

PAI's Study Tour to Mexico

2008

PAI's Study Tour to Mexico went "behind the scenes" to gain an exclusive look at the reproductive health and family planning services available to women and their families in Mexico. The delegation of PAI staff and participants, led by President Amy Coen, also explored the social and political barriers that exist in accessing these services – such as violence against women, a conservative government that seeks to impose a "traditional" model of the family, and opposition by the Catholic Church – as well as the policy and advocacy work PAI and its partners in Mexico undertake in order to overcome such barriers. Since Mexico was



"graduated" by USAID almost 10 years ago, this trip explored the family planning successes that were achieved during the time span of USAID population and family planning assistance, along with areas where progress and consequently funding is still needed (for example, unmet need for family planning among sexually active teenage girls remains high and has increased in the past ten years from 27 percent in 1997 to 36 percent in 2006.) Most insightful were the stories we heard from Mexican youth and women expressing their reproductive health needs.



Equidad de Género, a committed, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) organization and PAI's partner and

subgrantee, connected us with an impressive cadre of other SRHR organizations in Mexico. **The Alliance**, a group comprised of five SRHR organizations, told us their story of how they successfully worked in concert with each other, the media, the Catholic Church, and policymakers to help bring about the decriminalization of abortion up to 12 weeks in Mexico City – an unprecedented reform in Latin America, and one that has dramatically decreased the number of unsafe, life-threatening abortions.

Also included on the tour was a visit to Comprehensive Health for Women (**SIPAM**), another PAI subgrantee, whose work with women living with or affected by HIV has improved many women's lives. One woman told us that she wasn't aware of her HIV status

until her husband died and she learned that she needed to be tested; after she received a HIV positive diagnosis she lived in fear of transmitting the virus to her grandchildren by touching them. It wasn't until she found SIPAM where she received education that dispelled myths about the virus that she was able to reclaim her life; she now speaks to other women living with HIV, however, due to a lack of education throughout Mexico and discrimination, she will not tell family members, friends, or neighbors that she is HIV positive. SIPAM is the haven where she can confide in other women living with or affected by HIV.

We also visited a Mexican Foundation for Family Planning (**Mexfam**) clinic and later a high school where our group had the opportunity to see a Mexfam health promoter in action, teaching a sex education class to a group of attentive high school students.

This type of education is extremely important in a country where unmet need for family planning is highest among youth. Mexfam, an affiliate of the International Planned Parenthood Foundation and former recipient of USAID is a model for the delivery of reproductive health care; however, Mexfam's reach in Mexico is limited due to a lack of funding. We also noted that even if the United States still provided family planning assistance to Mexico, the destructive Global Gag Rule would prohibit any of that funding from going to Mexfam.



Overall the trip was a valuable, one-of-a-kind experience for all. One participant said that the trip "amplified her vision of reproductive health." Another participant said that the trip made him think deeper about women issues and that while he "had always been sympathetic towards women's issues....when one actually experiences the hardships and other difficulties faced by women, as relayed by the 'actors' themselves, it really does provide one with a much better feel for the overall challenges of women. This Mexican trip did that for me."

PAI has two study tours planned for 2009. To reserve your spot, or to find out more information, please contact Christine Bixiones, cbixiones@popact.org.