

Voices of courage

In May 2007 the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children¹ presented its annual Voices of Courage awards to three displaced people who have dedicated their lives to promoting economic opportunities for refugee and displaced women and youth. These are their (edited) testimonies.

"I come from the province of Maguindanao in the conflict-affected areas of Mindanao, southern Philippines. Violence has existed for more than 30 years. I still see very clearly our family being forced to rush from one place to another, always looking for safety. I basically grew up in an evacuation centre. It is harder than anyone who has not

and Family Services International. Growing up in the middle of constant armed conflict, I had become insecure and unsure of myself. CFSI saw something in me that I did not see myself – the potential to have a positive impact on the lives of others.

Building trust is a major challenge in Mindanao. Many of us are suspicious, always thinking that we are being used, neglected and marginalised. We always feel betrayed because a lot of promises have been made, only to be broken the next day. We have seen peace agreements reached, only to see violations by all sides. I have learned that trust can be built by being honest, exerting effort

to prove one's sincerity in working with communities, facilitating activities that lessen the feeling of being marginalised, and sharing the burdens of the people.

When CFSI began working with the people of Inug-ug in 2001, virtually the entire population of this small farming and fishing village were in evacuation centres, having been repeatedly displaced by violence and armed conflict. They were distrustful of one another and outsiders. Infant and maternal mortality rates were high. Most parents had fewer than six years of education and there were no schools within the village. CFSI helped these people organise. Over the course of the last five years, the people of Inug-ug have constructed

– through voluntary labour and food-for-work – 12 permanent classrooms now accommodating almost 700 students led by 12 teachers and a headteacher, most of whom work on a full-time basis for a small stipend. These successes give me energy to continue my work."

Noraida Abdullah Karim (nakarim@cfsi.ph) heads the Mindanao operations of Community and Family Services International.²

"Women and children are like scraps in refugee settings, and it takes courage for one to survive and to be a refugee. I am a living witness. I was sexually exploited and abused by men. Cruel people take advantage of war and conflict to put women and children at risk. I stood ground and took courage to fight a battle for women and children's total freedom, respect of human dignity and self-reliance. I fled Liberia the year the civil war started in 1990 and went to Guinea where I helped start schools for refugees. My partner of 13 years left me and I was left alone with seven children to support. I managed on a small stipend to pay my rent and support my children but I had to use credit to meet my daily needs. At the end of every month I was left with nothing because the interest rate was too high. I said to myself, I am being exploited again. I talked to a few female teachers. We organised a small credit union called Refugee Women Self-Help Club which loaned money with low interest. With a loan I used my baking skills to make cake, doughnuts and bread that I sold to the community. I found that there were many other refugee women who were abandoned with their children. Some young women and girls were forced into prostitution to survive. They were being raped, abandoned, oppressed and denied their rights. Many women and girls were dying of HIV/AIDS and unwanted pregnancies. I decided to counsel some of them on the pride and dignity of a woman. I used myself as an example. They told me, "Well,



Noraida
Abdullah
Karim

experienced it can ever imagine. Those who go there have no other choice. I hated the situation we were in but I did not know where to place the blame. I was angry, confused and hurt. Despite the hopeless reality of that time, I did not want to fail or to be useless. I made it my mission to finish elementary and high school. I sold on the sidewalk food cooked by my family and used the small earnings to help my family and pay my school expenses. After several years helping my fellow Muslims organise, lobby for peace and meet their needs, I decided I would act on my dream. I became a household helper for some of our relatives and paid for my schooling. I graduated with a degree in social work. Several years later, I was hired by Community



Emily Sloboh

Emily, you have a job. As for us, we are not educated and have no career.”

This got my attention. They said they were willing to learn any skills that would help them support their children. We started an organisation which has grown into Today's Women International Network. TWIN is carrying on protection and empowerment activities in Liberia and Guinea and soon we will start working in Sierra Leone. We have given marketable skills to 5,000 women and girls – tailoring, baking, soap making, computer literacy, hairdressing, carpentry, embroidery and batik. TWIN will continue to live up to its commitment that women and children will have a place of total peace and equal power.”

Emily Sloboh (ewasloboh@yahoo.com) is the TWIN Coordinator.

“One afternoon my little brother and I were playing on the shores of Lake Tanganyika. Suddenly we saw hundreds of people fleeing for their lives. They were crowding onto a boat, pushing and shoving to get on. We'd heard stories of torture and killing in our country, Zaire – which we now call the Democratic Republic of Congo. War was raging there. I feared for our lives, so I grabbed my brother's hand and ran onto the boat. We crossed the lake and landed in Tanzania, with only the clothes on our backs. This was 11 years ago, in

1996. I was 15 years old and my little brother Msimbe was 11. We were all alone. We lived and slept under trees for a few months until someone took us to Lugufu refugee camp. There, we eventually found our parents, our grandmother and our siblings. Lugufu camp is enormous – it has 32 villages. People live on rations from the World Food Programme.

Some Tanzanians called us fighters, robbers, eaters of men. They thought we were incapacitated, people of no value. Soon after I arrived I knew I must continue my education. But for a long time in the camp there was nothing – no teaching materials and no school building. We were studying under trees. I remember I was writing on the cover of a corn flour package. To pay for school I had to sell some of the food we received from WFP even though it wasn't enough to survive. Many people didn't want to go to school at first because they hoped they would not be in Tanzania for long. They believed that studying while being in a refugee camp had no sense since the education would not be recognised anywhere. I attended an English evening class operated by refugees. Most people thought that learning English was a waste of time because we don't speak English in DRC. But in 1999, thousands more people arrived at Lugufu. People realised it was important to study English so they could communicate with people working for the international organisations. My classmates asked me to teach them English. So I started an evening class which was very successful.

I decided to start a new organisation that would do more than just teach English. While still in secondary school I founded CELA – the Center for Youth Development and Adult Education – in my native Kiswahili, Kituo cha Maendeleo ya Vijana na Elimu ya Watu Wazima. Our headquarters are in Lugufu camp but we're planning on moving to Congo to work with people whose lives have been destroyed by the war. We fight against poverty and ignorance. We increase employment opportunities. We develop programmes for women and youth and we provide language training. We started with just a few volunteers, friends of mine. Now we have a staff of 44 men and women. We have given assistance to orphans

so they can go to secondary schools. We've had a campaign to teach people about HIV/AIDS. Women learn tailoring, soap making, knitting and computer skills so they can find jobs and make a living. We want women to tackle their problems themselves and develop confidence. We want women to live without fear. We want them to participate in the decisions that affect their lives. A refugee woman is everything; she is the source of whatever is in her family or household. Children in Lugufu refugee camp have been raped and forced to be married when they are very young. They have missed out on school, sometimes because they're child soldiers.



Atuu Waonaje

We're proud of our achievements. The centre has been recognised locally and internationally. We've managed to get financial support from individuals and organisations. Because of our work, every person in Lugufu is aware of AIDS and their attitudes have changed. 80% of the youth who speak English in the camp have learned it at our centre. Women get jobs because of our programmes.”

Atuu Waonaje (atuuwaonaje@yahoo.com) has lived as a refugee in the Lugufu camp in Tanzania for the last 11 years.

1. www.womenscommission.org
2. www.cfsi.ph