



Women for Women International (WfWI)

# Empowering women for sustainable development

## Towards the realization of MDGs in Rwanda

BY GRACE MUGOYA

In 2000, during the United Nations Summit, World Leaders articulated eight critical goals and time-bound targets for governments to work to achieve by 2015 to reduce and tackle extreme poverty. Together, the targets are known as the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and include the following:

- Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- Achieve universal primary education
- Promote gender equality and women's empowerment
- Reducing child mortality
- Improve maternal health care
- Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other diseases
- Ensure environmental conservation and water management
- Develop a global partnership for development

Women for Women International (WfWI) is among the development partners that have worked together with the government of Rwanda. According to country director Antoinette Uwimana the organization opened doors in Rwanda shortly after the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi.

WfWI supports the most marginalized women to earn and save money, improve health and well-being, influence decisions in their home and community, and connect to networks for support.

Currently, WfWI-Rwanda chapter is operating trainings and programs in six districts across the country: Kayonza, Rwamagana, Muhanga, Kicukiro, Nyaruguru and Gasabo. Most recently, the organization began programming and interventions in Nyaruguru. The decision to expand and invest in this district was in response to the significant development needs for programs and interventions that support women and the community.

Women for Women International - Rwanda work and year-long program covers a variety of topics and skill areas thus that support Rwanda's efforts to achieve 6 of the 8 MDGs.

WfWI also gives direct support to women graduates to start their own businesses.

### MDG1: Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger

MDG 1 requires countries adopt mechanisms and implement programs that reduce and eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. Defined as living on less than \$1.25 a day, global reports indicate that more than 218 million people in Sub-



Saharan Africa live in extreme poverty with the biggest percentage residing in the rural areas.

In Rwanda, WfWI has directed its intervention towards promoting rural women as one of the initiatives to empower the rural population. To be able to work effectively, the organization has formed many partnerships. Through its relationship with the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion, WfWI-Rwanda works towards uplifting families as well as contributing towards the country's development. Other partners of WfWI include the Workforce Development Authority, Private Sector Federation and Rwanda Cooperative Agency among others.

Given the history of the country, Uwimana says that empowering rural women has significantly transformed lives and families. She points to the vocational skills women develop through the training opportunities that offer a variety of choices. From artisan crafts to tailoring and agriculture, women enrolled in the program learn skills that allow them earn more revenue that directly benefits their families.

Creating a safe gathering and trade center for women to further their economic empowerment was the goal when WfWI-Rwanda built the Women Opportunity Center (WOC) in Kayonza district, Eastern Province. At the WOC, women get a chance to acquire life-changing skills, support and access to trading networks and resources.

WfWI also gives direct support to women graduates to start their own businesses.

### Immaculee's Experience

One of the beneficiaries of the Center, Immaculee Nyiransabimana, says that her life has changed due to the skills she acquired. "First of all, when I was selected among the lucky ones, we underwent a twelve months training that saw us appreciate life skills," she says.

The mother of three says that before, she was a housewife but currently, she is able to financially contribute towards the development of her family. "I underwent one month training in Uganda through the support of WfWI and learnt how best one can make organic manure and modern farming methods, something that has positively changed my life."

Today, Nyiransabimana earns a living through training other farmers as well as engaging in modern farming. In a good season of her work, she saves Rwf200, 000 (\$300) in three months.

Her story inspires many. Nyiransabimana and her six children were abandoned by her husband but she has been able to rebuild her life and take care of the family. She is proud that she is able to send two of her children to secondary schools.

Nyiransabimana's story is just one of the 67,000 women who have emerged from the WfWI-Rwanda program with new skills,

**The Minister of Gender and Family Promotion, Oda Gasinzigwa, with officials during a visit to check on works of women cooperatives supported by WfWI**

empowered to fight poverty and hunger in their respective families. These women also successfully completed the twelve months WfWI training programme that equips them with information on general life.

### MDG 2: Achieving Universal Primary Education

Although WfWI is not directly involved in providing education, WfWI-Rwanda supports this goal by educating mothers and reinforcing the value and importance of primary education. According to Uwimana, the women's program indirectly reinforces the efforts of government to promote the 9 Year Basic Education efforts through the sensitization and community campaigns in the rural regions.

"When we educate these women, we make sure that we also remind them of their responsibilities as parents; and it's here that we put much emphasis on taking children to school," notes Uwimana.

She adds that economic empowerment of women is another factor that has enabled families to keep their children in schools. This, she argues, helps parents to buy supplies and scholastic materials including books.

### MDG 3: Promoting Gender Equality and Women Empowerment

WfWI plays a significant role in empowering women through its training and community engagement programs that further awareness about gender rights. The opportunities for women to heal from their trauma, learn new skills and better understand their legal rights contributes to the community's awareness and support for gender equality.

Women enrolled in the programs will participate in training that exposes them to various skills like life skills that include Human Rights, Decision making and Gender Based Violence (GBV). Vocational skills include agribusiness, food processing, tailoring, beekeeping, hairdressing and beads making. Cross cutting skills that women get include financial literacy and social networking among others.

With the acquired skills, women are expected to start income generating activities to improve the welfare of their families. Building a culture of saving is one other important point emphasized to ensure that beneficiaries are able to get to another level through diversification of their activities.



WfWI also educates women on legal issues something that has positively impacted their families as they also educate their husbands; thereby bringing peace in their families. Another positive impact as a result of families getting informed about legal issues is that many families have legalised their marriages something that has led into mass marriages.

In the districts where women have been empowered, graduates share the experience and its impact on their family. For many, the training inspired confidence that continued well after graduation.

## Euphrasie's Experience

Euphrasie Mukanyarwaya, a 53 year oldmother of five from the Gasabo district in Kigali describes how her life changed and she continued to develop.

*Before joining the programme I was a poor house wife. I hardly put food on the table. Life was very hard. That is even why I was chosen as WfWI beneficiary because it works with poor and vulnerable women to help improve their living conditions.*

*I joined WfWI in 2006 and spent the first twelve months training in vocational skills, focusing on pearls/beads making and decoration. Upon graduation, I put the acquired skills to good use as I considered the training important. This was a new chapter of my life. I started making beads, sold them and earned a living which was not the case before. Gradually, I started saving part of the revenues as saving was part of the lessons we learnt during the training I first went through.*

*As I realised that beads-making was a profitable business, I approached a bank and applied for a loan. At first, I was given Rwf300 000 that I invested into my activities to expand production. After servicing the first loan, getting other loans was very easy and currently, I apply for more than Rwf 5million loan which I do pay back on schedule.*

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*Life has since changed for the better and welfare has improved. Currently, am able to provide for the needs of my family including paying for children education, health insurance, clothes and so much more. I have also been able to build a decent modern family house and another business house that I rent out to earn some extra money. My business is allowing me to live better.*

*I owe all this to the support, training, advice and guidance I received from Women for Women International. Had it not been for their support, I wouldn't have improved my living conditions; rather I would have remained a desperate poor woman. (This above should also be removed from the PDF)*

To ensure WfWI-Rwanda achieves its mission, it has set its focus on four key areas through which the organization believes will uplift women to the expectation, that first line should instead read To ensure WfWI-Rwanda achieves its mission, it has set its focus on four key outcomes through which the organization believes will uplift women to the expectation.



The four outcomes include enabling women to; earn and save money, develop health and well-being, influence decisions in their homes and communities and connect to networks for support and advocacy.

With the four measures, WfWI-Rwanda is optimistic vulnerable women in Rwanda can go an extra mile to positively change their lives and communities. To have the four focus points build a strong foundation for the beneficiaries, other four main pillars were developed. These are access to health, entrepreneurship (Expanded Economic Opportunities), financial inclusion and men's engagement. The four help in positioning beneficiaries in a situation that keeps them working hard so as to grow and have their gains further invested to also create jobs and employ others a step that WfWI Rwanda is sure contributes to sustainable development.

## MDG 4: Reducing Child Mortality

The 2012 World Health Organization report indicates that about 6.6 million children under five died. The cause of this loss was attributed to neonatal causes, pneumonia, diarrhea, malaria, measles, and HIV/AIDS. MDG 4 calls for reducing child mortality by two thirds by 2015. WfWI conducts awareness campaigns to improve knowledge about nutrition and strategies for combating malnutrition in childhood. Stunted growth is considered one of the major risk factors leading to increased infant mortality, poor cognitive and physical development and other impairments. The organization also sensitizes women about the need for personal and family hygiene as well as prevention measures diseases including malaria and diarrhea. Women are also encouraged to take their children for immunization.

## Nikuze Lenatha's Experience

*I had the chance to be selected among the beneficiaries and at first I had to attend an intensive literacy programme to acquire reading and writing skills. After that*

*programme, which lasted three months, we started another programme in business and entrepreneurship.*

*After the training, we formed a cooperative of 65 members and chose to venture into beekeeping. WfWI supported us by availing over 60 modern beehives. That was the beginning. However, among other things, we were taught how to nurture healthy families; especially preparing healthy meals for our children and the family as a whole.*

*In addition to supporting us to economically develop, it is very important the organization helps many to have healthy families. After various trainings, many of us realized that in many families, the problem is not lack of food, but the ignorance of what to prepare for our children. We also took a firm stand against parents who decide to take their harvest to the market without considering their families in the long run.*

## MDG 5: Improving Maternal Health

Educating women about their nutrition and wellness are cornerstones for improving maternal health. Women enrolled in the WfWI-Rwandan programme are encouraged to go for voluntary HIV testing. This is done to ensure women know their status as well as enabling those found HIV positive to protect the unborn from contracting the virus, an initiative that also feeds into the MDG 6—that calls for the combating of HIV/Aids, malaria and other diseases. An estimated 56% of pregnant women with HIV received antiretroviral treatment to prevent the transmission of HIV to their unborn child From nutrition to disease prevention, access to education and services is critical to achieving this goal. Women are also encouraged to go for Perinatal Care—the care given to women and a fetus or newborn given before, during and after delivery. It is given from the 28th week of gestation through the 7th day after delivery. According to Uwimana, under the organisation's reproductive health programmes women undergo

trainings through which they are, among others, encouraged to practice family planning methods. The organization's report indicates that 97 percent of those interviewed are aware of the importance of family planning. The achievements in this pillar also extent into MDG 5

## MDG 7: Ensure environmental conservation and water management

This goal requires realizing the environmental conservation and water management. WfWI has also played a role in ensuring that the government achieves MDG 7. This has been done through engaging women especially those in agriculture sector. Through their cooperatives, they make organic manure from the decomposition of animal waste and garden residues.

Organic agriculture considers the medium- and long-term effect of agricultural interventions on the agro-ecosystem. It aims at producing food while establishing an ecological balance to preserve soil fertility and prevent pest problems. Organic agriculture takes a proactive approach as opposed to treating problems after they emerge.

Soil building practices such as crop rotations, inter-cropping, symbiotic associations, cover crops, organic fertilizers and minimum tillage are central to organic practices.

In turn, nutrient and energy cycling is increased and the retentive abilities of the soil for nutrients and water are enhanced, compensating for the non-use of mineral fertilizers. This also plays an important role in soil erosion control. The length of time that the soil is exposed to erosive forces is decreased.

## MDG 8: Develop a global partnership for development

This emphasizes on creating global partnership for development and for WfWI, these partnerships have effectively helped to benefit the organization's beneficiaries. Among others, WfWI partners with Babson Entrepreneurial Leadership Academy.

Through the partnership, WfWI has been able to take part in the annual Global Entrepreneurship Week that brings together young entrepreneurs across the World.

This does not only inspire young entrepreneurs but also brings about exposure something that facilitates participants to learn from each other. For WfWI, women through their cooperatives too get the chance to meet experienced entrepreneurs and make connections that has helped many to market their products.

WfWI has contributed to the realization of all the MDGs in Rwanda. Empowering the most vulnerable women through the four key outcomes has significantly contributed towards changing lives especially those (women) in rural areas. Testimonies from beneficiaries are clear indications of WfWI's intervention towards achieving the country's vision 2020 and realizing the MDGs.