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# Refugee women in Liberia: repairing handpumps, dispelling myths

Gibson Zulu

**Two refugee women in Liberia are repairing handpumps in order to support others in their community.**

The outbreak of COVID-19 has derailed employment and trade, and has jeopardised life in general. The adverse effects of the pandemic are innumerable but have been felt most by the most vulnerable members of the globe – refugees. In the most unlikely places, however, there are glimmers of

hope. Even in the most uncomfortable places, such as refugee settlements, there are people who remain steadfast and committed to making a difference in their lives and that of their communities.

In the PTP refugee settlement in Grand Gedeh County, Liberia, Odell and Emma<sup>1</sup>

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have been at the forefront of the COVID-19 response by repairing handpumps, a rare occupation for women. Not content with being mere spectators or recipients of aid, these two refugee women decided to act against the spread of COVID-19 and its consequences for public health and livelihoods. Emblems of determination, initiative and female empowerment, they are involved not only in repairing handpumps but also in livelihoods activities. They have planted and harvested maize, yams, pepper and rice, and are selling maize from this year's harvest.

Both women arrived in Liberia in 2011. They fled violence in Cote d'Ivoire in the aftermath of the disputed Ivorian presidential election. Odell and Emma did not want to depend on men for survival and this prompted them to participate in a one-week theoretical and practical training course on Afridev handpumps in June 2019. This training was organised jointly by UNHCR and the Government of Liberia to train 13 refugees and four host community members. Odell and Emma were among four refugee women who successfully completed their training and they have continued to use their skills since then.

Their role became particularly important in late 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, when they continued to work to ensure provision of clean water, despite risks to their own health. By early 2021 their team had repaired all the handpumps in the 33 blocks of the PTP refugee settlement, although the constant wear and tear means they still need to undertake occasional repairs. They hope also to travel to Maryland County to repair handpumps in Little Wlebo refugee settlement as a way of encouraging more refugee women to become handpump mechanics.

The two women have forged a strong bond through this work and earned the respect of their community. Residents of PTP refugee camp now not only have better access to clean water to wash their hands to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 but also



WASH team members gather at a handpump which they have repaired in the PTP refugee settlement.

use the water for their livestock and gardens. Since Odell, Emma and their team of 11 men repaired the handpumps, refugees no longer have to walk any further than 500 metres to access a water point. At a time when people are losing their livelihoods due to curfews and lockdowns, and facing a rise in transport and commodity costs and with grim economic prospects, here are two refugee women who work without remuneration to bring water to their fellow refugees in the settlement.

*“Odell and Emma are courageous and hardworking. Society thinks this job is meant for men. Nonetheless, they have the passion for the job and have managed to excel at it and to dispel myths.”* Otis Zarzar, WASH County Coordinator, Ministry of Public Works, Grand Gedeh County

This is the story of two women who have vowed to use their skills to contribute to the well-being of their community, believing that every action counts and each one can make a difference. Their message to fellow women out there? “Believe in yourself. Don't be afraid to fail or try out something new and challenge the status quo. Refugees have so much to contribute to their host nations, and education and practical work are the key.”

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1. Names have been changed.