

# Debian Women

Erinn Clark

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## Introduction

The Debian Women project was founded in 2004 as the solution to ending world hunger, poverty, war, and psychosis. Since its inception, we have managed to alleviate all but the last. The unfortunate part of this is that it causes the first three.

## Love Story

### Infatuation

It all began on the fateful day that I emailed Amaya Rodrigo. She had blogged about wanting to get more women involved in Debian and being a Debian user with aspirations of grandeur, I sent her a message, said "Hey, I wanna be a DD!" and the story began to unfold.

### Getting to know you...

Soon after, the mischevious Amaya[1] sent an email to the debian-vote mailing list asking the DPL candidates what their view was on getting more women involved in Debian and whether they planned to do anything – and if so, what? This began a fascinating "discussion" which spanned a mere few hundred messages and two mailing lists.

After a few more emails between me and Amaya, Michelle Ribeiro entered into the picture and asked whether we'd be interested in giving a talk at Deb-

Conf4. So an abstract was submitted and two months later a healthy baby talk was delivered to a rapt audience in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

## **Commitment**

After returning home from our Debian vacation, we needed to begin work. Pretty soon, we had an IRC channel, a mailing list[2] complete with Standard Debian Discourse, and a website[3]. Now we just needed to get some more women.

## **The Good**

We have had a few projects and achievements since beginning the project. Our primary focus has always been about getting more women involved. So far, this appears to be working – there are currently 9 women in the NM queue[4] with several more waiting in the wings. If you're into percentages, this is an 800% increase since last year at the same time.

Some other things we have done or offered:

## **Mentoring**

The mentoring program is intended to give an aspiring contributor someone they can correspond with one-on-one. We were curious as to whether this would be more effective or less scary than asking groups of people for help (eg, the debian-{mentors,devel,legal,etc} mailing lists, IRC channels). It seems to be going pretty well, overall. People report feeling more comfortable with this situation and their skills are improving. Some of them have gone from being mentees to being mentors. This program is also offered to both men and women either as mentors or mentees.[5]

## **Online Tutorials**

Some of these have included:

- RC Bugsquashing Tutorial [6]
- Packaging Tutorial [7]

These were given on IRC and were very well received by all participants. It was interesting to have such an interactive approach to learning tasks, though I suspect it would be impossible to do something similar for a very large audience.

## Documentation

- Building Tutorial [8]
- Maintainer Scripts [9]
- Advanced Building Tips [10]
- How to Make a Debian Package Without Using a Helper [11]

## Camraderie

While non-technical in nature, this appears to be one of the major binding factors within the project. Debian is huge and it can be hard to find a place you fit in. While this is unimportant to some people, it's a dealbreaker for others, and we've successfully created a community which people *want* to get involved in. Debian tends to be very community-oriented, so this works out well.

## The Bad

### Community Issues

Defining membership has been a difficult issue. When trying to be inclusive, it is generally a better idea to blur lines since the formality of becoming a Debian Developer can be daunting for many people. Still, where is the line drawn? What constitutes a Debian Woman, anyway? A woman who uses Debian? A woman who contributes to Debian? Or, in some cases, a man who contributes to both DW and Debian? Or, in other cases, a woman who contributes to Debian but doesn't actually *use* Debian? I'd say the cases where a man does not contribute to either Debian or DW are exceedingly rare, but they do occasionally pop up.

Discussing these issues has been nerve-wracking due to the conflicting issues: How do you strike a balance and maintain your focus without getting bogged down by non-contributing, though wonderfully nice people when your primary goal is to involve more women in Debian?

*(NB: Non-contributing and thoroughly horrible people are covered in a bit.)*

## Friendliness, or lack thereof

Another misconception – or at least, widely-held view – is that DW is *all about* being friendly. This is wrong. WRONG. Can the people in the back hear me? Good. Because it's wrong.

The goal of Debian Women is to get more women involved in Debian. It's that simple. Our approach has been pragmatic: people are more likely to join a community if it's friendly. Unfortunately, people often mistake this as being a *goal* when it's actually more of a sensible approach and the result of individual people's personalities.

As a result of this mistaken interpretation, people tend to be shocked when members of DW are *not* all that friendly and, in some cases, quite hostile, especially to people we perceive as a threat. We have to keep our goal in mind, though; we're not an online LUG or support group and our focus should not become so broad that we lose sight of our original purpose.

Though we may occasionally hold hands and skip around in sunflowers, that is not our purpose.

## Trolls

Argh.

We knew we'd be an attractive troll target; there was no way to escape it except to choose not to exist and that wasn't an option.

This has actually been dealt with quite well, given Debian's open nature: we have several ops in the IRC channel who are ready, willing, and able to ban anyone who gets out of hand. Often there is some mediation that happens before this is done, but in most cases, we refuse to sacrifice the positive atmosphere in favor of openness. In the case of the mailing list, most people are smart enough to just ignore anyone we interpret as a troll, but this isn't always as clear cut. In some cases, people aren't necessarily trolls, but they *are* more interested in being destructive instead of constructive. This has worked fairly well, so far.

## The future

We have a lot of potential goals in mind for the future which we would like to discuss at DebConf5.

## Quotes about DW! Feel the love!

Prior to completing this paper, I asked some members of DW to say a few words about the project.

In some ways

*DW*

inadvertently led me to dislike parts of Debian. By this I mean, DW encouraged me to read Debian mailing lists, and sometimes what I read wasn't pleasant and in some cases discouraging. Arguments, flame wars and ad hominem attacks left a bad taste.

I have come to realize how much stress developers were under with Sarge and also that it takes passion to get that worked up about software. I'll choose the OS that has passion any day.

– *Angelina Carlton*

I think this is the first place in OSS where people haven't assumed I'm a man.

– *Clytie Siddall*

After getting involved with Debian Women, all of the sudden Debian wasn't just an OS anymore - it was a group of people. (Awesome people.) It's amazing to be able to look at the maintainer field of a package and say "I know that person!"

– *Christine Spang*

I think that the emergence of d-w last year, especially after Erinn's talk at Debconf, brought me a newer light on the place of women in information technology in general, on the role I can have to change things that need to be changed and on my general perception of the qualities required to work in IT environments.

– *Christian Perrier*

For me, DW has been the entrance to Debian. I had never thought that I could get involved in Debian at all, or even that I could fit into Debian. Now I'm also involved in other Debian activities, but I wouldn't have even tried without DW's advice and support. I think DW is doing a great work in opening a door to Debian for many of us.

– *Miriam Ruiz*

It has helped me to think of Debian as a big group of individual persons, many of whom I know, and I can talk to, rather than an anonymous hard-to-enter organization.

I'm amazed at how much my attitude towards the whole project has changed over the past year, and it's mostly due to the DW group.

– *Margarita Manterola*

## References

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