

[HOME](#)
[ABOUT](#)
[NEWS](#)
[BLOGS & PODCASTS](#)
[RESOURCES](#)
[MEDIA](#)

African-Canadian Collaboration Bears Fruit

July 16, 2015

[Elaine Smith](#)

Categories

[All News](#), [Breaking Research](#), [Global Lens](#), [Main Story](#)

Tags

Women are still at a disadvantage, whether they are academics or farmers, as participants in a recent workshop at the University of Toronto discovered.

A week of scientific training at U of T brought together plant pathologists and other researchers from Africa, Europe, the Middle East and Canada to work on techniques for identifying and preventing a blight that has devastated coconut crops in the Ivory Coast. More than 7,000 hectares have been destroyed by Lethal Yellowing Disease and another 7,000 are threatened, including the area that is home to the International Coconut Gene Bank, where 125 varieties of coconuts are maintained for research and dissemination.

“We have been working on how to prevent the spread of the disease,” said [Keiko Yoshioka](#) of U of T’s Department of [Cell & Systems Biology](#), one of the organizers, along with U of T anthropologist [Shiho Satsuka](#), and [Yaima Arocha Rosete](#), a private-sector colleague.

The ongoing project, funded by Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada and the International Development Research Centre, has previously provided training in disease detection for researchers from the Ivory Coast’s National Centre for Agronomy Research and [University of Nangui](#)



Maydianne Andrade, Professor & Canadian Research Chair, Department of Biological Sciences, UTSC; Dr. Yaima Arocha Rosete, Sporometrics; Marc Epprecht, Professor & Head of Department, Global Development Studies, Queen’s University; Gertrude Mianda, Associate Professor & Chair, School of Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies, York

Abrogoua. The recent session offered more advanced training focusing on techniques available using new equipment funded by the grant.

“This grant has provided us a chance to acquire equipment and build research capacity for individuals and the whole country,” said Hortense T. Atta Diallo, a scientist from the Ivory Coast’s Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research.

Using the new equipment and techniques, scientists will be able to test plants in the field, as well as in the lab, allowing them to see if Lethal Yellowing Disease is affecting the crop in remote areas of the country. At present, scientists aren’t sure how the disease is transmitted, but early detection will allow for better preventive measures.

A gender workshop on the last day of the week-long visit offered participants an opportunity to share experiences on another front. Gender equity is an important issue for both coconut farmers in the Ivory Coast and for women working in scientific research. Many of the Ivory Coast farmers are women, so failed crops can have devastating consequences for them; one of the goals of the initiative is to empower women and improve the livelihood of these farmers.

At the workshop, researchers from the Ivory Coast, Canada, Italy, Saudi Arabia and Mozambique spoke about the challenges faced by women working in science in their own countries.

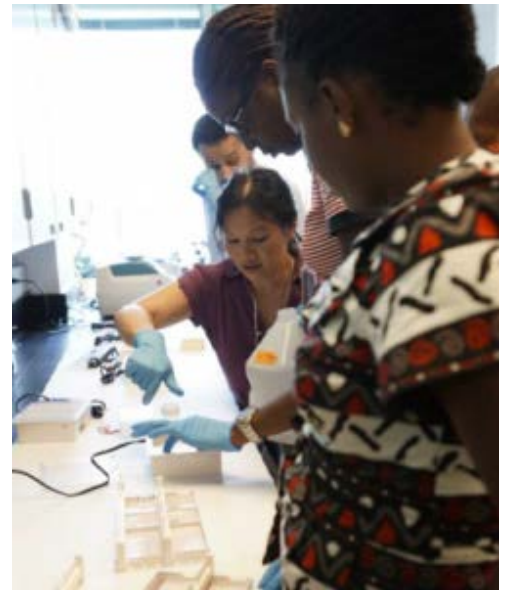
“We wanted to use this opportunity to share experiences and learn,” said Yoshioka.

Maydianne Andrade, Canada Research Chair in Integrative Behavioural Ecology at U of T Scarborough, and one of the speakers at the workshop, said, “I see commonalities between the issues faced by women here in Canada and in the Ivory Coast. They simply face challenges on a different scale.”

Her keynote address, *Gender Bias in Science*, focused on the challenges facing women in academia, based on her own experiences and an extensive review of the relevant literature.



Dr. Wolfgang Moeder of Cell & Systems Biology demonstrates RNA extraction from coconuts.



Dr. Pauline Wang of the Centre for the Analysis of Genome Evolution and Function (centre) lead one of the workshops.

The literature doesn’t provide as much encouragement as the assembled audience might have wished. For example, a 2009 study done in Canada by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council indicated that the higher up the academic ladder one looked, the smaller the percentage of female academics. Only 15 per cent of full professors were women; the only rank at which there is parity is in lectureships, which are non-tenure track positions.

Bias is a major factor in preventing women from achieving more, said Andrade, noting that in North America, bias is often implicit or unconscious.

“People are unaware of it and may deny it, but it is expressed indirectly,” she

said. “There is a type of mental shorthand that shapes our expectations and evaluations.”

However, there is progress, slow though it may be. For example, when the Canada Research Chairs program was established in 2003 to retain stellar researchers, only 17 per cent of the chairs were awarded to women. Eleven years later, 27 per cent of the chairs are held by women.

Andrade encouraged the academic women in the audience to find strong mentors and to build support networks, practical strategies that coconut farmers can also use to combat discrimination.

[Share on Facebook](#)

[Share on Twitter](#)

[Contact Us](#) | © 2017 University of Toronto, Faculty of Arts & Science | All rights reserved

