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### **Lumos Final Report: Female Empowerment in Rwanda**



A year ago, I could not have imagined how Rwanda would change my life and forever be interwoven into my present and future. My interest in Rwanda started when I read an article about the Gender Gap Index in 2017, where I learned Rwanda was ranked as the 5th most gender equal nation in the world. This later turned into a thesis prospectus and my decision to apply for the Lumos Award. My passion for a nation's history and international status turned into love of a people, culture and environment. While in Rwamagana, Rwanda, I lived with a host family, tutored English, taught Music, and pursued informal research on gender equality on the side. Throughout this entire experience, I have gained incredible worldly insight on the strings that connect and unite all humanity, as well as the cultural traditions that set us all apart. My Lumos experience allowed me to open my eyes to a world greater than myself, and in the process, I grew, laughed, cried, dreamed, rode, walked, ran, swam, dived, smiled, loved, cherished, doubted, hoped, questioned, learned, accepted, and fell in love with my second home, Rwanda.

During my fellowship, I had so many little moments of joy: my mornings when the sun would come out and warm me up as I brushed my teeth outside with the neighbor's chickens; my evening walk home during sunset from school through the banana trees and with the smell of eucalyptus wafting in the air; when I rode on the moto in the mornings to ishuri (school); yelling "ndaje" (coming) to everyone in the house who would let me know my moto driver, Ngoga, had arrived; coming home and having the kids beg me to have a dance party with them and when they followed my completely musical-theatre-derived dance moves; doing yoga with my host brother, Mpano, and having him take it seriously; conversations about gender equality with Laura; hugs from Laura; taking the bike from Val's bakery to school with Meredith sitting side saddle in our kitenge skirts flowing in the wind; children playing soccer along the highway; cows grazing the grass and their white and black spots sticking out in the lush green landscape; and site visits interviewing with women, having them trust me with their story.

In this report I hope to create a window for you into my experience in Rwanda, and I will start by describing the place I called home and the people I called family. Living with a host family, was a remarkably beautiful and difficult experience. Inheriting 3 younger siblings was a blast with our dance

parties, trips to the market, and duolingo app competitions. My host family was a perfect placement - my host mother, Laura, is an active advocate for women and she never shied away from talking about difficult topics with her husband, Peter. Peter was also very encouraging in my practice of learning Kinyarwanda, and was a wonderful and encouraging man to be around.



They both warmly accepted me into their home, which I extremely appreciated, despite the difficult living circumstances (latrine, no running water, not being able to cook for myself, bucket showers and a constantly dusty and cough-inducing room). While I don't know if I could ever live in those living circumstances again due to feeling sick half the time, having a small appetite due to lack of variety, and waiting to eat at 10pm every night, I do know that my host family experience strengthened my character, gave me an incredible perspective I will carry the rest of my life, and honestly gave me a lot of great, wild stories.

Laura was a teacher at Rwamagana Leaders School (RLS), which is why I was placed with her in Rwamagana, Rwanda. At RLS, I tutored 3 students in English and taught 2 music classes. I began tutoring Kevin, because he was new to the school. While I had been helping him in English, I had also been checking to see how he had been doing with academics and his social life. Kevin was a soft spoken, kind and generous boy, whom I thoroughly enjoyed spending time with and loved seeing his confidence grow in his Englishspeaking skills during our time together.

I also tutored Margaret who was a bit of a trouble maker, refusing to wear her socks and sticking to the dress code kind of trouble maker. She would often try to have a conversation with me instead of focusing on practicing reading, but sometimes I rolled with it and challenged her with some new vocabulary and with critically applying what we had recently read through our conversations. I know that we were able to form a wonderful connection based off of trust, respect and intentionality, and that if I imparted anything to her, it was the importance of knowing English and practicing acquired skills.

With Jeanette, we practiced building confidence. This applied to confidence in speaking English, presenting in class, discussing our ideas in conversations, and believing in ourselves and our abilities. The thing with Jeanette is that she has this incredible zeal to learn English and a desire to gain an education to help her family gain a better life one day. She wants to do this by starting her own business. When I asked her what kind of business she wants to start, she told me she wanted to sell clothes at the market. I could

understand why she would say this given her socio-economic upbringing, but I encouraged her to pursue higher education and to enter into entrepreneurship after gaining the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful.

On our last tutoring session, I had her draw her hand and write some words around the hand on what she had learned during tutoring and how it has made her feel. She really didn't understand why we were doing this so she didn't want to participate, so I drew my hand and did my own reflection as an example. Eventually she wrote a bit on the hand, and I filled in the rest on how I have seen her improve and why I am proud of her. I thought it honestly didn't go too well, but I chalked it up to the fact that she has exams and is dealing with family illness.



On one of my last days at the school, a school volunteer gave me a note from Jeanette. She apologized for being “so sad” on many of our tutoring days, and she explained it had been because she was stressed about her family. She also apologized for not wanting to do our vocal warm ups most days because she lied and told me she was sick. Our warm ups consisted of stretching, and then she would show me a new Rwandan dance step and we would put words to the movements.

After doing this for a month, I really saw her confidence level exponentially improve as well as the volume of her voice when speaking in conversations. But eventually it faded out because she would tell me she had cramps almost every time. In the case that she did have cramps, I did not want to push her to do the exercise. The goal was for Jeanette to learn how she could translate the confidence she has while dancing to speaking and presenting (which is why I combined the two in our warm-up).

I sought to encourage my students to be the best version of themselves, to trust in themselves and to pursue greatness in their life. It was a daily journey with the students and there were many ups and downs, but I was grateful I had the opportunity to be apart of their journey.



While at RLS, I was involved in starting a Drama Club, organizing a Talent Show and judging the singers (in a very Paula Abdul way from American Idol), as well as encouraging the students to use their voice, speak out and share their thoughts. For my individual research, I visited women's centers, schools for women, interviewed successful women and talked about the idea of "gender" versus "equality" with students, locals and my host family. During my research I visited and interviewed representatives at:

- Akilah Institute (first all-girls higher education school in East Africa)
- Nyamirambo Women's Center
- Urugo Women's Center
- Kibungo All-Girls Soccer Team (one of the only female soccer teams in Rwanda)
- Mocha Club (linked with Enactus and Nashville, TN)
- Women's Bakery (teaches trade skills and literacy)
- FAWE Girls School (Laura's alma mater)
- Muhama Refugee Camp
- ImagineWe, first publishing firm in Rwanda (founded by a Rwandan woman)

One of my main discoveries was that there is still a lot of work to do to give women opportunities to speak their truth and opinions, fight against gender norms and expectations and a patriarchal system at work in Rwanda. The current mindset of women and men as a whole across Rwanda was very disappointing. While women have opportunity, dream big, and work high up in organizations, corporations and Parliament (the main part spoken in media and literature about Rwanda), women still obey patriarchal gender norms, such that women are the only ones who cook, clean, take care of children, they can't play sports, they are only successful when they have a family, etc. This realization was heartbreaking for me as I thought Rwanda was going to be this place where women spoke their mind, and proclaimed gender equality throughout the streets. Instead, as a whole I found women to be quiet, timid, shy and barely audible when they spoke from mumbling so softly and being uncertain of whether they should share their opinions.

I met with mostly empowered women for my research, where I observed their perseverance and commitment to obtaining a better life for themselves and their country. While in retrospect, I should have surveyed both empowered and disempowered women, I think I was fearful of hearing stories of abuse, rape, abandonment, and voicelessness and the impact it would have on my findings. I focused more on what women have accomplished and organizations that allowed women to thrive and gain agency.

Marie Aimee, the Director at Nyamirambo Women's Center, explained to me, **"When women are moving, the nation is moving."** This was a powerful statement for me to realize in my research, because it speaks to where women were 25 years ago after the genocide and the path present-day Rwandan women have forged for their childrens' future. Over the past decade thousands of women have entered the workforce, opened their own businesses and become apart of revolutionizing Rwanda as a nation. Rwanda is an incredible example of the impact of a women's education, one that transforms families, communities and a nation with skills and transformative agency. Rwandan women have been doing just that, cultivating a nation of development, security, dignity and prosperity.



Despite women seeking to break marginalizing, patriarchal traditions and bravely pursuing their dreams, there is still a lot of work to be done to grow the nation's mindset from that of a fixed mindset to a growth mindset. Marie confirmed this when she relayed, "Many women think they can't grow. In order to grow you have to practice learning and ask questions." I believe the same can be said of all women, no matter where you live. We must continue to ask why things are certain ways, why we aren't allowed to do certain things and how we overcome the obstacles that stand in our way. Around the world, women are challenging these notions and the system that holds them in place - from Israel to Rwanda to the USA.



I have discussed previously how female voices matter, and this was reaffirmed when I met up with Nadine Niyitegeka, the Development Director at Akilah Institute. We discussed her experience at Akilah, and how she discovered who she was and that her voice mattered through her education. She has now been to the United States three separate times to fundraise for Akilah, and is breaking norms, expectations and boundaries of Rwandan women in powerful ways. Nadine's experience at Akilah allowed her to be "reintroduced" to herself. She broke the cycle of being timid and voiceless, and embraced her influence and power as an intelligent, driven Rwandan woman.

Akilah Student Body President, Esther, and also a close friend, similarly conveyed this notion of empowerment when she told me that, "We must give young girls examples of women who have made a change in their lives. I will educate my daughters, so they can think like me." In order to change mindsets, Rwandans need to see value in men and women. She believes, like many Rwandans, that everyone has the opportunity to do something to better themselves and the communities they live in. **"A better me, a better world,"** she emphasized in the "Women for Gender Equality" club meeting they let me sit in for. That's definitely something I desire to live by, and something I think should be a universal notion.



When we focus on ourselves, gain confidence in who we are and know with certainty what we bring to the table, we become ready to step into the action and offer up our talents to make a change and to openly discuss systems in place that prevent freedom and choice. I am grateful for this experience, because my time in Rwanda allowed me to flourish personally in an abundant way. I plan to take these experiences, stories and lessons learned with me to grow, develop and reflect on for the rest of my life.

Ibn Battatu, a Moroccan scholar and traveler, once said, “Traveling - it leaves you speechless, and then turns you into a storyteller.” My travels this past year have done just that: given me space to reflect and expand my mindset. What I take away is: confidence in myself as a woman and a traveler, as well as a craving for diversity and intercultural exchange. The Lumos Fellowship changed my life, and set me on a path I could never have imagined I would take, one that led me to lifetime friendships, love and a passion for all nations and all people universally.

