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Notes from the field

Legal volunteers in Ghana change lives through Domestic Violence Act

By Crossroader Paula Stromberg, Accra, Ghana

When Ausi Dziku's* husband died, she was faced with the prospect of being forced to marry her deceased husband's brother or be expelled from the family home.

A 40-year-old vegetable seller in the Volta region of Ghana, Dziku refused to give in to the family's demands and sought the counsel of Justine Dei-Zanga, a legal literacy volunteer trained to help women access the justice system. Dziku did not love her brother-in-law, she told Dei-Zanga. And thanks to a local radio show hosted by the legal volunteer, that features women's legal issues, Dziku also knew that what his family was asking her to do was illegal.

Legal literacy volunteers are community members who participate in specialized training with Women in Law & Development in Africa-Ghana (WiLDAF), a local Crossroads partner. The program enables volunteers to provide women in their communities with critical assistance in accessing the justice system and addressing issues like violence and property rights.

After taking on Dziku's case, Dei-Zanga accompanied her to meet with the deceased husband's family. They refused to accept that the newly passed Domestic Violence act prohibited them from forcing her into marriage or denying her the right to inherit her husband's property, explained Dei-Zanga in an interview. So, with Dei-Zanga's support, Dziku took the family to court. And she won.

The court upheld her right to refuse to marry the brother-in-law and to take possession of the home she shared with her late husband. The ruling has meant the difference between homelessness and stability in Dziku's life. Today, she continues to sell vegetables and look after three children in her own home.

In Ghana's Central Region, legal literacy volunteers are also providing women with essential support to fulfill their rights. Josephine Eshun, a legal literacy volunteer in the town of Komenda, described another recent inheritance case.

After her husband's death, this woman's in-laws refused to give her any piece of their farmland. She stood up for her rights, explained Eshun in an interview. After his funeral Eshun spoke gently to the man's family and explained that marriage laws also protect women. The result? The family agreed to give the woman a share of farmland. Now, she has the ability to support herself.

In her community, Eshun has also confronted the local church. When it was revealed that a 70-year old pastor had sexually assaulted a young girl, Eshun went to speak with him. The moment the pastor saw her coming, he ran away from the village, she said. The elders of the pastor's church begged her not to go to the police. She took the 12-year old girl to the hospital, but the family later refused to discuss her condition.

Despite the family's reluctance to speak publicly about their daughter's sexual assault, Eshun said that legal literacy volunteers are improving lives. The pastor has never returned to the village and the whole community witnessed her ability to make



Legal literacy volunteer Justine Dei-Zanga's intervention and counsel enabled Ausi Dziku to assert her rights by refusing to marry her brother in-law and retaining possession of her family home after her husband's death.



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change.



By supporting women to stand up against sexual and physical violence, to demand their rights to property and to refuse illegal marriage, legal literacy volunteers are playing a critical role in implementing Ghana's Domestic Violence Act. They are helping to move this landmark law from the page into the real lives of women and girls.

Legal literacy volunteer Joséphine Eshun helps local women to access justice.

** The names of the women in this story have been changed to protect their privacy and security.*

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