



A Rwandan refugee who sustains his wife and four children by producing crafts made of banana fibre in Nairobi.

## Empowering urban refugees

Christine and her husband arrived in Kenya in 1998, after fleeing Rwanda. They came with five children and she has given birth to three more in Kenya. The family now lives around 50km outside the Kenyan capital, Nairobi.

Like them, many refugees opt to stay in urban areas, preferably in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, instead of moving on to one of the four designated refugee camps in northern Kenya. Most of them end up living among the Kenyan poor, in disadvantaged locations with regard to housing, sanitation and security. Although refugees face similar challenges to poor Kenyans, their situation is aggravated by the fact that they have no social network to rely on, often do not speak the local language and sometimes face hostility or harassment.

Unlike those who move on to the camps, refugees who reside in urban areas receive no assistance and are expected to look after themselves. However, their prospects of acquiring legitimate work permits are restricted by government legislation, policies and practice. Yet they still work in the

informal labour market doing casual jobs, for instance as domestic workers, tailors or selling handicrafts or foodstuffs.

“We borrowed money from friends, rented a house and started making doughnuts which we sold through shops in our area,” says Christine. “With the money we earned, we managed to pay our rent, food and education for the children,” she adds.

### Loans to promote economic independence

However, in March 2009 Christine asked JRS for financial assistance because her business was about to collapse. Her husband had fallen into a deep depression and she was left as the sole bread winner. Two months later JRS granted her a loan of KSh 15,000 (USD 190).

Christine used the JRS loan to buy some equipment for her business which soon picked up. Every day, she would wake up early in the morning, prepare the doughnuts, help her children get ready for school and look after her husband. Then she would deliver the doughnuts to the retailers, most of whom are a long walking distance away. “From what I earned I could pay all expenses for the family, without depending on anyone,” she says. In March 2010 her husband died. Still resilient, she continues running the business and paid back her loan in June 2010.

Through its income-generating activities programme in Nairobi JRS provides training and small loans to between 30 and 40 people per year. “Many refugees acquired skills like tailoring, carving or crocheting in their country of origin. An initial assistance can help them become economically independent,” says Agnes Asiimwe, the Assistant Programme Coordinator.

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In 1993, JRS opened Mikono (Kiswahili for 'hands'), a craft shop in Nairobi where 70 refugees from different nationalities sell their products. Over the years, many refugees have been able to meet their daily needs with the income generated by the shop. Between January and September 2010, products worth USD 34,846 were sold. The refugees who supply crafts to the shop are aged between 20 and 60, most of them come from the Great Lakes region and almost 50 of them are women.

### Single mothers are less respected

Refugee women, and single mothers in particular, are the most vulnerable

among refugees. In most cultures a single mother is less respected than a married woman. This attitude does not change after being uprooted and displaced to another country. On the contrary, single mothers often have to carry a double burden in exile because they are disrespected by both the refugee community and the local population.

Most single mothers depended financially on their husbands before they were left behind. Being on their own, they find themselves in a precarious situation. Since they have no one to rely on, they often get depressed, unable to move on. Some develop psychosocial problems, others go into prostitution. They become an easy prey for men who not only abuse and

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exploit them sexually but also physically and mentally. Many become infected with HIV/AIDS and hence are unable to take care of their families.

However, once given an opportunity, there are many who learn how to handle the situation. "We see how their hope is revived and their dignity restored," says Irene Waweru, Director of the JRS Urban Emergency Programme in Nairobi. Like Christine, they manage to transform their lives and no longer depend on anyone, despite the tremendous challenges they face. ■

Mercy Muchai is JRS Eastern Africa's assistant regional programmes officer in Nairobi, Kenya. From 2005 until April 2010 she coordinated the JRS Income Generating Activities Programme.



Seventy refugees from different nationalities sell their products at the JRS Mikono craft shop in Nairobi.