Project Name: Women’s Economic Development
Country Most Impacted by Project: United States
Project Location Additional Information: Kigali, Rwanda
Project Impact: The Women’s Economic Development program aims to support women and communities in Sub-Saharan Africa and beyond by providing vocational training and opportunities for work. The program helps trainees succeed and contribute to the economic growth of the region while uplifting surrounding communities and families.

Project Description
This year marks the tenth anniversary of the Women’s Economic Development program, a Bloomberg Philanthropies Founder’s Project dedicated to promoting work opportunities for women in Sub-Saharan Africa and beyond. The program is driven by the core beliefs that women play an essential role in driving change in their communities and that they are central to economic growth. One of the marquee initiatives of the program is agricultural training for female coffee growers in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, who have transformed the coffee industry in the region.

As one of the fastest growing sectors, coffee production fuels economic development in the country. In 2013, Bloomberg Philanthropies partnered with Sustainable Harvest Coffee Importers to launch the Relationship Coffee Institute, which provides women with training, access and opportunity in the industry.

The trainings equip female farmers with essential agricultural knowledge and helped to increase local demand for coffee through a series of coffee tastings across the country. It also connects local producers to international markets – improving incomes and the quality of coffee. The Relationship Coffee Institute created a new brand, Question Coffee, to market the coffee produced by local women, and launched a café and wholesale business to expand the domestic market. In one year, the product has been sold to 19 different wholesale customers around the world.

Benefits
The original goal of the Women’s Economic Development pilot program was to provide 3,000 women in Rwanda with agricultural training. Over time, it became clear that there was a much greater demand for training among local women looking for opportunities and economic independence. In the last ten years, the program has expanded beyond agriculture to other industries and enrolled more than 200,000 women. As a result, the program has helped the lives of families and communities totaling more than 923,500 people in four countries in Africa. The women who graduate from the Women’s Economic Development program do so with priceless skills, knowledge, and confidence to thrive in various industries, including the coffee industry. Question Coffee is served at high-end hotels across the region, like Marriot, Radisson, and Serena as well as in Bloomberg L.P. offices around the world. The product has also been featured in the Starbucks Reserve collection in the U.S.

The coffee grown by these women is also served by RwandAir on flights across Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. Over the next two years, RwandAir will serve over two million cups of Question Coffee. The program has also had an impact on industry standards as the Women’s Economic Development program and its partner organizations look to apply lessons learned from Sub-Saharan Africa to create the first global industry standards and fair practices for female entrepreneurs who create products using their hands.

Readers can help by
The impetus to invest in women in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo is to support them in gaining inroads to an industry that is one of the fastest growing, but often omits female participants. Readers of CoffeeTalk Magazine can help raise awareness about the supply chain that is intrinsic to the coffee industry and advance goals of sustainability and transparency. Making ethical decisions at the checkout line and understanding the origin of the products you buy is one of most important ways that readers can support women in developing nations in Sub-Saharan Africa and around the world.

The women enrolled in our programs have not only realized economic independence for themselves, but also immediately invest in their families, communities and countries. That is the impact that readers and consumers can sustain each time they enjoy a cup of coffee produced by women coffee growers.