



A Transformational Education Journey: An Interview with Muriel Ilunga

I was born in Zambia, Lusaka. I am the first of a family of five of which I have two young brothers and sisters. My father is Zambian and my mother is a Congolese.

My childhood was not all fun where my Dad was not home most of the time for several months as he was a business man travelling up and down. My Mother ran a small business like selling pancakes, second hand clothing and braiding women's hair to survive. I literally sensed things were not good at a young age which had affected most of my childhood. My mother did all she could to keep us in school despite hardships.

Even though I was born in Zambia and left Zambia for Malawi at a young age, I have mostly grown up in Malawi but feel more of a Malawian than Zambian or Congolese having stayed in Dzaleka camp with my mother. As a young girl I grew up with a biblically trained conscious on which most of my choices were based on. I have grown up lacking basic necessities but had always believed that education would change my world. My Dads discipline also helped me a lot despite being abuse at times as he was strict. I managed to overcome challenges faced by fellow girls of my age such as teenage pregnancy, early marriage and/or dropping out of school due to poor living conditions.

Coming to Dzaleka

We came to Malawi in 2001. My father was politically persecuted back in Zambia and I don't know why. At the same time my mother was not comfortable of going back to Congo.

It was not a difficult time for me, but a relief when I came to Dzaleka. We came to Malawi in 2001 and registered at the Dzaleka Refugee Camp but always lived in the capital city Lilongwe. My mother, siblings and I came to live in Dzaleka in 2006. It was a relief because I knew that there was a free school, food and health services of which my parents struggled to provide for us.

Life in Dzaleka is generally difficult as most of the refugee population are dependent on the monthly food rations of which most families don't manage to live on for a full month. There are some small businesses run by refugees that cater for the immediate needs at home. A few refugees own big shops and businesses in Camp and around Malawi. It is hard living in Dzaleka and most individuals are prone to stress. And whilst resettlement is not mandatory to every refugee, most individuals still have hope that they will defiantly get a durable solution.



Muriel in Dzaleka 2013

Even if local integration was offered to refugees, very few would go for it as the benefits of resettlement are compared to that of local integration.

Learning about JWJL

I attended the very first Jesuit Worldwide Learning: Higher Education at the Margins (JWL, former JC:HEM) meeting in 2010 and read the message through posters in the camp. It was like reviving my hope for attaining higher education and I knew this came for people like me. I doubted about making it into the program because I understood that the University is from America and I thought there was little chance for me to make it into the program.

I applied for the 1st Diploma Program but did not make it as I was not sure of which writing style to use for the essay test. Some students from the 1st intake encouraged me to go ahead and sit for the essay exams of the 2nd diploma intake. I decided to use the knowledge I had from high school and apply it on the essay. I felt proud and happy when I was selected as this was the only opportunity before me with many people wanting to get into the program but could not make it.

When I first started the program, the main challenge was understanding and adapting to the American learning style in addition to learning online. I still believed I would make it as I found the coursework interesting and I was curious to learn more. I had the support from the onsite and online tutors. Onsite, the diploma 1 students helped us as well as the Project Coordinator and onsite

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tutors. All classes benefited me in one way or the other but especially Communication, Psychology, Logic and Knowledge, Philosophy, and Global Business

A Woman's Perspective

To be a woman in the camp is hard as women are exposed to a number of challenges. Due to the difficulties faced such as inadequate needs most girls and women are involved in sex work, trafficking and even abused by spouses or parents. One other challenge is that my society does not value women as much as men in terms of education and even economic opportunities. Fortunately, there are structures in the camp that address such issues but there is need of more educational campaigns on how women and girls can address such challenges.

As a woman I can say JWL helps women in a number of ways. First, JWL encourages women to apply for diploma and track programs. The education gained transforms our thinking and we see the world in a better way. Secondly, the gardening group is a source of income for the women involved as they grow vegetables and fruits in the JWL compound and sell the products. These women are those neglected by society, relatives, even spouses and even financially.

I would tell other women entering the program that they should not give up but undertake the transformational education journey for a better tomorrow. JWL is an organization that recognizes the challenges women face in marginalized society and therefore provides education so that we are empowered to face and address these problems. Taking the opportunity to study short term or long term courses is one way to transform ones life all women need to do is work hard. If they feel there is something pushing them back they can be able to communicate it to JWL and see the way forward in sorting such issues to increase enrollment of more women. JWL is an institution that is helping marginalized individuals to gain knowledge and skills that empower students to

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serve others as well as change their lives academically. The day I graduated felt like I had taken a giant leap from where I was. I felt proud and happy when I looked back to where I started.

Reflecting Back

Looking back at my time in JWL, I am now a better public speaker, have high self-esteem and confidence, am knowledgeable and marketable, and being of service to other marginalized people and communities in need. I

feel that the Muriel that first came to Dzaleka had a gloomy future but the Muriel that graduated with JWL has a bright future that will enable me to alleviate my life and those I reached out to. I would not have the same goals if I had not been at JWL This is because JWL has taught me not to be self-centered but to be there for other people. This is something significant that I might not have gained elsewhere. JWL acted as a bridge between my community, the global community and I. I feel competent and effective in my everyday life.

Today

Since graduation, I am serving my community with one of UNHCR's implementing partners in camp which is Plan Malawi as a

Community Development Facilitator working with women and girls on Sexual and Gender Based Violence. There are a number of activities we have for these women and girls so they have a voice and can stand up for their rights and challenges they face in the community.

I am interested in social work as I feel that I will acquire knowledge that will enable me to work with individuals and community members for the social wellbeing of all. Even if a different opportunity presents itself my goal will be the same “a woman in service for others”.

It is a surprise to me that many girls look up to me and say am strong and better off. I tell them that it is all about living your dream and forgetting your worries. On the day of graduation, a diploma 3 girl came to me and said “congratulations, you are strong to have completed

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Murial 2016

the whole three years” I replied and said “thank you, you can also make it”. These comments from girls and other individuals encourages me even more to be strong as the light at the end of the tunnel is becoming brighter. I have been involved in a number of activities that aim to encourage girls to enroll in the programs provided by JWL. Seeing me in front of them and speaking confidently, many girls said they would want to be like me and yes many have taken both the track and diploma courses. As a graduate, I am able to say “see I made it, you can make it too” and I would be more influential seeing that I am able to volunteer and even secure jobs.

Looking back to who I was as a young girl, I would tell her that we are all leaders’ weather small or big and what we do influences who we become. I would continue to say that a journey of thousand miles begins with one step and that what is within is greater than what is around her. To add, I would tell her that leading a moral life is rewarding to both herself and community.

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