

Remembering Magalie Marcelin

*A leader of Haiti's movement for women's rights,
who was killed during the earthquake*
by Beverly Bell



Magalie Marcelin

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"A loss for the whole nation." That is how one of Magalie Marcelin's friends described the death of this women's rights leader in Haiti's earthquake January 12.

Magalie was at the forefront of the birth of the contemporary women's movement in Haiti in the 1980s ("contemporary" because recorded actions for gender equity go back as far as 1820). She started Kay Fanm, or Women's House, Haiti's first shelter for battered women, which was also a hub of feminist and anti-violent activities. She was instrumental in passing laws to recognize women's equal rights in marriage, and to criminalize rape and domestic violence.

Magalie's political activism started as a teenager during the rule of Jean-Claude Duvalier. She was arrested along with others in a group that used grassroots theater to raise political consciousness. The government then expelled her, and she settled in Canada and studied law. After the dictator fell in 1986, she returned to Haiti and began advocating for women and for political rights. During the 1991-94 military coup, Magalie lived in hiding. Even then she never stopped organizing, hosting secret Kay Fanm meetings at her underground residence.

Though she was a lawyer, Magalie didn't argue cases herself, but helped women in trouble find lawyers and create defenses. She managed to get a fair trial for a

woman who, after having been beaten for many years, killed her husband. On another occasion, according to the feminist sociologist Carolle Charles, Magalie organized women to pack the courtroom during the trial of a man who battered his wife, to offset the man's political influence. The woman won.

Magalie lived at Kay Fanm, sleeping on a thin foam mat on the floor. That way she was available 24 hours for the needs of the domestic violence survivors taking shelter there, though she sometimes stepped away for a night when she was too worn down. She was not paid for any of this work. It was all volunteer; she supported herself through doing sociological investigations in the countryside as a consultant for an international NGO.

Magalie was also an actress and free spirit. When she was very young, she appeared in the full-length film *Anita*, about a *rèstavek*, a child slave. She always hoped to get back into theater, but never found the time; there were too many women to defend and support. Her email moniker was *tilangdeng*, or "mischief." Part of her philosophy was that, to do this work decade in and decade out, she had to keep her spirit nourished. She spoke of how her hometown of Jacmel provided that nourishment for her.

Magalie wouldn't play political games and told it like it was. She alienated some people as a result, but she didn't care. She particularly angered people with a statement she made on the radio: "A penis is not a weapon." In Haiti, synonyms for penis are 'machete' and 'baton', and having sex is sometimes called 'to crush' or 'to cut'. One extended study in Cite Soleil found that, for 100 percent of surveyed women, their first sexual experience was rape. This was the context in which Magalie chose not to worry about others' opinions.

Many of her gestures were quiet and unseen. She continually helped people find jobs, money, or whatever they needed to survive and be safe. She also helped women who wanted to start grassroots women's groups. This is where she died, in a meeting with a woman in Port-au-Prince who wanted to launch a women's organization. She was in the woman's home when it collapsed during the earthquake. Three others who were inside were rescued, but Magalie was not.

Jacques Bartoli, a close friend of Magalie, tells the rest of the story. "The morning after the earthquake, Delano Morel, another of Magalie's good friends, found out where she was. I got together a sledgehammer, other hammers, and heavy picks they use for construction, and we headed down. The street was blocked so we walked and walked until we reached the house. Magalie's daughter Maïle and her husband Andy met us there. We got together a couple of volunteers and some other people I paid. We extracted her five hours later but she was already dead.

“Two other women that Magalie had just helped the day before, women who were having trouble with their mates, joined us to go to the morgue. But the morgue had collapsed. There were people trapped there, too. So Magalie’s daughter said, ‘Let’s take things into our own hands.’ We took her body back to Kay Fanm and we laid it out there with ice. We knew she wanted to be buried in her land in Jacmel, on the other side of the river, but the road was broken. I said, ‘Let’s exhume her body in a year and take her to her land.’ So Magalie’s daughter found a place in Port-au-Prince and buried her the next day.”

Three other founders and shapers of Haiti’s women's movement died in the earthquake: Anne-Marie Coriolan, Mireille Neptune Anglade, and Myriam Merlet. So, too, did an untold number of women who worked every day without professional title, office, or resources to make Haiti a more just and equitable place. They were all part of a thriving tradition of women’s activism to bring about social, economic, and gender justice. Their work does not appear in the media depiction of Haiti, in which the reports of sporadic street violence have been blown up until Haiti looks like a nation of barbarians. (Curiously, this reporting has largely left out one form of violence which is prevalent today: rapes against women and girls who, since the earthquake, have been forced to sleep in the streets.)

No one will ever know how many women activists died in the earthquake. Many of the bodies were quickly dropped from bulldozer scoops into shallow mass graves, or remain in the buildings that are crushed like sandwiches throughout Port-au-Prince and its environs. Nor will anyone ever know how many of them died needlessly, not from the quake itself but from not receiving the medical care, food, and water that the U.S. government repeatedly turned away from the tarmac so that its soldiers and weapons could land instead. For those women who died in this way, it was the final injustice in a lifetime of injustices.

The battle against more lifetimes of injustice will require everyone. It will require Magalie, too. Good thing she’s on the case, present and accounted for, inside all who care about rights and justice.

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