

GAINING POLITICAL LEADERSHIP THROUGH THE VILLAGE SAVINGS AND LOANS SCHEME

Growing up, Rose Marie Fatorma saw her once vibrant hometown of Tongo experience the effects in the decline of diamond mining as absentee fathers, poverty and conflict ravaged through households leaving mothers who were heavily dependent on their spouses with nothing. As a 52 year old Pastor of Christian Faith, Rose Marie Fatorma believes she can return Tongo to glory by empowering women.

This strong belief led Rose Marie to focus on the construction of water and sanitation facilities in the town, the enrolment and retention of girls in schools, advocacy on ending gender-based violence and discriminatory cultural practices. However knowing that she needed the requisite training if she indeed wanted to make sustainable changes in the town, she approached SEND Sierra Leone, a local organisation implementing the More Than A Woman (MTAW) project supported by Irish Aid. SEND Sierra Leone took keen interest in Rose Marie and encouraged her to participate in VSLA training as a way to learn how to mobilize resources within the community through savings. Realising her interest in improving society, Rose Marie underwent a series of leadership, community mobilization and capacity-building training to equip with her necessary skills to contest for political office under SEND Sierra Leone's women political empowerment initiatives.

Councilor Rose as she is now called, after successfully winning the Councilorship for Ward 042,



Fig 1. COUNCILOR ROSE ADDRESSING AN INTERVIEWER IN HER COMPOUND

Constituency 015 in 2018 embarked on more initiatives that focus on developing the social and human capital of the women population especially in Tongo. Fueled by her enthusiasm and support from the MTAW project, she created the Tewoh Women Village Savings and Loans Association (VSLA) and seven other VSLAs made up over 200 women who have received the needed support to empower themselves through savings. These groups were formed to strengthen member's economic foundations while also empowering them socially and politically. This all can assume leadership, governance and decision making roles in their communities. During their training, sexual reproductive rights, WaSH and awareness raising seminars on gender-based violence, reporting and referral pathways and women's rights concerns were among the key topics.

Rose Marie encouraged the women to be self-reliant and focus their efforts in growing the saving amounts in the VSLA boxes as that would be their source of access to loan facilities. Driven to ensure independence, Rose Marie challenged some group members to invest their savings into purchasing the needed administrative support items for the VSLA recording.

Blessed with arable land, the eight VSLAs under Councilor Rose stewardship have invested into the cultivation of rice, cassava and groundnut on over ten acres of land. This initiative will allow the VSLAs to earn income collectively from the sale of the harvest and also provide foodstuffs for their households. COVID-19 proved to be a test for Councilor Rose but the resilience of the women in her

eight VSLAs proved to be greater as the women were able to save over \$ 4200 in 2020. A total of 175 women were able to access loans of varying amounts to support their household expenses such as health and education related expenses, and also business activities.

“The VSLA has been an important factor in my political success as it allows me to engage my fellow women personally and show them that self-reliance is possible through training and dedication”, she expressed.

Councillor Rose Marie Fatorma hopes to become the next Member of Parliament for Constituency 015 in the upcoming 2023 elections thanks to the coaching and mentoring she continues to receive from the More Than A Woman project and her fellow VSLA members.



Fig 2. Councilor Rose visits one of the group's groundnut farms in Tonga