

Introduction -- Located in Gisozi Sector, Kigali, Aspire works to improve the lives of vulnerable women through a carefully structured vocational skills training programme. In January 2016, Aspire started a pilot project teaching cookery, childcare and housekeeping skills to 100 vulnerable women a year. This includes six months of training in childcare, cookery and housekeeping in addition to rights and health awareness raising and psycho-social support. The impact of this programme is consolidated by the provision of pre-school childcare for the women's children. The following report provides details of the year-long pilot project. Fifty women were enrolled in the project in January and finished in June, and another fifty women were enrolled in July and finished in December.

For the first time, Aspire asked programme participants to pay for the training they received. Each woman contributed 5,000 RWF per month (about CAN\$8). This year Aspire earned 2.9 million RWF (about CAN\$4,650), which they have used to offset the cost of the training. This is an exciting step toward Aspire's self-sufficiency.

Vocational skills training - The training course includes 4 months of combined cookery and housekeeping training and 2 months of childcare, including early childhood development. English and French literacy were embedded in the vocational training so the women could improve their language skills.



A trainee feeds a baby in a highchair during training

- **Childcare and early childhood development:** The women learned six principles of early childhood development: cognitive development, physical development, health, hygiene and sanitation, social development and emotional development. They also learned practical skills, including caring for and feeding infants and young children, identifying childhood illnesses, child protection, and working with parents. Under the supervision of Aspire's childcare workers, they were able to practice the skills they had learned with the children at Aspire's childcare centre. They also travelled to a private crèche in Kigali to learn how other childcare centres are operated. At the end of the two-month training, the women took practical and written tests and did very well: in the first cohort, the average score was 93 per cent; in the second cohort, it was 73 per cent.
- **Housekeeping and cookery:** The women received training on housekeeping and cookery over a 4-month period. They learned what materials to use to clean homes and how to use them; hotel procedures for cleaning rooms; and how to do laundry. They visited a supermarket and familiarised themselves with the products available there. For many, it was their first visit to a supermarket. They also visited a Laundromat and used a washing machine for the first time. The average exam score for the housekeeping course was 71.5 per cent in the first cohort and 79 per cent in the second cohort. During the cookery course, the women learned kitchen safety and

hygiene; how to cook mandazi and samosas (local snack food); how to make salads; how to cook soups and sauces; and how to bake cakes. The average exam score was 68 per cent in the first cohort and 81 per cent in the second cohort.

- **Jobs and internships:** Following their training, Aspire placed thirty women in employment: twenty women are now working as housekeepers, three are looking after children, one is working in a supermarket, two are working in coffee shops and four are employed as cooks.

Seven other graduates found jobs themselves; six of them now work in private homes while one woman is a childcarer. Aspire also secured 1 to 3 month internships for 53 women in hotels and 1 woman in a school as a childcarer. The women enjoyed the internships and said they were now more familiar with the work environment. The hotel managers were impressed with the women's discipline, commitment and skills and agreed to write letters of recommendation for the interns. The managers said they would consider hiring the women when there are job vacancies.



Trainees at their graduation ceremony

Health and rights awareness-raising - In addition to vocational skills, the women also attended health and rights awareness-raising sessions to learn about topics that will help them both in their future jobs and their everyday lives. Session topics included birth control, HIV/AIDS, mental health, women's and children's rights, worker's rights, nutrition and First Aid. Some of these sessions were led by Aspire's social worker, while others (in particular, the legal trainings on women's and children's rights and worker's rights) were led by expert organisations. On average, 90 per cent of the women in the first cohort and 84 per cent of women in the second cohort attended these sessions.

Psychosocial support - Aspire's social worker counselled women individually as well as visiting them in their homes. She commonly advised women on domestic abuse, family conflict, family planning and avoiding unwanted pregnancy, hygiene, and mental health and trauma. During her home visits, she also talked to resistant parents and partners about the women's involvement in the training programme and the importance of internships. In 2016, the social worker held 44 individual counselling sessions and carried out 53 home visits.

Aspire childcare centre - Thirty-eight children attended Aspire's childcare centre on a weekly basis in 2016. The children are divided into three groups according to their age - the top class comprises three and a half to five year olds; the middle class comprise two to three and a half year olds; and the playgroup, the youngest children who are those under two years old. The children in the top class learned reading and writing in Kinyarwanda, basic words in English (such as classroom materials, parts of the body and

rooms in a house), improved their Kinyarwanda vocabulary, and started learning how to add and subtract. The children in the middle class learned their colours, how to count from 1 to 10 in both Kinyarwanda and English, and how to draw. They also practiced listening to stories and answering questions about what they had heard. There are nine children in the playgroup and they learned to socialise and play together and how to say please and thank you. Following the national curriculum, all of the children who were old enough sat exams at the end of the year. The vast majority of the children scored “excellent” (51%) or “very good” (26%). The children also received two meals per day at Aspire (a bowl of porridge in the morning, and a healthy lunch of vegetables, rice, beans and, some days, meat).



Children at the graduation ceremony for the Aspire childcare centre

Conclusion - The pilot project has gone well. The women are happy with the education they have received, and the women were especially excited to do internships. Thirty-seven women are now placed in full-time jobs and earning enough money to support themselves and their families. All of the women surveyed said they were confident that what they learned at Aspire would continue to be useful after the course ended.