



# Rwanda & South Sudan Learning Brief

## Women's pathways in and out of conflict and poverty

A Learning Brief drawing on Life History Interviews conducted with Women for Women International participants and graduates



Photo credit: Alison Wright, 2014

### Context

Women for Women International (WfWI) began providing social and economic empowerment training to marginalized women in Rwanda in 1997 and in South Sudan in 2006. Rwanda is now stable and at peace, while the violence has resurged in South Sudan. This preliminary analysis aims to identify factors that influence graduates' lives, before and after their interaction with WfWI, using Life History Interviews (LHIs) as a qualitative research method.

While WfWI routinely collects and reports on large volumes of survey data, this set of 24 LHIs collected systematically in Rwanda and South Sudan in 2015 and 2016 is a first attempt to develop a deeper view of participants' life pathways, and the ways in which key opportunities and barriers that guide how these pathways evolve can be used to inform the organization's programming.

### Life History Interviews

The life history interview (LHI) is a qualitative method of inquiry that involves the systematic collection of testimony from people about their own experiences. LHIs allow researchers to "examine changes in the well-being of households and individuals in the context of wider events and changes in culture, norms, social

relationships, public policy and social provisioning."<sup>1</sup> LHIs can be used to "collect data about tangible facts, as well as perceptions, processes, perceived options/choices and decision-making processes"<sup>2</sup> and allow broader exploration of complex situations and relationships.

This analysis examines results from the LHI transcripts collected as part of the "Study of occupational and economic well-being among marginalized women in Rwanda," conducted by FATE Consulting from August-October 2015 with 16 WfWI graduates of the training programs conducted in 2009-2010 and in 2013-2014. An additional series of LHIs were conducted with 8 WfWI graduates from 2015 and 2016 in South Sudan in June-July 2016.

Using a semi-structured interview guide, researchers asked participants to describe key events in their lives, major changes, and the factors they believe contributed to those changes. Participants then plotted key milestones on a timeline, rating their well-being at each point on a 1-10 scale in which 10 represented the highest level of well-being.

A key aspect of analyzing LHI transcripts is to identify key themes not by frequency of mention, but by the importance of reported events or factors in determining individual and household well-being at various points in time in the eyes of the respondent, as viewed and recorded by an unbiased interviewer. These insights are therefore necessarily subjective, but provide a deep view into how an individual woman's life unfolds through a context of conflict and poverty.

**Acknowledgements:** This project was conducted in 2015-16 with funding provided by the Millby Foundation. WfWI's programs in Rwanda are implemented through the generous support of several institutions including the Cartier Charitable Foundation and the Rwanda Hope Foundation, and WfWI programs in South Sudan are implemented through the generous support of the World Food Programme, UNFCU and the Cartier Charitable Foundation.

<sup>1</sup> Bird, Kate. "Using life history research as part of a mixed methods strategy to explore resilience in conflict and post-conflict settings." [http://www.chronicpoverty.org/uploads/publication\\_files/bird\\_mixed\\_methods.pdf](http://www.chronicpoverty.org/uploads/publication_files/bird_mixed_methods.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Bird, Kate. "Reflections on using life history approaches" [http://www.chronicpoverty.org/uploads/publication\\_files/3.2%20Using%20life%20history%20research%20-%20overcoming%20the%20challenges.pdf](http://www.chronicpoverty.org/uploads/publication_files/3.2%20Using%20life%20history%20research%20-%20overcoming%20the%20challenges.pdf)

## Insights from Rwanda

Each participant was asked about their childhood, education, current life situation, health issues, material well-being before and after the training, impact of the training, support systems and crisis coping skills. When we refer to 'women' below, please note that we are referring to respondent women in these interviews. Several themes emerged from these 16 transcripts.

■ **What's past is prologue.** A participant's background may be an indicator in predicting the long-term impact of WfWI training. Even among women already identified as poor and marginalized, graduates who reported coming from "wealthy" families of origin and those who had slightly more education as children were more likely to be using their vocational skills. Many of the graduates who had returned to subsistence farming had little or no education and said their families struggled economically. This finding aligns with research on intergenerational socio-economic mobility in many countries, in which we find children often occupying similar strata of the socio-economic distribution as their parents, especially when there are few public investments through public education and health in enabling children to move to a substantially different level of well-being.

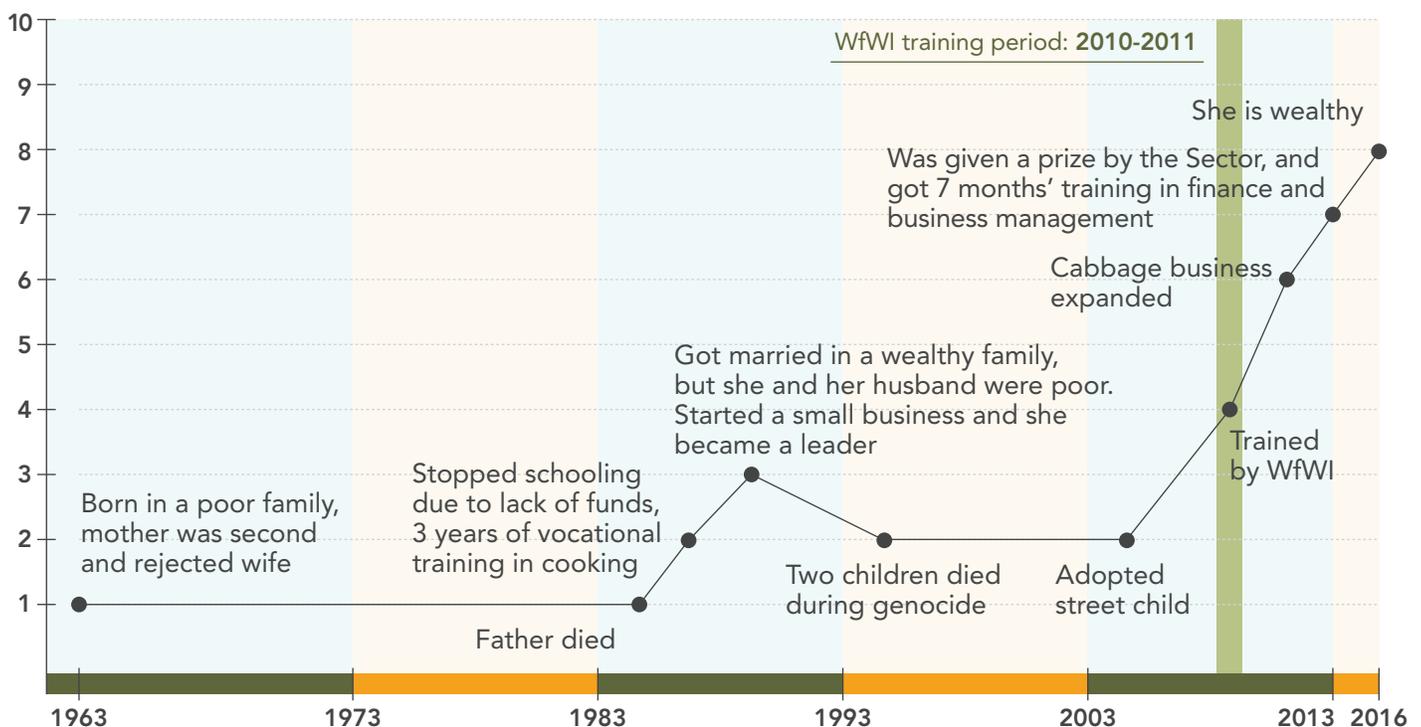
■ **A high dependency ratio interferes with income generation.** Most of the women interviewed had several children living at home, including very young children. Few had any help in caring for their children, which meant these women had to stay close to home when their children were not in school. Several specifically cited their caregiving responsibilities as a barrier to pursuing income generating opportunities. "I don't get enough time for weaving, and I can't get anyone to help with that. We know how to do that, but due to lack of time we don't practice that."

■ **Women still spend much of their time on household activities.** Most of the women said they were solely responsible for cooking and cleaning at home, regardless of their marital status. Some said their children helped by gathering cooking grass or water, and some had husbands who would share in specific tasks, although this was considered unusual. "When I am not at home, he would cook for the children. Some would say I bewitched him because he is helping."

■ **Women do not consider their household tasks to be "work."** Despite spending a large part of their day cooking, cleaning and caring for children, women do not consider their household contributions to be "work." They place no monetary value on these activities, yet the time they spend on daily chores takes away from

❖ 52-year-old mother of 8 from Rwamagana, Rwanda, trained in agriculture

Despite a difficult childhood and surviving the genocide, this graduate has leveraged her inherent entrepreneurial talent, her WfWI training and other supports to rebuild her life. **"I don't want to go backwards in poverty. I will farm and I will not go backwards."**



their ability to generate income from other activities. For women who are single heads of household, this dichotomy has even greater impact on their ability to advance economically.

■ **Positive health practices promoted by WfWI’s training program at times require additional household expenses to gain benefits.** Almost all the women interviewed specifically mentioned cleanliness and nutrition among the most valuable aspects of their WfWI training. Most said they were committed to using those skills, but several qualified their responses by adding “depending on means” or other references to the cost associated with keeping their homes and children clean and cooking healthy food. A few listed soap and vegetables among their biggest expenses.

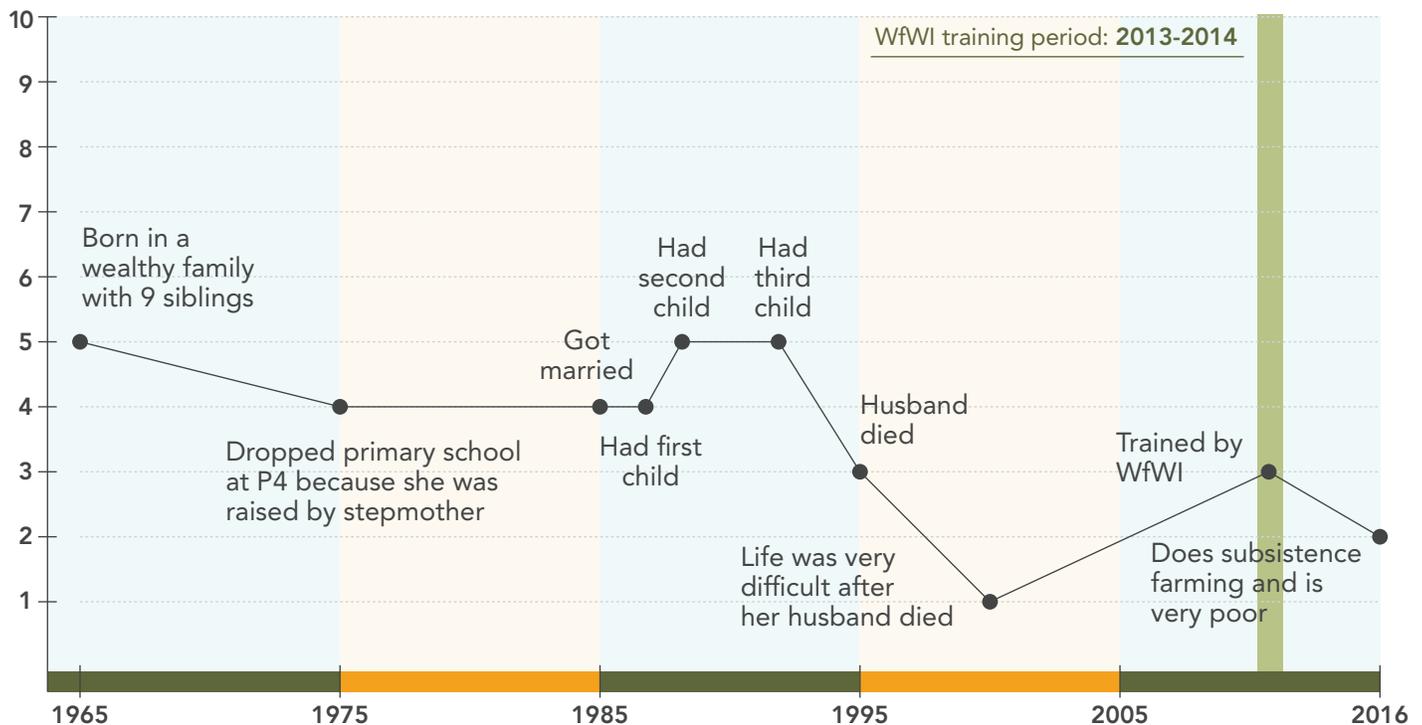
■ **Drought/climate change may have increasing impact on graduates.** Several graduates mentioned how “sunny” it had been, and how that had affected their ability to find work, farm their own land or prepare nutritious food. Apparently referring to the lack of available wild vegetables, one woman said, “We used to get vegetables from the field, now everyone cooks vegetables from their own piece of land.” Another said, “Before we used to look for a field and farm it, but we cannot because it has been so sunny.”



In Rwanda, Eugenia and other women trained in sustainable agriculture skills through WfWI work together to grow and sell vegetables. Photo credit: Alison Wright, 2014

❖ 51-year-old mother of 3 from Kayonza, Rwanda, trained in commercial farming

The death of her husband and health issues have impeded this graduate’s ability to earn an income and save. **“For those who are able...they are in business... they have people living with them and helping with the household activities... I could not leave my household.”**





**Women train in beekeeping.** Photo credit: Alison Wright, 2014

■ **Health issues impair graduates' ability to earn and to save.** Many women reported chronic health issues, ranging from recurring malaria and typhoid to stomach problems, headaches, and lack of energy. Some reported psychological trauma linked to prior conflict or the loss of a child due to miscarriage. Several were also caring for a disabled child or spouse. Recurring health problems can have a double economic impact: Increasing expenses for health care, medicine and community-based health insurance (CBHI) while reducing earning capacity.

■ **Some of the most valued benefits of WfWI training are intangible.** When asked about the impact of their training, many women talked about improved relationships with their spouses, joint decision making and better communication. "I used to be angry and not talk to my husband. Now I talk to him."

■ **Extended vocational training may be required to prepare graduates for successful employment.** Mastering a vocation may require more than 12 months of training, particularly for women who are learning skills for the first time. A woman who trained in hairdressing said, "The training wasn't enough time because we had a lot to cover... The one who benefitted the most was the one who already had a basic knowledge about the skills they were being trained in. For those who were new, we did not learn much."

■ **Initial investment is required before women can use certain vocational skills.** Women cannot farm if they do not have access to land, fertilizer, tools and seeds. They cannot tailor clothes if they cannot afford a sewing machine. The lack of funds for initial investment barred many women from using their vocational skills, or from scaling their operations to produce greater profits. "I

trained in farming, but I do not have any land to farm." "If I could invest more in my farming, I could get more out of it." "If I had land to farm, that would be beneficial."

■ **Competition reduces profitability.** Several women said the increasing competition with other local businesses made selling certain products unprofitable. Some addressed the challenge by growing different crops, such as tomatoes or plantains, while others traveled to other regions to purchase scarce products and resell them closer to home. For those who had learned a new vocational skill, such as bakery, competition was a bigger issue. "About the donuts that we were trained to make, there are many people doing that and they go to waste easily."

■ **Women lack access to markets for certain products.** A woman who trained in basket-weaving and worked with a cooperative expressed frustration with their inability to find customers for their products. "There is practically no market to sell my products...If we could have someone to buy our products on order that would make a big difference... for example, if we could get foreigners who would buy our products."

■ **Saving as a practice vs. opportunities to save.** For many women, the concept of saving was the most valued information they took away from their WfWI training. "I used to get money and spend it unnecessarily, but now I can keep it for a month so I can get a pen if a child says he needs one." "Those who did not use (their stipend) for buying food were able to achieve to something." But for those with high expenses or low income, saving is impossible and their frustration is evident. "I never have saved. I don't have enough to put for savings." "When you have no income, you cannot save."

## Insights from South Sudan

The conflict in South Sudan is much more recent than the Rwandan genocide, and in many areas is still ongoing. WfWI graduates experienced violence and displacement as adults, a key difference in their experience from that of Rwandan graduates. Respondents were selected on the basis of their willingness to take the time required for the interview, and many were well-known to WfWI as active participants and leaders in their communities. A number of key insights that emerged from the LHIs in South Sudan are presented below.

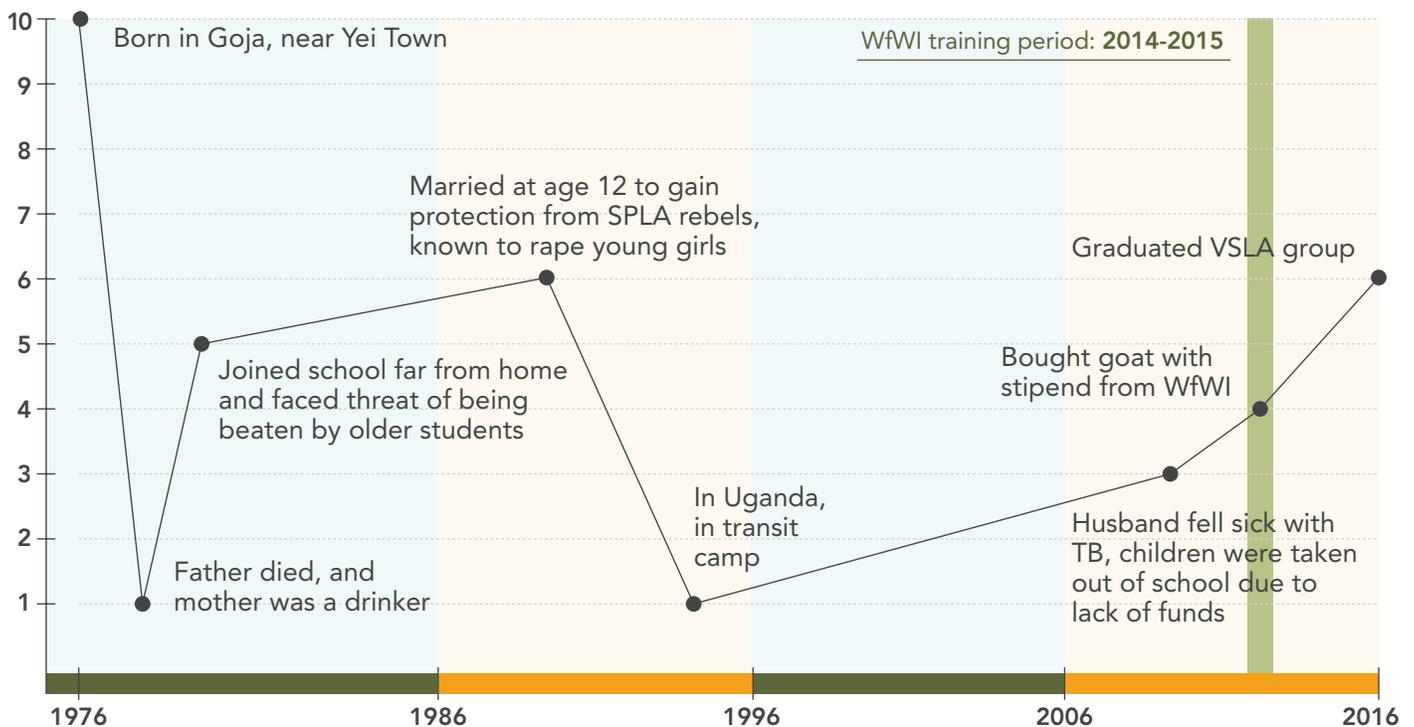
- Displacement is a key barrier to wealth acquisition.** Many of the women living in what is now South Sudan were born outside the country during various periods of war, conflict and instability. Several mentioned living in refugee camps in DRC or Uganda. Displaced people have difficulty acquiring, keeping and transporting assets, which makes wealth accumulation a challenge.
- Death and abandonment left many women as heads of household.** While all respondents had been married at one time, many had lost their husbands due to death or abandonment. Most had a large number of young children (often between 5 and 9) and were solely responsible for child care and household tasks, leaving less time for income generating activities.



Women for Women International-South Sudan participants make donuts as part of their vocational skill training. Photo credit: Tadej Znidarcic, 2012

👤 40-year-old mother of 9 from Yamba, South Sudan, trained in agriculture

An unstable childhood, displacement to a Ugandan refugee camp and chronic health issues have challenged this graduate's resilience. Participation in a savings and loan group has given her access to both financial and emotional support.



■ **Marriage at a young age.** UNICEF's State of the World's Children 2016 finds that 52% of women in South Sudan marry before the age of 18. One WfWI graduate married at 12, "because of the behaviors of the SPLA rebels raping young girls and women. She decided to marry so she would be protected, though she was not ready to get married." Early marriage impedes a woman's ability to acquire knowledge and skills, access resources and build social support networks.

■ **High rates of infant mortality left psychological scars.** South Sudan has a very high rate of infant mortality (66 deaths/1000 live births, which is x10 that of the US). Many graduates had lost children to miscarriage or complicated deliveries, and reported lingering trauma from the experience.

■ **To pay for health care, many sell assets or tap savings.** When a child falls ill due to malaria or typhoid, women are forced to sell crops, livestock or charcoal or tap savings to pay for medicine. Most women cited health care as one of their biggest household expenses.

■ **Women use WfWI's stipend to invest in assets.** Many women reported using their monthly stipend to purchase durable household goods and small livestock. "I have assets now, like plates, chairs, cups, spoons, beds, a cassava garden, goats, and guinea pigs."

■ **Generating income is a source of pride.** Women considered their own income separate from their husbands', controlled and managed it independently, and took pride in being able to contribute to the household. "Five years ago, I was a dependent. Currently, I stand for myself by working hard to earn and supplement what my husband provides." "My family now feeds well, because if my husband does not have, then I can provide also. We share in the needs of the family."

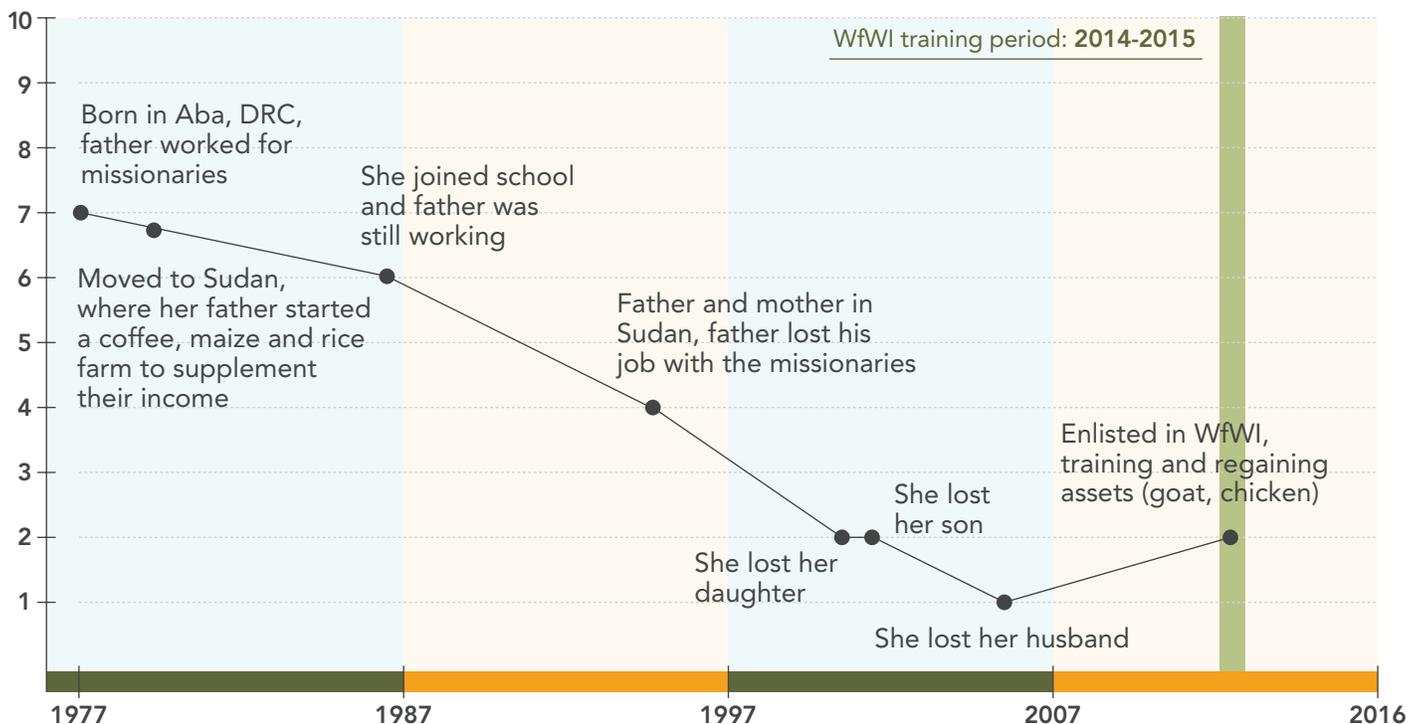
■ **Living through conflict increased women's resilience.** When asked how they cope with crisis, one women suggested that her prior experiences had prepared her to handle just about anything. "I lived in crisis for 21 years during the war in South Sudan, living in the camps, being forced to sleep in the woods and having my sisters taken by rebels." This may be tested now that violence as resurged in the region.

*"Five years ago, I was a dependent. Currently, I stand for myself by working hard to earn and supplement what my husband provides."*

- WfWI Graduate from South Sudan

👤 39-year-old mother of 7 from Nyaju, South Sudan trained in bakery skills

This participant has endured recurrent shocks, including the deaths of her parents, husband and two children. She has begun to rebuild her life with support from her faith community, and the skills she learned in her WfWI training.



## Research Method Insights

The Life History Interview can be a robust and illuminating qualitative research tool. In this initial exercise of using such a tool, we encountered a number of lessons on systematizing the method and process used to administer this tool, which we share below.

### ■ Balance trust with skill in selecting interviewers.

In quantitative research, the goal is to maintain a clear separation between the interviewer and the respondent to remove any scope for bias/interpretation. However, with the LHI interviews, we chose to have the life skills trainers and vocational skill trainers conduct the interviews (instead of the M&E data collectors who collect survey data), since the trainers maintain a close and more open relationship with participants and graduates and were in a position to respond to their narrative and probe appropriately when additional detail was needed. This strategy has the benefits of the interview drawing on the trust between respondents and trainers, but faces the limitation of trainers having limited training in data collection and research methods, which too affects the quality of the transcript.

### ■ Explore the impact of the interviewer's gender.

In this pilot exercise, we tested both female and male trainers as interviewers for the LHIs. Best practice in gender-sensitive research is to have interviewers of the same gender as the respondents to prevent inhibitions when discussing sensitive topics, and to avoid gender power dynamics from influencing the interview. We do not yet have a conclusive result from the current pilot to determine the efficacy of same-gender interviewers, but we anticipate investigating this aspect of LHI quality as we conduct more of these interviews to determine patterns.

■ **Allow sufficient time for the interview.** The 45-60 minutes allotted for the LHIs to accommodate operational constraints was found to be too limiting to conduct a thorough LHI. We will therefore return to the original timeframe used in the Rwandan LHI interviews, of allocating closer to 2 or 3 hours per interview and conducting fewer, more select, interviews.

■ **Be aware of the power of suggestion.** Commonalities in some of the women's responses may be due to shared experience, or simply agreement with an interviewer's suggestion. For example, several women mentioned 'soap' as one of their biggest expenses. Is that because their WfWI training in cleanliness requires them to purchase an expensive new item? Or have women always been buying soap, and they mention it only because the interviewer suggested it as an example of a common household expense?

### ■ Probe for the meaning of colloquial expressions.

In several of the interviews, women used common expressions that lost some meaning in translation. For

example, several women talked about having relationships with other women or their spouses become difficult or even end because "we did not understand each other." Some spoke about "looking for money," a term that probably means looking for temporary work on a farm owned by someone else, but was not entirely clear.

■ **Expect and embrace cultural differences.** Rwandan women did not appreciate a question about material well being on the Life History Interview. When asked how they were "better off" as a result of their WfWI training, most cited their new knowledge and improved relationships at home rather than increased material wealth. "The most important thing is peace at home." Asked to define the characteristics of a better off household, one woman said, "I think it is a household that has both spouses that work closely and understand each other well." Another said "Even if they have everything they need, if they live in conflict when would they enjoy the satisfaction of having all those assets?"

**These process insights will be incorporated into the revision of the LHI tool and process, and we anticipate rolling out this method of qualitative data collection in our other country programs very soon.**



**Selina graduated from WfWI's program in South Sudan and is now a role model for new participants who see her success. She earns income from farming, which she uses to pay school fees for her 6 children.** Photo credit: Charles Atiki Lomodong, 2015



Regina plants bananas, eggplants, and cassava near her home in Yei, South Sudan. She says she is happy now, because the Women for Women programme has helped her. "I am now earning income and able to provide for my 7 children." Photo credit: Charles Atiki Lomodong, 2015

## Implications for WfWI Programming

Data from the Life History Interviews suggest several ways WfWI could enhance programming for marginalized women in conflict-affected areas.

■ **Design for shocks.** In almost all instances, the training provided by WfWI shows up as a marked lift/increase in reported well-being among women, regardless of their particular starting point at that stage in their lives. At the same time, the LHIs noticeably reinforce a finding from research that movements into poverty are as important to consider as movements out of poverty. Women's lives as reflected in these interviews are not linear developments from a low starting point to a high ending point, but rather a series of high and low moments, shocks and recoveries. Key to programming in fragility and poverty is the reflection on shocks, the anticipation of shocks, and investing ways in which women's knowledge, skills, resources built through the training program can even further enhance resilience and provide some measure of insurance to prevent significant reversions to pre-existing levels.

■ **Extend to influence home and social support.** The combination of social and economic programming is critical in the way WfWI addresses the range of challenges that women encounter in their everyday lives. Furthering interactions with women's home context can identify and provide additional support to allow women

to allocate time to their social and economic growth opportunities. In the many cases where women are the sole providers for their households, such support is critical to allow for a step-change in well-being to move beyond subsistence. Stepping up men's engagement activities in both these contexts is likely to help push forward changes in gender practices and the allocation of labor in the home, which has implications for women's pursuits outside the home.

■ **Enable investments and market support structures.** Women report impediments to having sufficient capital for their enterprises. At the same time, they report strong saving behaviors developed through the program. Providing tools to channel small flows of savings into lump-sum investments, and supporting returns to such investments in vocational activities through structural support on market-specific linkages, marketing, aggregation, productivity, and profitability would greatly enable the sustenance and growth of vocational activity and viable businesses among graduates.

## Women for Women International



WOMEN for WOMEN  
International

For inquiries, please contact Women for Women International at:

general@womenforwomen.org  
www.womenforwomen.org  
www.facebook.com/womenforwomen