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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“MIREILLE’S ARC: A LIFEBOAT IN THE DRC” BY MIREILLE TUSHIMININA

CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.



In the old church building, a very confident Grace stood at the front of the room surrounded by young girls from her community. She had just finished giving her talk about her personal journey from child prostitute to community builder and motivational speaker. I first met Grace while visiting shelters of the Shalupe Foundation in Paka-Djuma, a slum in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, known for its extreme rates of prostitution and poverty.

The ConnectHER Film Festival provides a powerful platform for young storytellers to highlight critical issues facing women and girls. Students submit original short (3 to 6 minute) films focused on issues such as girls' global education, ending violence against women, redefining beauty, and girls in tech.

A place where life is tough for everyone but is most horrific for young girls expected to provide for their families. **Like Grace, teen mothers end up walking the slum's dangerous streets to sell anything they can, including their own bodies, for very little. In desperation, they use plastic bags as condoms, wrap newborns in trash bags and are often imprisoned in maternity wards until their hospital bills are paid. Others simply escape abandoning their babies.**



A young woman sits outside her home in Paka-Djuma

Paka-Djuma is Grace's home.

Shalupe (meaning lifeboat in French) Foundation works in many slums in the DRC recruiting the most marginalized and vulnerable girls determined to change their own lives and to lead others to better lives as well. Grace was showing leadership potential, she was part of the foundation's Lifeboat Academy for Success program where street girls are given a path off the street and to self-reliance. She had started prostituting at 10, under her parents command. She knew nothing of simple childhood joys such as playing with dolls, dreaming out loud or going to school.

When I spoke to her then, I was struck by how defeated she sounded; "that's the way things are and will always be," she told me, unable to imagine a way out. **I asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up, but she looked confused. Wasn't it obvious that she was already doing what she would do her whole life?** Her existence had no meaning, she believed she was to be sold for sex all her life and die young in some dark alley. No one cared about her, not even herself. Emotionless, she described herself as "just another body taking space on earth, doing its best to survive until there is no more life in it." That's why I founded the Shalupe Foundation: to invest the necessary time and energy to **take girls like Grace under my wings and turn desperate fates into inspiring stories of hope and solidarity.**

I was born in the DRC, but left the country at an early age to pursue my education in Belgium and later in the U.S.A. In 2001, after over a decade living abroad, I visited my native country which was in the midst of a particularly deadly war: 12 million died 16 years of civil war. **I was frightened, but committed to serving my fellow Congolese women struggling for survival in one of the worst countries for a female to live in.** Women and girls undergo collective rejection, a heavy social stigma associated with rape and sexual abuse. All exacerbated greatly by the culture of impunity and the social acceptance of gender violence. **The DRC was making headlines but for all the wrong reasons and people's lives were not changing.**

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How could I become the unabler? How could I help save thousands of women by building programs and sustainable empowerment?

To tackle this core question, I had to draw strength from deep in my core and my heritage – looking at myself in the mirror I called up the story of my birth and the meaning of my name. My grandfather announced my birth with these words: "This is the child that we have heard of and have been waiting for" and named me **Tushiminina Ngondo, meaning "do not lie about the moon as she is the one we've been waiting for."** Living up to this name has not been easy, but it's partly why I left a high-paying job in the United States, to be part of my country's solution.

Through our work Grace now has the tools to rebuild her life. And there are others: **Charlene, the child bride who was sold into marriage by her mother for less than USD100 to a man 3 times her age. When I met her, she was 14 and already had 2 children.** She enrolled in our vocational training, French literacy and alphabetization program which later enabled her to join our chalk making social enterprise. Now she provides for her family. There is Nanette who ran away to avoid early marriage and sought refuge in a church where I met her. **She was given the opportunity to go to school, and will be the first to get a high school diploma in her family. She hopes to become a lawyer and social entrepreneur.**

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, hopeful girls remain muted, too afraid to address gender based violence, early marriage and limited access to school in their homes and communities. Once hopeful girls like 11 yrs old Lisa who on June 15th, 2015 came across the perpetrator who made sure her life and passion to attend school were shattered.

July 22nd 2015, around 10:10 p.m., a gang of 5 men forced themselves into the home of Jeannette who lives with her 18-year-old daughter (Eunice), a 22-year-old girl (Mireille) who was pregnant with her son's child and 24 years old Christelle .

The men gang raped three of the young women in front of their families. To this day, justice has not been done. The next day, July 23rd 2015, Moliere TV, a popular community channel tells this horrific story. Even after media coverage, there was no action. The young women were terrified, the community was torn and local authorities remained dormant. But we women stepped up.

The news stories pointed at a new openness to acknowledge the prevalence of sexual violence and for some, to condemn it. We know that not only do the rape victims need help, but that whole community needs to come together to combat it. I had to overcome my own battles to be able to impact other lives, but today I'm able to connect with every single one of the girls I meet and help.

We are not fighting this battle alone. As women and girls we come together to see conflict and inequality as an opportunity to change everyone's lives.

Mireille Tushiminina is the motivational force behind the Shalupe Foundation, an action and impact driven non-profit organization run by and for Congolese women specializing in finding empowering solutions for ending Gender Inequality & Violence and Social Injustice in post-conflict DRC.