St. Martin is classified as a shantytown and the sale of small quantities of essential foodstuffs is considered the domain of the poor, in reality the socio-economic position of women vendors is not so homogeneous. They can be placed in at least four categories according to the amounts of cash they have to hand (as discussed earlier). This demonstrates the benefits of the case study approach, to reduce precipitate generalization or stereotypical categorization. The study of the different strata of women vendors and their networks merits more research (an extension of Neptune-Anglade's studies).

If the importance of family aid is evident, one realizes that a price is paid. In reality, most women take on the responsibilities of their extended family at the cost of their health. In the same way, the proximity of housing to work often seems more of a necessity than a choice.

There are no spontaneous community strategies in the neighbourhood studied here. Instability has divided Port-au-Prince into small fiefdoms whose political situation varies from district to district. In St. Martin, it is anarchic and repressive. In contrast, elsewhere in Haiti's capital, one can find examples of community strategies at work, notably in La Saline and Cité Soleil where women have formed associations - for example DFH ("*Délivrance femmes Haït*") in the Linthau 1 sector of Cité Soleil, founded in 1990.<sup>(38)</sup> More micro-level research on formal and informal associative structures in Port-au-Prince is necessary. There are many national and professional women's associations but they do not seem to have links with the small associations of poor neighbourhoods.

The gender inequality described by Neptune-Anglade<sup>(39)</sup> is clearly confirmed. In addition, *plaçage* as it exists today affords women very little protection. Everything depends on the concern shown by the extended families, the good will of the companion and the negotiating capacity of the woman.

In this poor district, as in the rest of Port-au-Prince, disadvantaged women suffer overt discrimination due to their class as well as their gender. Women vendors vehemently complained of exploitation and of the contempt expressed by more affluent women for whom they have worked. The concept of "sisterhood", as constructed by feminist researchers, is too easily assumed. The existence of such solidarity must be assessed in the light of the reality expressed by these women. This problem of discrimination between women must be linked to the dramatic problem of class and race inequalities in Haiti.<sup>(40)</sup>

How can the current findings be used? As urban planners, we have generated concrete proposals for other researchers and Haitian NGOs:

- The formation of housing cooperatives that would integrate production space and day care facilities with dwellings.
- The development of participatory projects with priority given to women heads of household or to households in which the

38. DFH (*Délivrance femmes Haïti*) (1991), *Priorités des femmes de Linthau 1*, 1 page, typed, Port-au-Prince.

39. See reference 3, Neptune-Anglade (1986).

40. Labelle, M. (1987), *Idéologie de couleur et classes sociales en Haïti*, CIDIHCA and Presses de l'Université de Montréal, Montréal.

41. See, for instance, Klodowsky, F. and A. Spector (1988), "New families, new housing needs, new urban environments: the case of single-parent families" in Andrew, C. and B. Moore Milroy (editors) (1988), *Life Spaces, Gender, Household, Employment*, University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver, pages 141-158; also Peterson, R. (1987), "Gender issues in the home and urban environment" in Zube, E. and G. Moore (editors) (1987), *Advances in Environment, Behavior and Design* Vol.1, Plenum, New York, pages 187-218.

42. This portion of the text was written prior to the return of Jean-Bertrand Aristide to the presidency of Haiti. After his return in October 1995, elections were held but the progress of women in the KASEKS was minimal. Much remains to be accomplished at this level. Although a government ministry for the status of women has been created, its existence has been contested and its budget is small.

43. Charlmers, C. (1991), "Le mouvement populaire et ses principales caractéristiques", Ateliers de travail, HAVA, 29-30 janvier 91, Port-au-Prince, pages 16-17.

44. See reference 7. Vieux's description of *plaçage* is not without controversy - see reference 10.

45. "Le secteur informel dans l'économie haïtienne" (1989), *Forum libre* No.3, Port-au-Prince; also "Femmes et démocratie en Haïti" (1989), *Forum libre* No.2, Port-au-Prince; HAVA (Association Haïtienne des Agences Bénévoles) (1991), "Définition, rôle et fonction des ONG. Cahier 1," Ateliers de travail, HAVA, 29-30 janvier 1991, Port-au-Prince; see reference 22; see reference 3, Neptune-Anglade (1986); Reiher, O. (1985), *Port-au-Prince: pour une analyse socio-spatiale de la gestion urbaine*, Master's thesis, Université du Québec à Montréal; and ENFOFANM (1993), "Premye rankont nasyonal kont violans sous fanm", *Haïti fanm*, Vol.III, No.5, Port-au-Prince, pages 1-9.

woman is the sole provider (there are examples of such cooperative projects in Canada).<sup>(41)</sup>

- Assistance with financing, training and cooperative management for existing savings associations (*soldes*) of Haitian women vendors such as those studied.

None of these proposals can be implemented if the complex history of relations and conflicts within and among communities, and between civic society and government authorities, is ignored. It is necessary to consider the diversity of neighbourhoods and to work with local formal or informal grassroots groups who understand the social fabric. Women could be the *poto mitan* (the Créole term for the pillar that supports the home) of these processes but they need more recognition and more power through support, training and financing. With regard to practical and strategic needs, it is necessary to intervene where they intersect. For example, women are ever present at the neighbourhood level and have always taken care of the everyday environment, thus more decision-making power could be given to them in this domain. A concrete example of such autonomy could be at the community council level, once democracy is re-established.<sup>(42)</sup> Former President Aristide, who owed his position primarily to women and youth,<sup>(43)</sup> has come out in favour of a policy that would give more power to women. However, no women were elected to the KASEK (district assembly councils). As provided by the constitution of 1987, these councils are elected by the "communal section citizens". Their role is to provide a link between City Hall and the citizens. Inclusion of women in these groups would be a tangible way of empowering women and of bringing their priorities to the forefront.

With regard to gender relations, according to Vieux, there are some beneficial aspects to the *plaçage* custom. However, during a recent seminar, Haitian women mentioned that Vieux's analysis was incomplete, especially because he did not interview women on the question and because, in his conclusions, he tended to minimize the negative impact of *plaçage* for women despite his previous comments.<sup>(44)</sup> So, *plaçage* must be evaluated by women and discussed with men before proposing (as Vieux did) to give it, after modification, a legal status. Less-educated women would need the cooperation of members of other socio-economic classes, both male and female, who are sensitive to their situation and to gender relations. Such individuals already exist in Haiti.<sup>(45)</sup> Recently, women and men known for their progressive ideas and their actions against all kinds of discrimination have been named to government posts. Therefore, we conclude this study with an optimistic outlook.

