



SUCCESS STORY

Tragic Hope: The Story of Naomi



Above: A resident physician receiving obstetrical training at a Project AXxes-assisted regional hospital

Photos: Project AXxes.

Below: Women waiting at a regional hospital for fistula repairs



Thousands of women and young girls suffer from fistulas in DR Congo. A fistula is caused by obstructed labor (dystocia) or sexual violence (rape and trauma). They cause involuntary loss of urine (incontinence) or stool and severe social stigma and distress. Many fistulas can be prevented through appropriate obstetrical care and repaired through delicate and lengthy surgical procedures.

Project AXxes has trained physicians and nurses to treat and manage fistulas in regional hospitals. The project has also worked with health centers and communities to create an awareness of this condition and need for early recognition, appropriate management, and referral. In the process we have encountered stories that are both tragic and hopeful.

One such story is that of Naomi (not her real name). Naomi was married off at age fourteen by her uncle who was offered a dowry. Six months later she was pregnant. Her husband was unwilling to send her for prenatal care at the local clinic, and sent her to her own village near the end of her pregnancy. When her labor pains commenced, her cousin walked her to the thatched hut of a traditional birth attendant rather than to the health center. Naomi spent four agonizing days in labor. She was told to push, and had others sit on her abdomen. Eventually it was determined that the baby had died, and on the 5th day she was put astride a bicycle and pushed to the hospital where the dead child was removed by c-section. Unfortunately Naomi's troubles did not end there.

After a long hospital stay, prolonged by having no one to pay her bill, Naomi walked back to her husband's village. However, she now had a sizeable fistula and was incontinent of urine. She smelled chronically and could not keep her bedding or clothes clean. Her husband banished her back to her home village where she was grudgingly taken in.

For the next eight years Naomi was a pariah in her own village. She survived in a tiny dwelling by fixing clothes with a sewing machine her grandmother gave her. One day she heard on the radio that a team of doctors supported by the USAID-funded Project AXxes would be coming to a nearby hospital to treat women with fistulas. She decided to sell her precious sewing machine in order to have money to support her during what she perceived would be a long and expensive hospital stay.

The happy and hopeful ending to this story is that Naomi's fistula was successfully repaired, and she received the operation free of charge. During her lengthy hospital stay she was fed and tended by empathetic and caring health workers. Naomi is now physically healed and back in her home village. She has found someone who has asked her to marry. She is back sewing clothes, with the hope that she'll be soon be making clothing for her own family and children.