

## **My experience with GRACE ONE**

My name is Susan Bakesha from Uganda. I joined the GRACE project in July 2005 during the first GRACE Methodology workshop that took place in Durban. I was part of the team that worked on the project titled “The Uptake and Impact of The CD-ROM: Rural Women in Africa: Ideas for Earning Money”. The project was initiated by Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) and my other team mates Dorothy Okello and Angela Nakafeero were the lead researchers and I was the research assistant. As a matter of fact, Angela was supposed to attend this particular workshop since she was the team leader. It so happened that during that time of the workshop, Angela was expecting and the doctor advised her not to travel since this would not be good for the baby. Similarly Dorothy was nursing a baby and could not travel too. For those reasons, none of them could attend and I was requested to represent the team. I was hesitant to travel since my mother had a month earlier undergone a major brain surgery to extract a tumor. Although she had been discharged, her recovery processes was quite difficult. Since she was directly under my care and in my house, I feared that she might die while am away. I shared this with my siblings and they encouraged me to attend the workshop since they considered it a great opportunity for my career. Two of them accepted to stay at home and take care of mother while I was away.

My first experience was rather strange. The workshop organization and delivery of knowledge and skills was new to me. At first I felt lost. I wondered whether I was in the right place. Ineke’s methods of facilitation were totally new to me. I felt like I knew nothing about research and this made me nervous sometimes. I had to unlearn some things in order to understand the new approaches. I had been used to doing things in a certain way. For instance, in most workshops I had earlier attended, the facilitator would deliver information about a given topic, make notes points on the flip chart and give handouts every end of session. At the end of a 10 day workshop, one’s note book would be full of notes.

This time, the flip charts and markers were there. But the facilitator choose not to use them, save for only a few occasions. The seating arrangement was strange, the meditation and drawing of pictures dominated our interactions. However, there were concepts that were emphasized over and over again. These included among others keeping the focus, coherence and engaging your inner self in whatever you are doing. For the first time, I realized that I needed to link my inner being and sometimes spiritual being with my project. I learned to engage my brain more than usual and allow my spirit to be free to think and engage my surroundings to be able to discover the hidden meanings of my actions and the people around me. However, this took some time since I found it time consuming and sometimes demanding and exhausting. One of the main reasons was that it required one to have overall control over the project so as to be able to make decisions and gain ownership of them. The fact being that I was a junior in the management of the project, I felt sometimes tired and drained. At some point, I felt like giving up, but this meant that the project would end. My colleagues often argued that I needed to attend all the workshops for continuity purposes. And because GRACE could not facilitate more than one person to attend the subsequent workshops, I was requested to attend the

subsequent workshops and hence the responsibility to undertake all the project activities after field work, and in particular writing the chapter. Although I considered this an opportunity to spread my wings, it was rather challenging for the reasons I have already shared. Having the responsibility to undertake given tasks without the ability to control and make decisions that facilitate implementation of such tasks was one of the biggest challenges I had to deal with.

What did I do to face the situation? I choose not to give up. I did not want to let myself, my mother<sup>1</sup> and those that believed in me down. I choose to refocus and train my mind to look out for the best opportunities that GRACE provided. One of the things that kept me going was that I had the opportunity to write a chapter which would be published by one of the renowned publishers in the world, Zed Books! This was my first time and I felt great whenever I thought about having my name written against one of the chapters in the GRACE book and cited by readers in future. Indeed, the launch of our book, *African Women & ICTs: Investigating Technology, Gender and Empowerment* in Dar es Salaam was one of the most defining and memorable experiences in my life. I felt proud of myself and my contribution towards women's empowerment became real and tangible. It gave me the hope that I could do and achieve more, both as an individual and also working with others.

GRACE also enabled me to meet, interact and work with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, academic qualifications and age groups. Having to share and exchange ideas with academically accomplished people like Prof. Ruth Meena (Tanzania), Prof. Grace Bantebya (Prof. Bantebya is my former lecturer and supervisor at Makerere University), Dr. Buhle Mbambo (Zimbabwe) and Leila Hassanin (Egypt) was at first intimidating. However, as time went on and as I came to know them better through interaction, I felt comfortable since in GRACE we would communicate with each other using our first names. I was often challenged by their humility!

GRACE also taught me to become more confident about what I do. Through GRACE I have improved my knowledge and skills in feminist theory and gender analysis and pass this on through different assignments like policy analysis and training.

I learned to love myself without feeling guilty. I discovered that I needed to love and develop myself before I share these values with others. Ineke is well endowed with self development skills which she often shared and integrated these in the workshop programmes. I admired her energy and wisdom.

I must confess that GRACE was sometimes a long and exhausting journey, but the new ideas, concepts and methods of work made it lighter. Anne Webb, the Coordinator of the project was another inspiration to me. Her humility and approach to situations even when the journey appeared difficulty was reassuring. I often admired her intellect and analytical skills. At the end of it all, I was glad to have been part of the journey. As I set

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<sup>1</sup> My mother passed on three weeks after I returned from the Durban workshop. She had been a major inspiration in my life and although she was dead, I knew that she would be happy to see me completing the journey successfully.

off for the second phase, I anticipate greater experiences which will make me a better person in all aspects of life.