Josephine’s Story: A Remarkable Woman in Congo

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I’m just back from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a country ravaged by war and conflicts over the past 10 years, conflicts that have claimed millions of lives. It is a place where in many corners of the country, security and rule of law are virtually non-existent, and food and medicine are scarce. It is most especially difficult for the women who suffer near daily occurrences of sexual and gender-based violence. It is unimaginable to find ways to live day to day, hand to mouth and yet women do because they must, and they still manage to smile, to laugh and dance. During my trip, I met many incredibly strong women. I listened to their heart-wrenching stories and I felt their hope and desire to survive in this unforgiving environment. And on one faithful day, I met Josephine. Her story is so inspiring that I had to share it.

Josephine is a 40-year-old woman who has led a very difficult life in Walungu, Congo. She was orphaned at age seven when she lost both her parents. As food was scarce, she and her four-year-old baby brother were separated and sent to live with her parents’ friends in different villages. She didn’t see her brother again for 11 years. She was reunited with him by chance when he came to her village in search of food during the long dry season. He never left and for the past 22 years they have lived in the same village raising their families together.

Josephine married at 18 and had 12 children, eight of whom lived, all girls. Her husband was unable to support their family so she divorced him and is now the sole breadwinner for her family. She was desperate to generate income to feed her children and when given the opportunity to join Women for Women International’s program in Congo, she jumped at the chance.

During the 12-month program, Josephine learned about her rights, health, commercial farming, and agriculture. Josephine graduated in July 2011 and has been cultivating two plots of beans utilizing the skills she learned in agriculture training. She is working alongside 25 other graduates who are members of her pre-cooperative, Rhugwasanye.

But Josephine had bigger dreams. She approached a land owner in her village to secure rental of one hectare for four years with payment of a goat. Using the skills she received in Women for Women International’s training, she taught 200 women from her village that did not have the opportunity to participate in the program how to cultivate beans in straight lines.

These 200 women organized themselves into groups of 25 and now work together making tiles, producing cooking pots, honey, farming, tree planting, and cultivating seedlings. They have developed a coordinating body and elected Josephine as their president. Only 25 of the 200 cooperative members have completed Women for Women International’s training, yet the multiplier effect is evident among the women, their families, and communities. They decided they needed to learn to read and write to grow their businesses so they engaged two teachers from the group as volunteers to teach them basic literacy. The group is using the income from their different businesses to re-invest in additional plots of land, to send their children to school and to feed their families.

Josephine’s dream is to have a small home and “continue to give birth” by passing on her learning to other women in her village and community beyond. She continues to make the long trek to the Women for Women International commercial farm twice a week to tend her plots. She walks, eight kilometers each way, to help make her dream a reality.

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