

Courage, Strength and Power of Hope The Congolese Women in Action

It has taken me months to stop and write my thoughts on the success of the Women's Group in Ilebo, Democratic Republic of Congo.



To attempt to put into words my respect and admiration for the hard working women is difficult. Yet, in the paragraphs that follow I will try to convey the Congolese Women's hope, energy, work ethic and talents. The women were given a small economic loan of \$300.00. The women used those funds to their fullest potential. The women had arranged for a whole group meeting. There are approximately 130 members.

This meant that the members of the group had to make arrangements to leave their farms in the jungle to return to the city prior to their weekly trip to the market. In Congolese culture the women plant, harvest and sell their crops as one of their many female responsibilities. Farmer accompanies their other titles of wife, provider, mother, grandmother, cook and the list goes on...

Well, I am privileged to share that over a 100 women were waiting for me patiently as I entered the meeting hall. The room was filled with smiling women, ranging in ages from 22-90, wearing bright colored outfits. I was so honored to be in their company.

But, before the meeting could officially begin I was instructed it was time to DANCE!

So, we went outside to the school's courtyard and formed a huge circle. Two women entered the circle and began to sing and the other 100 women followed by dancing and singing. It was interactive, call and response. And of course, I did my best to mimic their swaying hips and beautifully flowing moves.



The language barrier was nonexistent through this experience. As the women taught me the dances and I stumbled to keep up with their rhythm, speed and endurance we all laughed and bonded. It was truly a moment of joy!



After almost an hour of nonstop dance and song, it was time for business. The Women's officers conducted the meeting. They are the only women who aren't farmers. These 6 women are the educated women who hold professional jobs within the city. They are teachers, nurses and entrepreneurs who volunteer their time to help the women of Ilebo prosper. The officers and the members collectively decided what to do with the economic loan.

Their first investment was using their domestic talent, crocheting. Presented to me were delicate table cloths, placemats and many other linens.



These hand made items were beautifully made with intricate detail. The women had purchased the materials and sold the items for a profit at their market.

The earnings were added to their funds that the group's Treasurer is responsible for monitoring. Besides sewing, the officers also teach "ABC's School" twice a week.

One of the group's goals is to teach the illiterate women how to read and write. Over 60 women attend class so they can better themselves through education. A woman in her 60's shared with me, "I have sent my children to college and now my grandchildren. It is now time for me to learn because education is the way to a happier life." I was in tears during this meeting as I learned of the sacrifices that these hard working women make every day. For example, the trip from Ilebo to the women's farms in the jungle is a half day's journey.



The women walk over 3 miles to the river, they then pay to take a 10 minute boat ride (the boat is a hollowed out log) to the jungle's entrance and then walk over 3 hours to their land and their "work" hadn't even begun for the day. They then will work until sunset in their fields and then take care of their domestic duties. So, for women to make the voluntary trip to "ABC School" two more times a week so they can attend learn is truly noble.

After listening to the women's future plans, their lists of needs, wants and concerns I decided to reinvest in their efforts. I gave the women another \$300 and I am pleased to share that in 8 months they have more than doubled their earnings!

The women of DRC are proud, loving and hard working people who thrive to survive each and everyday. The women's center allows for the women to become empowered to make strategies to increase their standard of living through education and increased income. Women throughout the world live to make a better world for their children and themselves. And, I witnessed first hand how the power of hope, dedication and will allows for women to improve their own lives with a small donation by those of us who are privileged to be literate, have enough to eat and drink on a daily basis, access to health care and hygiene

products and a safe place to call "home". Many of the Congolese women dream of the day when they have these luxuries. But they aren't sitting back waiting for change instead they are working hard so that they too can have a higher standard of living. Please support the Women of Ilebo's efforts and donate to their center.

2011 Women's Goals:



- Eye wear & eye exams, need reading glasses.
- Medical supplies, especially items for diabetes and high blood pressure
- Hygiene products, all types⁷⁰.
- Mosquito nets, most women sleep on a mat on the ground each night near their farms because the journey home every day is too difficult and costly.

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