

The report on March 2018 Women Healing Retreats in Rwanda.

YEGO Rwanda is a non-denominational Christian NGO founded to care for Genocide survivors and vulnerable youths, to assist them in healing psychologically from their traumatic experiences, and to promote the development of a culture of peace and tolerance. Yego also works with traumatized women, giving them opportunities to heal, to raise their children and develop themselves. One of Yego Rwanda's core missions is healing which is crucial for good health, peace, and self-development. As part of this mission Yego recently hosted the fourth annual Women's Healing Retreats .

The Yego Women's Healing Ministry Retreats are unique three day weekend retreats that are conducted in the lush Gihindamuyaga monastery resort located in Huye district, three hours away from Kigali. The purpose of these retreats is to provide healing for women who have faced various tragedies in their lives. This ministry began in March 2015 with only 23 women. We can now proudly say that more than 100 women have attended these retreats and have professed that they were transformed by the time they spent there.

The retreats can be defined simply as time spent away from one's normal life for the purpose of sharing one's story with fellow women and reconnecting, usually in prayer, with God. These retreats are specifically targeted for women and girls from low income backgrounds mainly because that is a fair representation of the average Rwandan woman, but also because they are the ones most in need.

The women's Healing ministry under Yego Rwanda, has in total eight volunteers and one facilitator, Dr.Kae Neufeld.

These volunteers known as the "Core team" help run the day-to-day affairs of the ministry. Two of these volunteers are Yego Rwanda founders and directors Pastor Emmanuel and Athanasie Gatera. There is the administrator and accountant, Divine Irakoze, and 6 women who make up the rest of the core team, They include Martine, Josephine, Annick, Cassilde, Chantal and Athanasie. Grace Gatera serves a translator and represents girls on the core group. These women attended the first retreat, and after that they decided to volunteer their time and effort to help grow the ministry.

The core team helps with planning, logistics, communications, and strategizing for the retreats. They also are coordinators for "zones", small fellowship groups where women who have been to the retreats gather monthly to catch up and pray. The

core team does all of this voluntary work even though they themselves too still have struggles with money and taking care of themselves.

Grace also helps with the translation from Kinyarwanda to English and back as she is fluent in both languages.

The retreats took place on March 16 -18 and March 23-25. The retreats was facilitated by Dr.Kae Neufeld from Edmonton ,Canada, our regular facilitator, who also hosted sessions during the retreat.

Forty five people attended the retreats collectively, 18 women and two facilitators in the first retreat and 23 women and 2 facilitators attended the second one. All attendees, both girls and women, gathered in one class for all sessions of teachings, games and crafts. They were divided into girls and women groups for the purpose of sharing stories (two women and one girls' groups), with a core team members to help set the ladies at ease and to aid as facilitators during the sessions.

The sessions began on Friday with the ladies arriving at 12:30pm from Kigali, the capital city of Rwanda. After this the women were shown to their rooms, which are fully furnished and self-contained. Then they proceeded to the communal dining area where they shared lunch and acclimatized. Most of the women that we get are deeply traumatized and come from very poor backgrounds so it may take them awhile to feel comfortable enough and that is why we started with lunch.



The first retreat members at lunch

After lunch they had time to rest and refresh themselves and then the sessions began. In line with the purpose of the ministry, the goal of these retreats is to have the women tell the stories of the tragedies they have faced in life.

The ladies shared their stories, of being raped, of being deprived of education, of being abandoned by their husbands, of their relatives treating them so badly that they had to run away.

One girl shared how she began working as domestic help when she was seven because she had been orphaned. She was often cold and hungry from the daily trips she had to make to a nearby forest to collect firewood. One day she picked a ripe avocado from the tree at the house she worked at and ate it. The people she worked for then handcuffed her and burnt her feet and her fingers.

The retreat, featured sessions on forgiveness, self-esteem, love, God's love for us all and the journey after. The lessons were filled with music, prayers, dancing and singing, games, crafts and walks in nature, for which Gihindamuyaga is famous.



The ladies were always provided with breakfast, mid-morning snacks, lunch, mid-afternoon snacks and dinner. One of the ladies who came to the retreats this year said that she wished she did not have to go back to Kigali because she had never had food like that in all her years of living. She said that it was also another kind of healing, to be able to eat to her fill whenever she wanted.

Some of the women's favorite games included "The Big Wind Blows", "Houses and Tenants", as well as the sack throwing game. One of the girls said that her favorite part of the retreat was the games, because they brought back the feeling of her carefree childhood.

Every evening, the women gathered to sing, pray, and get some time to rest. There were always art supplies in the conference room for those who wished to work on their artwork.

On Sundays, there were Roman Catholic worship services at the monastery centre at the nearby parish, and a non-denominational worship service at the retreat centre.

After worship, the ladies had lunch, congregated for the last session which included singing, dancing and some farewell speeches. Speaking for the ladies, Jackie said she would never forget the experience. She said no one had ever listened to her before and soothed her. She said that they had hope that all would

be well in the long run. She also took the opportunity to thank Kae for the great love that brought her all the way from Canada to Rwanda to give them hope and lessons and assured her that they would always love and pray for her even as she went back to Canada.

After that they went back to their rooms so they could pack and check out. Core team members distributed transport fares for the ladies to use once they got back to Kigali to be able to get home as some of them do not have any money at all.

The ladies took pictures to commemorate the day and then left for Kigali.



Ladies from the 16-18th retreat



Ladies from the 23rd to 25th retreat