

# Some optimistic news from Haiti

*Internship report by Henrietta Champion de Crespigny*

At a very sweet farewell party the office threw on my last week in Haiti, it was insisted I make a speech after the customary thank yous from every employee in the office. I stood there and tried my very best but I find impromptu thank you speeches difficult even in English, let alone French. Even now I can't find words that could aptly express how grateful I am to all of Plan for my remarkable experience or what a privilege it was to have been welcomed into the Plan family as we called it.

Especially in the challenging first few weeks, my colleagues included me, helped explain my tasks and were constant points of reference and sources of support. I was working with the team in charge of developing Plan Haiti's gender equality training program for the next two years.

This involved an introductory session of training on Plan's Global Gender Equality Policy, with a total of 151 participants from the four offices in the country. This was also part of the Gender Equality Self-Analysis I conducted over my three months in-country.

I was also in charge of writing a report discussing the extent to which Plan's Global Gender Equality Principles were integrated into their office culture as well as the planning and execution of their programs in the field. My report was based on seminar training results and a set of interviews with over 65 employees from diverse sectors of Plan Haiti.

The results revealed the presence of gender champions amongst managerial staff who have adopted their own measures of gender mainstreaming and promotion. This has often seen the implementation of proactive strategies such as: setting quotas for participation that reflect the endemic gender divide amongst school children, increasing the diversity of life-skills training sessions and ensuring that 60% of micro-financing loans are given to women.

Every employee interviewed identified cultural norms as the number one obstacle to gender equality in Haiti. What we were promoting in some instances conflicted with deep-rooted beliefs that were both religious and cultural. A pertinent example occurred during a training session when a participant objected, stating that what I was preaching was not in the Bible. This was an insight into the complexity of the issue at hand. As a young, privileged white woman who has been taught to question her own cultural norms, without consequence, it was no easy task to answer him. In order for these principles of equality to be realised, certain "norms" will require adaptation...and, of course, immediate adoption of these gender rights may in some circumstances have ramifications, particularly for women.

Whilst responses like this were clearly alarming and frustrating, they were becoming less common, I was told. Interviewees identified that things were certainly improving, albeit slowly. Projects like



*Henrietta attends a conference after being "in-country" for three months.*

micro-financing for women target the key issue: "that women do not have the means to combat these stereotypes because they don't have economic autonomy in their homes," explained a Plan financial officer.

I was lucky to make some strong friendships with other young expats working in the field and often found myself privy to the same conversation: the sector is changing, there's a new participatory approach to development and that's the future.

New projects that older actors in the sector were undertaking was evidence of this. For Plan, 75 years in the making, their implementation of the AK1000 nutrition project was testimony to this new age development approach. It consisted of producing a healthy food product in factories in Haiti from local wheat, beans, rice and corn crops, manufactured by women in a production unit who would then sell the product to local markets at an affordable price.

Programs like this have been supported by a new generation of highly motivated graduates moving into the sector. As a whole this is seeing new strides being made in terms of sustainable macro-economic growth and private enterprise in developing countries. This kind of self-supporting economic development is beginning to empower women and men in Haiti, and it is this new movement that gives me hope for Haiti.

I would also like to thank the Castan Centre and Monash Law for this enriching experience. Interning in Haiti gave me an invaluable insight into the world of the International Non-Governmental Development Organisation sector. It has affirmed my belief in the importance and true potential to realise the human rights of all people.