

Women's Health and Women's Rights

MFP Expands Haitian Women's Health Program Across Northern Artibonite Region

"By 6 am, the back of the ambulance is packed with medical supplies and instruments, and we head north along the old Port-au-Pais road. It has not rained recently, so we easily cross the Rivierre Blanche. A month from now, in the rainy season, it will be a difficult crossing, and mudslides along the mountainside will make this journey hazardous. The sun is rising and I am struck with how beautiful the Haitian countryside is this time of day. When we reach the dispensary at Pendu, Madame Marcelle, the community health worker, and twenty patients are already waiting for us." —Dr. Mike Viola

Cervical cancer has decreased dramatically over the past 3 decades in the United States. However, the disease is a major cause of death in the developing world. Haiti, which is at the bottom of the U.N. Development Index, has one of the highest cervical cancer rates in the world. The prevention of



MFP nurse Orna Dieuaueme talks to women in the village of Decostierre about cancer prevention and living a healthy life style.



Women waiting to be seen at the MFP Women's Health Clinic at Alma Mater Hospital in Gros Morne

cervical cancer is of critical importance in Haiti since facilities for the treatment of advanced cervical cancer, the stage most cervical cancers are detected in Haiti, are limited in Port-au-Prince and non-existent for rural Haitians.

Prevention of cancer in Haitian women is important, also, because of the unique and central position women occupy in their society. They are referred to as the *poto mitan*, or central pillars. They are the caregivers for children, the elderly, and the sick, in homes where fathers are frequently absent. Women are often the "bread winners", and their work of selling in the market place goes on in spite of earthquakes, hurricanes, political unrest, or a failing economy. When a Haitian woman falls sick or dies, her loss has a devastating effect on her household, and on the whole community.

3,000 Women Screened

On International Women's Day 2009, MFP kicked off its Women's Health Initiative, the centerpiece of which is cervical cancer preven-

tion and treatment. With a dedicated group of Haitian and U.S. health workers, our screening program at the 50 bed Alma Mater Hospital in Gros Morne has been a model for cancer prevention for all of Haiti. We have screened more than 3,000 women, and detected and treated a large number of pre-cancerous and malignant lesions of the cervix. The program has been expanded to detect and treat other diseases of women, such as breast cancer and sexually transmitted infections. In the process, we have brought a large number of women, and their families, into the health care system and promoted a healthy life style.



Mountain roads are hazardous, as evidenced by the MFP mobile health unit stuck on a mountain top near the dispensary at Pendu.

Screening Program Brought to Rural Dispensaries

Many women in the northern Artibonite region are unable to travel to our Women's Health Clinic in Gros Morne. They live in hamlets and mountain towns in remote areas with poor roads, often wiped out by overflowing rivers. We have taken advantage of the small rural dispensaries and the community health workers, *agent santé*, who work in these areas, to expand the Women's Health Initiative. We bring health workers, as well as medical supplies, screening instruments and a gas driven electric generator to the dispensaries for periodic

screening sessions. Our screening dispensaries now dot the map in the northern Artibonite (in Gros Morne, Jolivert, Verneil, Pendu, Corail, Moilin, and Decostierre) (see map).

After examining and treating more than three thousand women, we have learned a great deal about our patients. No matter if they are illiterate and have had little schooling, they will take advantage of any services that are offered to them that will preserve their health. They understand the message, you can prevent this disease, and early cervical cancer detection can mean cure.



MFP Cervical cancer screening sites in northern Artibonite Department: Hospital at Gros Morne, and dispensaries (in red).

Achievements of Women's Health Initiative

- ✓ 3,000 women screened for cervical cancer.
- ✓ 51 new cases of AIDS detected.
- ✓ 276 new cases of hypertension detected.
- ✓ 261 cases of pre-cancer of cervix detected and treated with cryosurgery.
- ✓ 19 cases of invasive cancer treated with surgery.

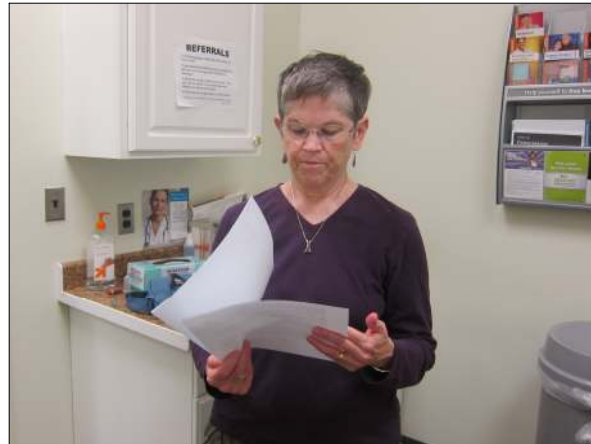
MFP Focuses on African Women Torture Victims

MFP Report on Abuse of Women In African Prisons

E.S. is a 29 year old human rights worker from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). In 2010, Government soldiers burst into her home, beat her with a baton, and took her to the Army prison in Kinshasha. While in prison, she was beaten on the soles of her feet, subject to mock execution, bound with rope and raped. After her release, she fled to the United States to seek asylum. Her medical examination at the MFP Health Center for Torture Victims revealed multiple scars consistent with blows from a baton, including horizontal linear scars on the soles of her feet. She was severely depressed, and had incapacitating symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD). She was given anti-depressant medication and is now receiving psychological counseling.

Unfortunately, this story of politically-motivated torture of an African woman in prison, is all too common. This month, MFP will release a report on the torture history, and resultant medical and psychological problems of 70 women from Ethiopia, Cameroon, Eritrea, the DRC and Togo. While these countries differ in their political and economic stability, they share the practice of State-sanctioned extrajudicial torture.

Our patients in the study were young (average age 34), more educated, and had a higher level of employment than women in their countries. They were arrested multiple times for political (90%), ethnic, or religious reasons. They described inhumane prison conditions, and multiple interrogations and torture methods, including being beaten with batons, burned, or whipped to the point of unconsciousness. A high percentage of women were raped or sexual assaulted (48%). The psychological effects of the multiple traumas were evident, with two-thirds of



Pat Clauson, RN, NP examines data included in MFP report on torture of African women.

patients suffering from PTSD, and one third with moderate to severe depression. Physical complaints related to their torture experience were common and in some cases incapacitating. The U.S. Government granted asylum to all women in the study based on credible evidence of their having been tortured.

Our patients' torture experiences should be viewed in the context of societies in which women are degraded and their rights continually violated. For example, 44% of our patients were subjected to female genital mutilation as children, and 16% were victims of human trafficking (to Middle East countries).

The countries described in the report have ratified the *UN Conventions Against Torture*, and *On the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women*. These nations receive enormous amounts of development aid from Western countries. Donor nations should leverage these funds to encourage recipients to uphold and comply with the principles of the U.N. Conventions with respect to the rights of women. The MFP report will be distributed to relevant Governmental Agencies, non-Governmental organizations, and presented to the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Torture.

Saving Haitian Girls Through Education

Children's Scholarship Fund For Girls Keeps Haitian Girls in School

The statistics concerning the education and health of Haitian women are troubling. It is well known that the level a girl reaches in school is a strong predictor of the age at which she will marry, how many children she will have, her future health, as well as the health of her children. If girls are encouraged to stay in school, their lives will improve. But, less than 20% of Haitian girls finish primary school (6th grade), and just a handful go on to finish secondary school. Half of the women in Haiti are illiterate.



Girls at the Foni Bo School in Gros Morne. The CSFG supports 100 students attending the school.

The Children's Scholarship Fund for Girls (CSFG), established in 1991, has long supported the education and nurturing of Latina girls who immigrated to the U.S. from conflict areas in Central and South America. While this work continues, since the earthquake in Haiti in 2010 we have focused on the education of children in rural Haiti. We formed a liaison with the Foni Bo Primary School in Gros Morne and financially support the education of a growing number of children for their complete primary school education. The school provides a full lunch for children, often their most nutritious meal of the day. The goal of this educa-

tion project is to prepare children, especially girls, to continue on to middle and high school.

The Scholarship Fund is an independent fund for which MFP is the fiscal agent. If you would like more information about the Children's Scholarship Fund for Girls, please contact the fund director, Kathleen Crane, at fundfor-girls2@gmail.com.



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