

A year after Haiti's capital was destroyed by an earthquake, violence and rape haunt the lives of vulnerable women and children living in makeshift settlements. Journalist **Lisa Armstrong** reports on how a handful have mobilized to fight for protection and justice for their sisters

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
ANDRE LAMBERTSON

FIGHTING BACK

The moon was out, white and full the night the men came. It was one in the morning, still and quiet except for the chirping of the crickets.

Andrela had never felt safe in this large, desolate field she and ten other families now called home. They set up tents only a month after the earthquake cracked and crumbled their homes. Survival hadn't been easy for the 35-year-old single mother, who slept at the entrance to her tent to protect the eight children—five her own, plus a niece and two nephews who lost their mother to AIDS just days before the earthquake.

It was the sound of someone tripping over a rope that awoke Andrela. Before she knew what was happening, a man had cut a hole in the back of the tent. Soon seven of them were inside, their faces hidden under dark ski masks. "They put a gun by my ear," remembers Andrela (whose last name, like those of the other victims, we are withholding). "I started to scream and they told me if I made any noise, they would kill me. The children sat straight up and the men hit them and made them lie down. They were scared and trembling on the ground."

One by one, the men raped her. Afterward they made her lie on her stomach and forced her face away from the children. What came next was even more horrifying: The men raped her daughters, ages 12 and 14, too. Andrela could do nothing but pray. "I was thinking that God should just kill me because there are things a person should never have to experience," she says now. "First there was the earthquake, and I thought we were all going to die. And then this. It was just too much for me to bear."

It is a story told all too often in postquake Haiti, where a year ago this month, Port-au-Prince, Jacmel and almost every town in between were nearly destroyed. Afterward almost 1.5 million newly homeless were crammed into hurriedly constructed encampments consisting of flimsy tarps and tents and with little consideration for security. Since then, rapes have increased threefold, according to one estimate, in part because of the cramped, unsafe conditions. Women and men share the same open bathrooms without doors. While officers with MINUSTAH, the United Nations peacekeeping agency, patrol some of the larger camps, they generally leave at night. Haitians in smaller settlements like the one where Andrela lives are even more at risk.

Faced with these dire circumstances and what they say is an indifferent police force, women instead draw strength from one another. They've banded together, both formally and informally, to protect one another, prosecute the predators, lend a comforting shoulder. The morning after Andrela was raped, a female neighbor saw the hole in her tent, understood what happened, and quietly gave Andrela a needle and thread to quickly stitch it so she would not suffer the shame of others knowing. Andrela then turned to Marie Lucie Mentor.

"She Is All My Family"

Mentor, 44, is founder of KALMI (translated, the creole acronym stands for Haitian Committee for a Better Life), and one of numerous Haitian women doing what they can for sisters



who are suffering the most. Ten years ago she started KALMI, a Jacmel-based grassroots organization for people living with HIV. Since then Mentor has provided financial, medical and other assistance to more than 2,000 people infected with the disease, including 12 orphaned girls who completely rely on her care. Andrela, who is HIV-positive, first met Mentor two years ago when she went to a food distribution organized by KALMI. It was Mentor who found medication for Andrela's 12-year-old, who was infected with a sexually transmitted disease during her rape. "I was too ashamed to even tell anyone my daughters had been raped. It was Marie Lucie who realized, who comforted me, who listened to me and gave me the strength to care for my children," says Andrela. "I don't know how I would manage without Marie Lucie. Sometimes when I'm hungry I go to her house. She gives me whatever she has to give."

It's nearly unbelievable that this type of generosity comes so easily from a woman who has so little. And yet, it's a sentiment echoed by all who have benefited from Mentor's care. "Marie Lucie is my mother, my father, she is all my family," says 18-year-old Cathiana, who has been with Mentor since she was 12. "If I need medicine, if I need food, she finds everything for me."

Mentor has seen the horrifying effects of rape on several of the girls under her care. And so she works with the Haitian government through the Ministry of Women's Condition and Women's Rights (MCFDF) and women's groups like *Fanm Deside* (Women Decide), which provides lawyers for victims and puts pressure on law enforcement and courts to prosecute rapists. "Most of the time, we are obliged to behave like the

police to support female victims of violence," says Mimose Andre, director of the southeast office of MCFDF. "But the truth is, anything that relates to women is neglected."

When a woman is raped, one of the MCFDF field agents will accompany her to the hospital and to the police, and try to ensure that the proper legal steps are taken. However, Andre says that the courts will often negotiate a financial agreement between the rapist and the victim's family, rather than prosecute the case. Until 2005 rape was considered a crime of passion in Haiti, and rapists were not imprisoned, but instead they simply offered monetary compensation or marriage as restitution.

Working together, sometimes the women's efforts pay off. Mentor and Andre were able to persuade police to keep an 18-year-old man in jail after he attempted to rape an 8-year-old. The girl's mother, Roselene, caught him lying on top of her daughter. She shouted, he fled, but neighbors held him down until the police could arrest him. Roselene then went to Andre to report the assault.

Though the man's mother has begged Roselene to drop the charges, Andre insisted he stay in jail, particularly because he previously sexually assaulted a 1-year-old girl.

But Roselene's daughter's case is rare. Though women scream and fight back as they are raped, neighbors, fearing for their own safety, rarely intervene. Mentor adds that often, when rapists are arrested, "They walk in the front of the police station and right out the back." It's one of the reasons she didn't push her foster daughters to report their attacks. "When you go to the police, they will say they don't have a car or that it >



Andrela prepares a modest meal of squash and cherries.

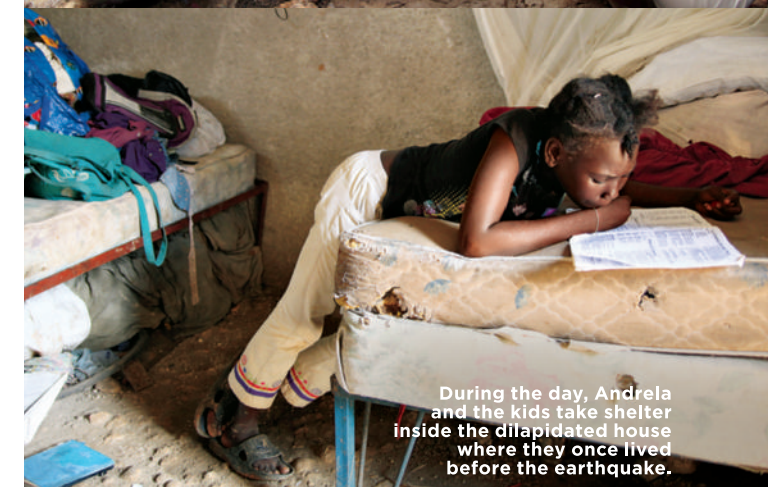
“It was Marie Lucie who realized, who comforted me, who listened to me and gave me the strength to care for my children.”

—ANDRELA

Because food is scarce, Andrela feeds her children with whatever she can harvest from her small garden nearby.



Outside their tent, Andrela and her daughter Tan Lynda, 12, try to keep a normal routine by washing up after lunch.



During the day, Andrela and the kids take shelter inside the dilapidated house where they once lived before the earthquake.



The family must walk through an overgrown, muddy path to get to their old house.



Several of Mentor's girls say they were raped while living in Camp Pinchinat.

doesn't have gas," she says. "If I knew the girls were going to find justice, I would push harder for them to go to the police. But I know they're not going to find justice."

"It Is Like They're Provoking the Men"

The police, both in Port-au-Prince and Jacmel, say if women can identify their attackers, they will search for the men. If not, they say there is little they can do. They simply do not have the capacity to investigate stranger rape.

But many women tell a different story. When Gisele, 38, went to report that she had been sexually assaulted in a portable toilet at the Champs de Mars camp, she says an officer told her, "Your behind is big, which must have provoked them." Since then she has joined with KOFAVIV, a local women's rights organization, to force the police to open an investigation into her attack.

Patrick Clervoix, principal inspector for the Commissariat of Police of Port-au-Prince, says that while he has heard rumors that women are mistreated when they come to report rapes, it does not happen at his station. He insists that he wants to stop the rapes—and so when women come to the station, they are referred to a female officer who takes their statement, promising that if the woman knows the rapist, they will go after him.

However, Clervoix says that in some cases, the women themselves unwittingly cause the attacks. "We sit down outside the police station and look at Champs de Mars, and sometimes we see women naked, having a shower in front of everybody," says Clervoix. "It is like they're provoking the men."

Experts say that gender-based violence increases after disasters, when people are crowded together and men especially feel

powerless. "Sexual Violence Against Refugees," a report from the U.N. Refugee Agency (UNHCR), states that men who experience the psychological strain of not being able to assume normal cultural and economic roles may become aggressive toward women. These men are angry, frustrated and plagued by the uncertainty of their future. While advocates like Mentor and the members of KOFAVIV have tried their best to protect other women, they need governmental and international support. But Lisa Davis, human rights advocacy director at Madre, a women's human rights organization, says that the Haitian government, the U.N. and nongovernmental organizations are purposely excluding these women's groups. Last October Davis and other lawyers petitioned the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to improve security and lighting in camps and to include women's grassroots organizations in security planning. "When you don't involve grassroots groups, you make huge mistakes," says Davis. "We know, for instance, that women need lighting, but the U.N. passes flashlights out instead. When the batteries die, they're useless. They would know what women really need if they just listened to Haitian women themselves."

Since the attacks on Mentor's foster daughters, she has been able to rent a room for them, and is at ease now that they have shelter for a few months. But it is a precarious sense of comfort. At one time, Mentor's organization was partnered with World Hope International, a Christian relief organization in Virginia, but now she relies solely on private donations. While millions of dollars were funneled into larger international agencies after the earthquake, grassroots groups like KALMI suffered. Mentor does not have enough to properly feed all the girls or pay for their schooling, as 90 percent of the schools in Haiti are private. In fact, she does not have money to pay for these necessities beyond this month.

"Where Is Your Hope?"

Andrela also continues to struggle. She typically feeds her children from their small garden, but there are still days when they have nothing to eat. She, too, doesn't have money to pay school fees. When it rains, the tent, which a friend bought for her, fills with water. The recent cholera outbreak that has killed more than a thousand people and the deadly flooding from Hurricane Tomas have only added to a bleak existence in Haiti.

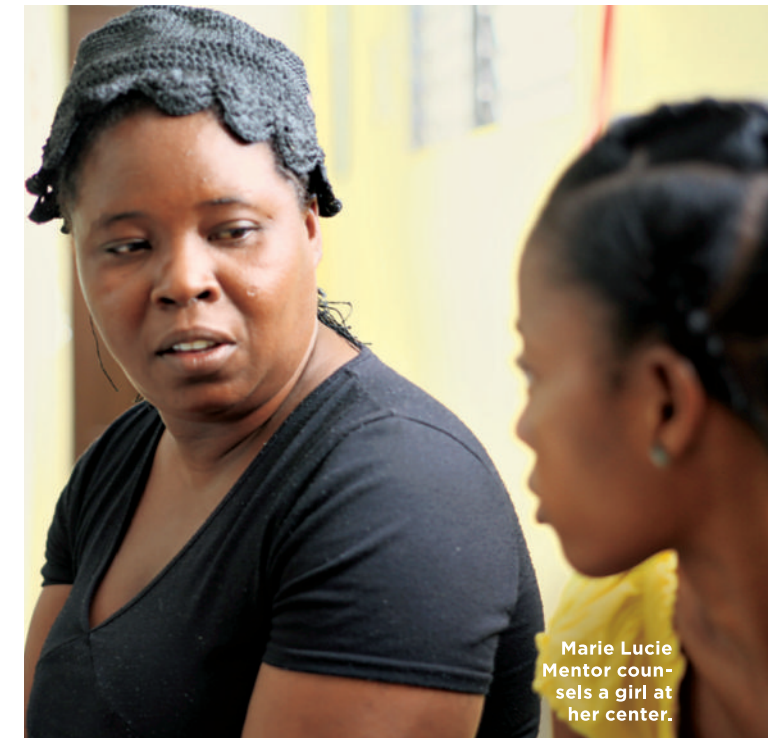
"Considering everything that's been donated to this country, you see in the end, someone had to buy me a tent. I guess I don't exist," Andrela says. "But I'm not angry, because if you're angry with God, where is your hope?"

Despite everything, both Andrela and Mentor still have hope—if they speak to the media about the rapes, if they band together, then the police, the government and the international community will have no choice but to listen to them.

"If it is Marie Lucie alone, that's nothing. But if it is 20 of us, who form a big chain, then we can get justice," says Mentor.

"Women will always help other women, like Marie Lucie; look at all that she has done for me and so many others," adds Andrela. "I am ashamed because of the rapes, yes, but by telling my story, perhaps it will create change." □

Lisa Armstrong is an award-winning journalist. Reporting on this story was supported by The Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.



Marie Lucie Mentor counsels a girl at her center.

How You Can Help

Three ways to make a difference

While millions in proceeds were donated to several NGOs in Haiti after last year's earthquake, very little of that money has trickled down to the people who actually need it, particularly women and children. Here are three ways you can help women like Marie Lucie Mentor who are doing so much with so very little to meet the urgent needs of Haitian women today.

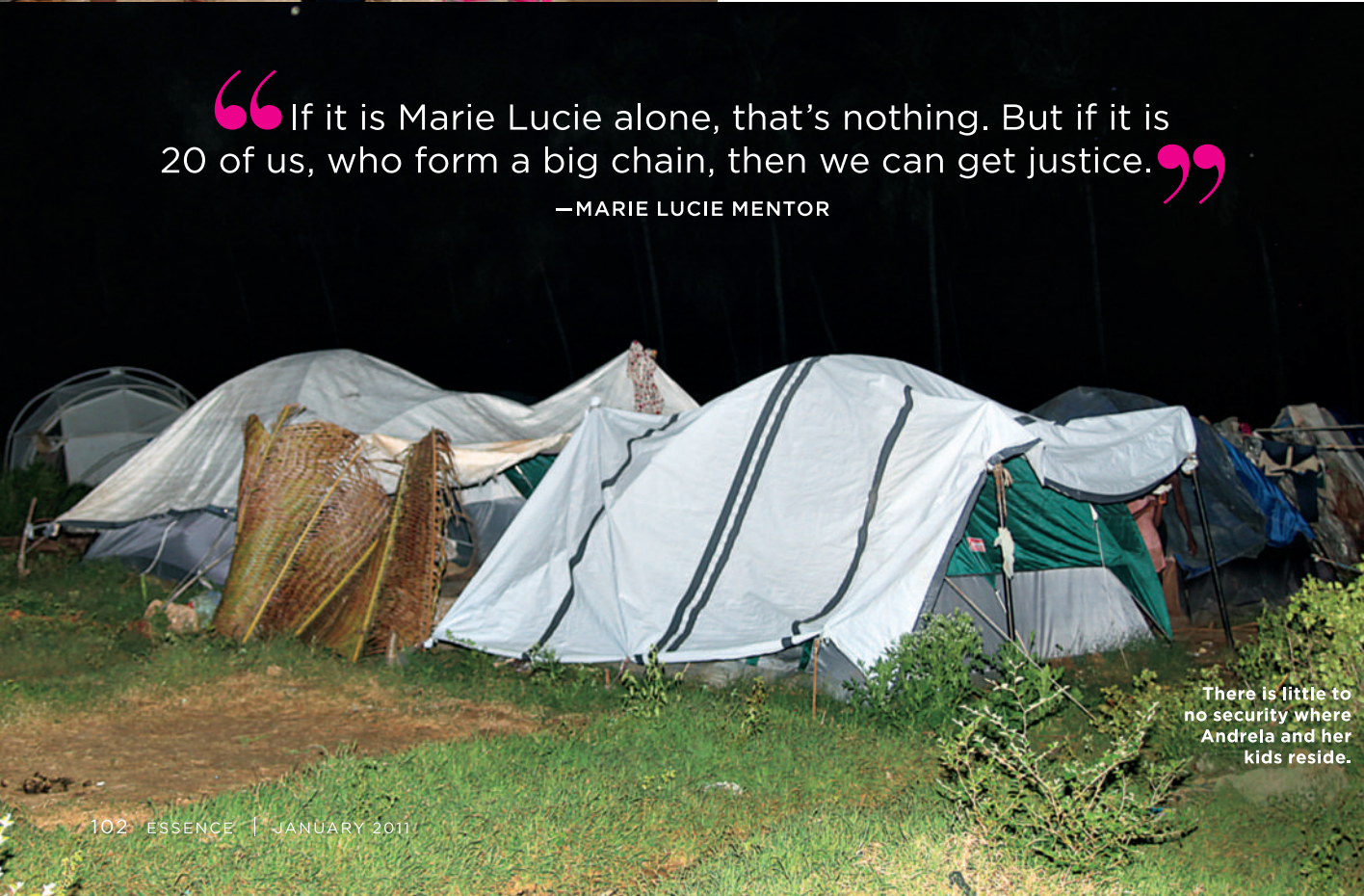
1. FONKOZE USA is an American 501(c)3 organization that offers microloans and educational services to rural Haitian women. Go to the "donate now" button on fonkoze.org and in the "restriction" box type "Marie Lucie Mentor's program, KALMI," to send your contribution.

2. MADRE focuses on saving women in Haiti by providing them with whistles and flashlights through its Helping Hands programs. To donate these and other items, log on to madre.org.

3. PARTNERS IN HEALTH, which offers health care and community partnerships in the developing world, has found a way to provide medical supplies required for cholera, HIV/AIDS and other illnesses to those in need on a consistent basis. Visit pih.org for more information. —Wendy L. Wilson

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—MARIE LUCIE MENTOR



There is little to no security where Andrela and her kids reside.