In May 2004, Judithe Registre, Country Director, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) left Washington, D.C., to set up Women for Women International’s newest office. Having worked in several African countries, Judithe was not a stranger to the continent’s challenges, yet what she witnessed in Congo made a deep impression: “There are no words for me to describe the impact of the war on women in the DRC. It is unbelievable what they have suffered, and what they’ve experienced.”

Judithe’s first weeks in-country included meeting with various organizations active in the relief efforts to find out who is addressing which needs of women survivors of conflict. While exact numbers are still unknown, some organizations estimate that more than 100,000 women have been raped during years of war that have especially plagued the eastern part of the country. Judithe found that the primary focus of aid to women rape survivors is medical assistance and counseling. She observed that beyond basic health and other immediate

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In Perspective....
Zainab Salbi’s Letter from the Road

On my last stop of a trip that started in Jordan and included Iraq, Kenya, Rwanda, and finally the Democratic Republic of the Congo, I could not help but see the stark contrast of beauty and cruelty existing together.

Just as I am writing this piece from Bukavu, Congo, three soldiers near me are cleaning their weapons. I don’t know whether they are government or rebel soldiers, or even security guards. It doesn’t matter much here, where all soldiers are known for pillaging, killing and raping. What distinguishes them is a fine line between whether they only pillage without raping and killing, or whether they do all at the same time. Our driver at our office here

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Zainab Salbi’s Letter from the Road
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told me how government soldiers attacked his brother’s house and demanded money. When he gave them $200, they left him alone. But a few days later, rebel soldiers came to the same brother and asked him for money. Except this time he did not have any, so they killed his baby in front of him, shot his teenage daughter in the shoulder, forced him to strip his daughter naked and spread her legs, and then they raped her in front of him. But as I hear this story and watch the soldiers clean their weapons, I also see the indescribable beauty of Lake Kivo—its calm, the vastness that obscures its other side, the hills framing it, and the brilliantly-colored birds above it.

The contrast was as vivid in Rwanda, the country of one thousand hills, red mud, and lush green. The fields are filled with farmers dressed in beautiful and vibrant clothing. The children in their blue school uniforms often surround visitors with striking smiles as they practice basic English and ask for pens and papers. Yet one does not have to go far to visit the genocide sites in churches where the skeletons and the bones have been preserved. As I entered a church with two supporters of Women for Women International who joined me in my visit to Rwanda, an older woman started talking about what she had witnessed the day when 8,000 people died in the church and the surrounding area. She survived because she was Hutu. She asked her brothers to hide five of her children. But her husband, who was a Tutsi, two other children of hers, and 11 other family members were all killed in the church: “I could hear the cries and the sounds of the bombs that day. I still have nightmares about the killing that took place,” she told us from where she sits all day to guard the church and bear witness to the bones of her children and husband resting before her. As we left the church, I noticed graffiti written on the walls in English, French and Kinyarwanda saying ‘NEVER AGAIN’. I left the church shaken with tears and anger at the injustice that does not seem to stop in the world… I found it ironic that 50 years after first writing ‘Never Again’, we are still writing the same phrase after new genocides. It seems that it is happening over and over again.

The site of that church reminded me of the mass graves that I visited in Iraq not so long ago. There, the bodies were buried, but the clothing and the ID cards that were in their pockets when the people were executed were put in a bag on top of the grave by the people who did the excavation. Mothers were roaming from one bag to another searching for the ID cards amidst blood-covered clothes, hoping to find their loved ones.

At our office though, I saw the open courtyard of the old oriental building filled with women in black abaya. About 100 of them waited for certificates recognizing their community action. Through Women for Women International, they had come together and cleaned their neighborhood. “We never thought we could do such things,” one woman stood up and said, “but Women for Women International convinced us that we have the power to make our community a better place to live.” Another woman rose and said: “We demanded that the mayor provide us garbage bins for the community. This is our right and the government cannot deny it to us.” A third woman added: “We are so grateful to Women for Women International for staying and not leaving us despite the security situation in Iraq. We know you care and we are grateful to all the women who made that possible.” Hearing women talk about their experiences was perhaps the most positive thing I witnessed in my trip there. We are not seeing these positive stories on our TV screens, nor are we aware of the reality that Iraqis are being kidnapped and killed in a far greater numbers than anyone else in Iraq. In one week, I learned of four kidnappings—two ended in death, including that of a woman who was a distant colleague, and the others were released with a large ransom.

So as I reflect on these stories and the beauty of the scenery before me, I can’t help but put things in perspective in my life. At the end of the day the things that take so much of our energy, be it an argument with a loved one, a disagreement with a colleague, getting upset over a broken car, only reflect our luxury of not having to face life and death at every single moment. Where I am sitting now with the women our organization works with, the beauty and the cruelty of life is so intense that it makes my life in America seem miniscule. It is these moments when I remember my work with Women for Women International is a unique opportunity to share what we often take for granted.
Elhame’s Story

Elhame Smaili is an inspiration. Although she is 60 years-old, she continues to learn new skills and build hope for the future. She endured many hardships before joining Women for Women International - Kosovo with her daughter-in-law in May 2003. During the war in Kosovo that ended in 1999, her only son was killed and her husband died of a heart attack shortly after the war. Her eight year-old niece Arbresha developed a physical handicap following complications from an illness during the war and now walks with difficulty. Elhame’s house was damaged during the war, like many houses located in Cirez, her village in the Drenica area. Although an organization was slated to assist her family with reconstructing the house, they received only minimal aid and now live in very poor conditions. She lives with her daughter-in-law Mihrije, three grandsons between the ages of seven and 15, and three nieces ranging from eight to 13 years-old.

With determination and an energetic spirit, Elhame and Mihrije opted for the beekeeping course as a way to develop skills to earn an income. Now recent graduates of the program, Elhame says that she and Mihrije have learned more about the world through their participation and now have a broader perspective. Both women are grateful to their sponsors Donna Wise and Sharon Gladden for bringing “new light to their home.” Elhame and Mihrije have recently received three beehives through a project implemented by Women for Women International. They have begun their beekeeping activities, putting their Women for Women International training into action: “I am finally active and involved in the work,” says Mihrije. “There are barriers such as poverty, but I have to challenge them, especially to support my children. I hope that Tahire, our cousin, will help us to work with bees, since she was the best in the group of women beekeepers.” Tahire, 26, who lives in the same village with Elhame and Mihrije agreed: “Of course I will help them, there is no question. I hope that one day honey from our village finds its way into the market and onto the tables of the best hotels.”

Reflections on Sponsorship

Marcia Koford

Three years ago, it had become intolerable to wake up each morning to daily headlines reminding me of the endless suffering in the world. I felt torn between blocking out the world completely or searching for a way to do something about that suffering. I also felt overwhelmed by the challenge of how an ordinary citizen could find a humanitarian organization that actually accomplished something significant. All of this changed when I saw the Oprah Winfrey Show featuring Zainab Salbi and Women for Women International. I decided to begin by sponsoring a woman in Nigeria.

Over the past three years I have sponsored, one at a time, three women in Nigeria, and have recently added a sister in Iraq. In April 2004, I had the privilege of observing the Women for Women International program directly by accompanying staff and trainers going into remote villages surrounding the city of Enugu in southern Nigeria and Jos in northern Nigeria. A high point for me was meeting with each of the three women I have sponsored and learning directly from them how Women for Women International has changed their lives. Most of Women for Women International’s sponsored women were once quite literally the most vulnerable individuals in their villages. I learned first-hand from village chiefs and leaders, as well as from the women themselves, of the impact that the empowerment of these women has had on the larger community. As our sponsored sisters have acquired emotional strength, economic independence...
Giving Afghan Women Credit

Women for Women International recently began dispersing its first microcredit loans to women in Afghanistan. The only organization in the country that offers loans exclusively to women, the initial investment represents 187 microcredit loans to women in and around Kabul, totaling approximately $34,210. $200,000 in loans will eventually be dispersed during the first year, with a total of $4.2 million over the next five years. Many of the loan recipients are opening their own businesses for the first time.

A number of the women who have received loans are interested in starting or expanding an agri-business; the loans will fund activities such as buying and raising a cow or chickens to sell milk or eggs in the market, or cultivating and selling vegetables. However, there are also a variety of creative, non-agricultural businesses. Mina Gul is using her loan to start a soap-making business, a skill she learned while she was a refugee in Pakistan. Shilla is opening a small shop, where she and her son will sell the handmade shoes she has made for the past 13 years, and Sofia is buying newer equipment for her home-run beauty salon.

The microfinance program was the next logical step for Women for Women International’s programs in Afghanistan. Currently, the organization’s year-long program provides women with monthly direct aid and emotional support, rights awareness, literacy, health, and leadership education, and vocational skills training. “This program will help graduates of our program, and other women in Afghanistan, gain economic independence as the country rebuilds,” says Sweeta Noori, Country Director for Women for Women International – Afghanistan.

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and leadership roles within their villages, they in turn have attracted respect and interest from village chiefs in Women for Women International’s programs for men, as well as for women.

Meeting Juliet, my first sponsored sister, was truly heart-rending when I realized how meaningful our connection has been for her. Shortly into our meeting in her two-room, barely-furnished, thatched hut, which housed numerous family members, Juliet brought out her proud possession of family photographs. There in the midst of the photos, was the first photo I had sent her three years ago of my husband and myself. I felt overwhelmed with tears of humility and thankfulness that somehow I was led to support this beautiful, loving, and strong, young woman. Juliet had mastered English well, so we could speak candidly about what she called her “life circumstances.” The letters we had exchanged prepared me to meet a very intelligent and resourceful young woman, who had struggled with trying to support her ailing husband and family, despite repeated pregnancies and limited opportunities. With the training and money she received through Women for Women International, Juliet has become a determined and competent leader within her community. She and several other sponsored sisters have pooled their resources to run a rental business. I watched in awe as she demonstrated, for example, how the small generator she had purchased could be rented out to locals celebrating weddings and other events requiring a consistent source of power.

Shy, slim and seeming too young herself to mother three children, my second sister Perpetua told me through an Ibo-speaking interpreter, that she has used her new skills to market and sell salt fish that she raises, as well as fruits and vegetables which she grows. Perpetua and I danced together, in what was for me an almost out-of-body-experience. We were encircled by colorfully-dressed women chanting, cheering and playing drums to wonderful tribal rhythms in celebration of the coming together of unlikely sisters as the two of us, and for their enthusiastic appreciation for Women for Women International’s meaningful work.

In meeting my new sister, Gladys, a 28 year-old woman, nursing her eighth child born within the last ten years, I had the distinct impression that she was severely depressed. I worried that she had experienced significant trauma, and once again I felt thankful that I have been given this opportunity to support and encourage her through our correspondence in the year to come.

If you are planning to invest in an organization and are searching for one that professionally and effectively accomplishes what it sets out to achieve, I recommend that Women for Women International be at the top of your list. It is a delightful and amazing group of women who combine a pragmatic zeal with the talent and training for effectively accomplishing their mission.
New Report Examines Gender in Rwanda Ten Years After Genocide

Women for Women International celebrates the release of its first commissioned paper, “Women Taking a Lead: Progress Toward Empowerment and Gender Equity in Rwanda.” Designed to assess the political, economic, and social status of Rwandan women on the ten-year anniversary of the genocide that claimed approximately 800,000 lives, the report captures the experiences of women from all parts of society.

The report traces the struggles, hardships, and successes of Rwandan women over the past decade, and examines the policies aimed to increase women’s participation in all levels of government. For example, following the 2003 elections, 49% of Rwanda’s parliament is now female, overtaking Sweden as the country with the greatest proportion of female legislators. The government has created other structures to encourage the political participation of women, including women-only elections, where women in a community elect a council to ensure that women’s views on important issues are communicated to local authorities.

Despite these and other successes, the report highlights many of the challenges that Rwandan women still face. For example, in the words of one female deputy mayor, the needs of rural women continue to be great: “The social norms and traditions which impose an inferior status on women and make them dependent on men are still in place. You see the inequality of the sexes in the rural domain by comparing access to basic services, to resources, and participation in decision-making.” The report also examines the potential for laws and new concepts of gender equality to be accepted by both men and women, creating broader social change. One interviewee believes: “As long as gender means simply that women will contribute to the family’s economy, men are in favor because this is to their personal benefit. But they don’t want to hear about laws protecting women for fear they will lose part of their control over the ownership and use of the family inheritance.”

The report concludes with recommendations for action, which include economic development programs for urban and rural women, programs that incorporate men into the agenda for women’s advancement, increased communication between women in government and those at the grassroots, and innovative management tools that quantify the impact that policies have on women. To see the full report, visit Women for Women International’s website at www.womenforwomen.org.

Join the Sponsorship Community

Women for Women International welcomes you to join a community of about 9,000 concerned sponsors who offer direct, personal support to women who have been profoundly affected by the devastation and suffering brought on by war and conflict.

As a sponsor, you will be matched with a woman in great need. Your friendship and support can help financially with a monthly contribution of $25, to assist your sponsored sister in obtaining basic life necessities, such as food and medicine. It will also help emotionally through letters you exchange which offer a lifeline to your sister by communicating that someone cares and that she is not alone.

Please visit the new Sponsorship Community section on our website where you can access a how-to guide on becoming a sponsor, read letters between sponsors and their sisters, peruse frequently asked questions, learn about the countries where we work, and more. Even if you are already a sponsor, this is still a great place for new inspiration. To become part of the community, visit www.womenforwomen.org.
needs, women’s economic survival must be addressed: “Everything has been taken away from these women. They are dying a silent and slow death because their calls for help are not being answered. To make matters worse, their own communities shun them, leaving them with absolutely nothing.”

Judithe found that there was no other organization providing Women for Women International’s mix of comprehensive support that deals with women’s urgent economic needs in addition to their long-term social and political ones. She sees the organization as providing the “integral link between humanitarian assistance and long-term sustainable development.”

Judithe’s initial experience in the DRC has shown that the process of trying to give voice to women who have experienced deadly conflict can be a matter of life and death—not only for the survivors. On May 26th, during her third week in the DRC, fighting broke out between a dissident group and the national army, despite a 2002 peace accord that saw the eastern region’s main armed groups agree to disarm and accept the authority of a national unity government. Several days later, the dissident army seized the town of Bukavu, where the new Women for Women International office is located, despite the presence of UN peacekeepers. The rebels went door to door in communities to terrorize, pillage, and rape women, including one of Judithe’s colleagues at another organization. Within the space of just a couple of weeks, a number of civilians were raped and/or killed, and thousands fled to Rwanda and Burundi.

Judithe was able to escape to an internally displaced persons (IDP) camp at the compound of the United Nations Mission to the Democratic Republic of the Congo: “One minute I was in a house, where I had a fridge, a bed, and a bathroom. The next, I was standing in line for food rations for IDPs and refugees. I had to sleep on the floor, the same floor I would use the following day to set up the fire that would warm the food I would eat. It all happened so quickly.” As negotiations between the UN and the rebels who had taken control of Bukavu stalled, the numbers swelled in the IDP camp. Judithe faced what she called “a life or death decision—leaving the camp and trying to reach neighboring Rwanda or staying.” She decided to leave and was evacuated to Goma, another city in the eastern region of the DRC. From there, she found her way to Kigali, Rwanda by taking a private taxi. On the afternoon of Sunday, May 30th as she was arriving in Kigali from Goma, the war reached Goma and the borders to Rwanda were closed.

Judithe expects that Women for Women International’s program will be an important way to start rebuilding individual lives and communities. The program’s first step, according to Judithe, will be to “recognize the women survivors’ humanity… to bring visibility to their pain and suffering, supporting them at the individual level, and giving them the space to articulate what they’ve been through.” Much funding and attention has been given to the important task of reintegrating former dissident soldiers, to provide incentives against fighting. However, Judithe believes that it is important “not to overlook those who have suffered, while the perpetrators’ issues are addressed.” She sees Women for Women International’s program as a similar sort of reintegration effort for the women who have been severely impacted by conflict, providing them with a stipend, and helping them develop skills to find or create a job, as they forge their own process of self-development.

Women for Women International reopened its office in Bukavu on July 10, along with other members of the international community who have since returned to the area. Women for Women International staff members are in the field identifying women who will be eligible to participate in our program. We plan to begin matching women with sponsors in September. The need is vast and the resources to help are limited. It is critical that we reach out to our sisters there.
Taking Steps for a Change

Each Sunday, when the Susquehanna International Dancers meet in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania to create fancy steps to traditional folk music, it is not for the love of dance alone. They also have a humanitarian impulse. “We can’t just stand idly by enjoying a people’s culture in their time of need,” said Jack Holt, a member. When member Khin Khin Guyot suggested a benefit party in the early 1990s to aid victims of the Bosnian conflict, the group held its first “Bosnian Benefit.” They first began linking dance with humanitarian assistance by donating proceeds from their dance parties to the Red Cross. Later they learned of Women for Women International’s work in Bosnia and began donating their proceeds to this cause: “We were learning dances from the Balkans, and we wanted to give something back to the people who lived there,” said member Anne Wilson. “Women for Women International was a perfect choice.” In 1995, the group began sponsoring a Bosnian woman in Croatia following the Balkan Wars.

Today, the central Pennsylvania group sponsors five women in four different countries and hopes to sponsor a woman in every country where Women for Women International works. This has helped the group learn more about Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Rwanda, and the lives of the people whose dances they learn. Wilson vividly remembers stories from the group’s sisters, many focusing on the trauma of war, but also on the hope and desire to rebuild their lives.

As crises have spread beyond Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Susquehanna International Dancers now hold an annual sedjulka, a family dance party, to raise money for Women for Women International. Member Oliver Larmi teaches dances to children of the Greenwood Friends School, which they perform to live music at the party, while guests enjoy a bounty of international food. They hold a cooking party before the event where participants can learn how to make delicacies like baklava and tiropita. Social dancing goes on long after the children’s bedtime and often turns into a folksong fest. One year, Larmi pinned a collage of pictures and letters from the women the group had sponsored to a clothesline, as a way to let the community “meet” their sisters.

This dynamic group of supporters has channeled their love of dancing and international culture into a way to help women survivors of conflict all over the world. More information on the group is available at http://facstaff.bloomu.edu/akwilson/ folk_dancing1.htm.
Shop to Make a Difference: Visit the Virtual Bazaar

Just in time for the last lazy days of summer and back-to-school excitement, Women for Women International’s Virtual Bazaar is back! There’s a new, hand-cut stone bead bracelet from Afghanistan, slippers from Bosnia and Herzegovina, and more!

The Virtual Bazaar is another way that Women for Women International provides income-generating opportunities to women in our programs. The Bazaar offers participants an outlet to sell products they have learned how to create in their vocational skills training classes. Every purchase made in the Virtual Bazaar supports Women for Women International’s programs around the world. Thank you for supporting women who are creating change in their lives, their families and their communities.

Check on line at www.womenforwomen.org/bazaar.html to see the new products featured in the Virtual Bazaar.

Women for Women International program participants in Afghanistan craft bracelets for the Virtual Bazaar.