

EMILY SLOBOH – SPEECH FOR VOICES OF COURAGE AWARDS LUNCHEON – 10 May 2007

Distinguished personalities, I greet you. I am grateful today to receive the Voices of Courage Award.

I want to remind us that women and children are like scraps in refugee settings, and it takes courage for one to survive and to be a refugee. I am a living witness -- I was sexually exploited and abused by men. Let us know that cruel people are taking advantage of war and conflict to put women and children at risk. I stood ground and took courage to fight a battle for women and children's total freedom, respect of human dignity and self-reliance.

I fled my country, Liberia, the year the civil war there started, in 1990, and went to Guinea, where I helped start the Refugees School System. I began as a nursery school teacher and worked my way to Head Mistress. In that time, my partner of 13 years left me and I was left

alone with 7 children to support. I managed on a small stipend to pay my rent and support my children, but I had to use credit to meet my daily needs. At the end of every month I was left with nothing because the interest rate was too high for me. I said to myself, I am being exploited again. I will take credit no more.

I talked to a few female teachers. We organized a small credit union called Refugee Women Self-Help Club, which loaned money to its members and outsiders with low interest. With a loan from the club, I used my baking skills to make cake, donuts and bread that I sold to the community.

I found that there were many other refugee women who were abandoned with their children. Some young women and girls were forced into prostitution to survive, were being raped, abandoned, oppressed and denied their rights. Many women and girls were dying of HIV/AIDS and unwanted pregnancies.

I decided to counsel some of them on the pride and dignity of a woman. I used myself as an example. They told me, "Well, Emily, you have a job. As for us, we are not educated and have no career." This got my attention. I asked if they would like to make bread and they said they were willing to learn any skills that would help them support their children. This was a great challenge for me. I thought, "The best minute I spend is the one I invest in people, everyone is a potential winner."

I decided to take on this challenge, to counsel people who were traumatized, frustrated, victims of gender-based violence. We started an organization which we named, "Today's Women." Today's women were to know their rights and stand for their rights. This is how TWIN, Today's Women International Network, was founded in 2000.

TWIN is carrying on protection and empowerment activities in Liberia and Guinea. Soon we will start working in Sierra Leone. We have helped 5,000 women and girls. We teach people about Gender-Based Violence, including female genital mutilation and HIV/AIDS. We offer reproductive health and life skills training.

Almost 800 women have taken part in skills-training, including tailoring, baking, soap-making, computer literacy. They have learned hairdressing, carpentry, embroidery and batik. More than 300 women have received grants. TWIN established a day care center and primary school, which more than 900 children have attended since 2003. TWIN has also established a legal aid clinic.

Today's Women International Network will continue to live up to its commitment that women and children will have a place of total peace and equal power to

defend us. I encourage foundations, organizations and individuals to join the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children to end the plight of the abused. We consider this award a challenge to motivate our endeavours to accomplish this vision.

Every one of you present here today, I thank you.