

# Airwaves to Courage



IN TROUBLED HAITI, COMMUNITY GROUPS ARE WORKING WITH WOMEN TO CREATE RADIO PLAYS THAT RAISE AWARENESS OF LIFE-THREATENING ISSUES

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Men who beat their wives.”  
“No hospitals.”  
“No money.”  
“ state doesn’t fulfill its responsibilities.”

The women nod their heads in agreement. Roosters crow outside, cheerful shouts from a nearby football game punctuate the afternoon discussion, the bright Caribbean sun streams through the windows, but nothing distracts them. They lean over their work at the table.

“Poor nutrition.”  
“No doctor at the clinic.”

Yolene Ceyard, a twenty-two-year-old mother, writes the words around a drawing

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*Overleaf: In a Port-au-Prince sound studio, members of Fanm Kouraj, a rural-based group of women activists, record one of their plays for broadcast over a network of Haiti’s community radio stations*



**M**ore than 520 of every 100,000 Haitian women die giving birth in this country of 8 million.

of a tree.

Usually farming a rocky hillside seven hours away, Ceyard was one of thirteen women at a workshop in the hills high above Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital, during the hottest days of July 2003. She made the long journey because, in addition to being a mother and a farmer, she is also a volunteer at her local community radio station. The workshop was aimed at helping Ceyard and other women radio reporters and producers turn their knowledge and their concerns into theater.

Despite unrest in the streets and deepening poverty at home, she and the other women came from all over this devastated country, which always seems to teeter on the edge of yet another uprising or natural disaster.

Indeed, as the women met, hundreds of unions, civic groups, student associations, and others were taking part in a nonstop mobilization against then-president Jean-Bertrand Aristide. A paramilitary band of ex-soldiers and disenchanted police officers were training across the border in the Dominican Republic. Within months, Aristide had left the country in what he described as a "modern coup d'etat" and yet another interim president had taken his



**Top:** Teachers on the island of La Gonave and members of Fanm Kouraj, these women gather to rehearse one of their original songs, which they perform throughout the country to help provoke discussion about the plight of Haitian women, such as that of the young mother, opposite, who lives with her children and another family in two rooms in one of the capital's poorest neighborhoods, Cite Soleil. **Right:** A scene from the play, "Running from the Rain, I Fall into the River," the story of a restavèk girl.

place. It was to be Haiti's thirty-third violent change of government.

But while newspapers and radios blared ominous warnings about Haiti's future, Ceyard and her friends continued to address the trials and tribulations much closer to home, often within their homes.

That hot summer day, the women created a tree of women's problems, specifically the problems that lead to one of the gravest threats they face: death during childbirth. More than 520 of every 100,000 Haitian women die giving birth in this country of 8 million. That's more than twice the number in the neighboring Dominican Republic, and over sixteen times the Cuban figure.

Where the tree's roots should have been, Ceyard and the others wrote out the reasons Haitian mothers die. At the top of the tree's bare black branches hung the heavy fruit. For the children left without mothers, the consequences are equally grave.

"Street children."

"Rape."

"*Restavèk*." (The word means "stay-with" and is used to designate Haiti's child slaves. Children from poor rural families are often sent to work as domestic servants with better-off urban family members with the expectation that the children will be provided education and housing. In reality, the families often use the children as domes-

tic slaves, giving them inadequate care and nourishment, denying them access to education, and often abusing them physically and sexually. UNICEF estimates there are about 175,000 child slaves in Haiti.)

Ceyard and the other women were painfully aware of how many of their friends and neighbors have died while giving birth. And the consequences for the children concerned them even more.

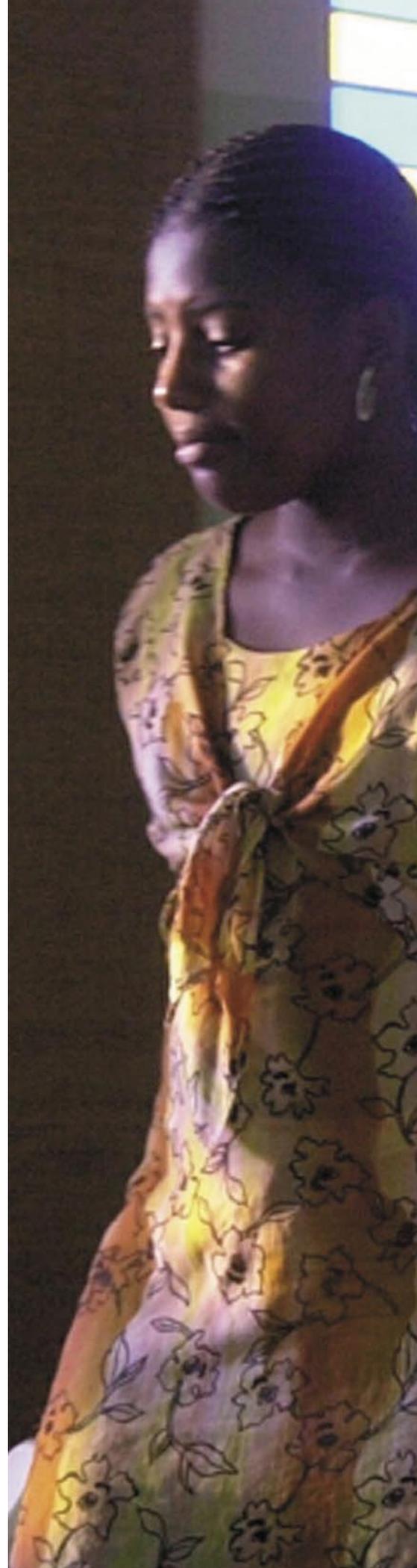
The facilitator in Ceyard's group was a woman who teaches first graders during the school year. Vana Edmond, thirty, is a member of *Fanm Kouraj*, a group of young women activists from the island of La Gonâve, located some thirty miles northwest of the mainland, across the Bay of Port-au-Prince. *Fanm Kouraj* means "Courageous Women." The group performs popular theater about the problems facing young women in Haiti. But that day, instead of acting, Edmond and other *Fanm Kouraj* members were sharing their knowledge.

"*Fanm Kouraj* started with six young women who were teaching children in the *Matènwa* Community School for Development," Edmond explained as she surveyed the small groups of women working on tree exercises. "But we would also reflect on women's problems in the community, on situations where



"Women were being beaten up by their husbands. It made us very sad. It was like a big boil on our hearts that we hadn't yet found a way to cure"

*Fanm Kouraj's Vana Edmond, right, with the "tree of women's problems," created by workshop participants, and opposite, as the ball-capped male suitor in one of the group's most popular plays about sex and pregnancy. The young woman, far right, is played by Gertine Decembre.*





women were victims of violence. Women were being beaten up by their husbands. It made us very sad. It was like a big boil on our hearts that we hadn't yet found a way to cure. We were thinking about ways we could do that when we met Shana and Peggy from Women's Rights International."

Women's Rights International (WRI), a U.S.-based nonprofit organization, works with women living in countries at war or with a history of government violence and repression. They use a form of popular education they developed called "Discovery-Based Leadership." After several young girls at the school in La Gonâve became pregnant, the teachers began to discuss ways that they could help the young women in their community confront some of the difficult problems they face. An administrator at the school who was familiar with WRI's work suggested WRI meet with the young teachers.

"In Discovery-Based Leadership, people examine their lives and their realities and reflect on their experiences as part of a process of transformation," explains Shana Swiss, WRI founder and public health physician, as she watched the workshop from the side of the room that hot summer day.

"We met Vana and the other teachers four years ago," Swiss recalls. "We began our work together by asking how they would define their most pressing problems. Their immediate reply was that Haitian women's problems were rooted in 'misery and poverty.' These answers came quickly, without reflecting their deeper comprehension of how 'misery and poverty' impacted their own lives as young women."

During a series of visits to La Gonâve island—reached by six hours of travel by car, sailboat, and four-wheel-drive vehicle—Swiss and her colleague, research scientist and educator Peggy Jennings, joined forces with Fann Kouraj.

While Haiti has never technically been "at war," decades of civil unrest, including the last few years' violence which led to yet another upheaval, has torn apart an already weak social fabric and strained family and other relationships to the limit. Through it all, however, WRI and Fann Kouraj nurtured what was to become a rich and fruitful relationship.

Contact with WRI reinforced Fann Kouraj's determination, according to Edmond. "We realized that the only way we could address that big boil on our hearts was through popular theater plays, theater that portrays the reality of the women living in La Gonâve and in the rest of Haiti," she says. "So on July 14, 2000, we decided to

work together as a group to make popular theater, and we named our group 'Fanm Kouraj.'

As protests raged in cities around the country, the women from Fanm Kouraj and the community radio stations put their own issues on center stage that week. One after the other they identified the same questions about sex, women's health, and childbirth, and problems such as teen pregnancy and infant and maternal mortality that plague women all over their country. The tree had helped them identify a specific problem and organize their collective wisdom. As they drew the causes on the roots and consequences on the branches, the women drew out their intimate knowledge of the different factors that can result in death during childbirth, as well as the consequences for the children left behind. The next step was to turn their tree of knowledge into a play.

"It's tough!" Edmond confided as the women worked. "Each branch could be an entire play."

"Because of their creativity and their artistic intuition, Fanm Kouraj ends each play at a high point of tension, with the audience on the edge of their seats wanting to know what will happen next," Swiss explains. "Then the critical piece comes when Fanm Kouraj leads a discussion with the audience not only about 'What happens next?' but 'Why does this happen in real life?' and 'What can we do to prevent this from happening?' It is through this discussion that the real process of change takes place, motivating people to challenge assumptions, consider new options, and hear other perspectives."

"We're all teachers," says Millienne Agervil, a third-grade teacher and member of Fanm Kouraj who was also facilitating a small group in the workshop. "When you work with a group of students in the classroom, you don't pose a problem and then give the solution. You have to find a way to make students think. Sometimes you may

have to send the students home to think. That's the same kind of work we do after we perform a play. We lead a discussion and we want that discussion to continue. We don't do a play in order to say, 'Here is what we want you to do.' Instead, we try to create a space where people can reflect. We think that when someone used to do something, like a man beating his wife, and then when they see us portray that, and when they see people in the audience discussing that, then everyone, including the man, will go home and think about their own actions in a different way."

Four years after their first play, the women of Fanm Kouraj have a repertoire of six dramas they perform throughout La Gonâve at schools, churches, and peasant organization meetings. They bring their plays to the mainland, too. They have already recorded their plays on cassette for Haiti's community radio stations. Now they are taking their work one step further. With the help of WRI, the women of Fanm Kouraj went from being teachers to being activists and now back to being teachers again, but this time for their activist peers—women radio reporters, producers, and on-air hosts.

As the workshop moved into its final stages, Edmond coached her radio colleagues on how to turn their tree into a play. Ceyard and her friends were shy. At ease behind the radio microphone, they were used to being in front of a live audience. The women conferred and agreed that one would play the man who beats his wife. Another, the wife who would die giving birth. A third would be a young girl, an older daughter, whom the father will send to be a *restavèk* in his cousin's home. And another the cousin's husband who rapes the *restavèk* girl.

The play was serious business. Like Edmond and the other members of Fanm Kouraj, these radio activists were mothers, teachers, and farmers. In their communi-

ties they experience all the unconscionable hardships of Haitian women—poor or no health care, limited education, and for many women, physical abuse, rape, abandonment, and poverty. But like the women of Fanm Kouraj, the radio activists were also women committed to working to change their communities and their country for the better. And they also believe communication and dialogue are part of the answer. That belief led dozens of grassroots organizations, peasant groups, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to found over two dozen community radio stations over the past ten years.

Haiti may be home to Latin America's oldest republic but it is also home to a legacy of violence. Perhaps that is why its people so cherish freedom of speech, and why, when Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier was driven into exile in 1986, ending a twenty-seven-year dictatorship, one of the first clarion cries of the elated population was "*Baboukèt la tonbe!*" which means "The muzzle has fallen!" The radio waves were full of denunciations, celebrations, and—more and more—Creole, the only language all Haitians speak. French, the language of the elite, had finally moved over.

In 1995, Tèt Kole Ti Peyizan Ayisyen (Heads Together Small Haitian Peasants), a national peasant movement, set up three radio stations. Ceyard, a young Tèt Kole member who spent most of the coup in hiding, signed up to help out at the one near her home in the high plains of the northwest. The radio, which ran on a sometimes-broken generator, solar panels, and a couple of car batteries, was called Radio Tènite, after a wild grass.

Why name a radio station after grass?

"Because Tènite grass can resist everything," Ceyard explained after her group had finished rehearsing its play. "Cut it, burn it, uproot it, it always comes back. Just like us, we'll keep fighting."



*The strength of Fanm Kouraj's plays lies in their ability to spark discussion of social problems, such as children living in poverty, drawing together audience and characters. Opposite: A group ponders the value of role playing to spark discussion. Left: Poverty's many faces include this young mother who collects and sells firewood and charcoal to support her five children.*



“Our radio programs help people understand their reality, help them understand what is going on, why things are the way they are,” she continued. “When people start to see their reality, they can start to change it.”

But it didn't take long for the few women at the other radio stations to realize that despite the rhetoric about progress and social change, they were second-class citizens at the stations. And if they couldn't change that, they couldn't effect change elsewhere. Just as Fann Kouraj got together to help other young women, the women in community radio got together and founded the Haitian Women's Community Radio Network (REFRAKA) to speak up for themselves and better address women's issues.

But REFRAKA and the institutions that support it soon saw that putting more women on the radio was not enough to reach women in the community. As the big city radio stations got stronger transmitters, beaming programming into the small towns and countryside where community radio once reigned, REFRAKA wanted to find a way to tap both its own vitality and community radio's reach. They realized that they needed a dynamic way to portray women's realities in their programming.

So Fann Kouraj and REFRAKA teamed up in July 2001. Since then, REFRAKA has broadcast Fann Kouraj's plays over their network of stations, and Fann Kouraj has led two popular theater workshops like this one for REFRAKA members, who have now collectively created four plays of their own.

On the last evening of the workshop, an audience of over fifty journalists and people from women's groups, peasant associations,



“Our radio programs help people understand their reality . . . When people start to see their reality, they can start to change it”

and NGOs in Haiti came to see the new plays. In “Running from the Rain, I Fall in the River,” the story opens with a man—a REFRAKA member dressed in man's clothing—storming about the house, tormenting and beating his pregnant wife. After he refused to allow her to seek help with the delivery, she died during childbirth. Unable to care for both the infant and his older daughter, the man sent the older daughter to live as a *restavèk* with a distant cousin and his wife. It wasn't long before the cousin—played by another REFRAKA member—raped the girl. The play ends with the cousin's wife abusing the girl and throwing her out of the house. The young girl ends up living in the street, where many *restavèk* children are forced to resort to prostitution.

The discussion after the play was animated, with audience members blaming the police for not protecting women, the state for failing to provide health care, the cousin for failing to protect the child in his house, and the girl's father for beating his wife and abandoning his child.

“That girl's father didn't only kill his wife,” one man said. “He killed his child, too.”

After the discussion ended, audience members lingered, talking with one another, with WRI's representatives, and with the women activists in Fann Kouraj and REFRAKA. At the end of the evening, the

members of Fann Kouraj and REFRAKA congratulated each other and discussed how they could encourage radio audiences to hold similar discussions after hearing broadcasts.

A year and one change of government later, things aren't much better for Haitian women. In fact, the violence of the latest upheaval and the devastations of flooding that left over a thousand dead in central Haiti and a drought in the north starving tens of thousands more were only a few of the more recent tribulations they have faced.

Yet Fann Kouraj remains together, courageous, performing their plays on La Gonève, getting ready to continue their stewardship role with a group of younger teens on the island and working on a plan to collaborate with a peasant association to amplify women's voices through their plays.

“I know Haitians are good at talking,” said Edmond at the workshop's end, “but I think our plays make people do more than talk. Our plays make people think.” ■