

# “My work is to encourage”

## A look at JRS accompaniment in Nairobi

INTERVIEW

with Sr Mercy Njeri LSJ

***Sr Mercy, you have been a pastoral worker in the JRS Urban Emergency Programme in Nairobi for six years. What do you like most about your work?***

It is the contact with the people, the personal encounter that I like most. There is a certain mystery surrounding this encounter.

***Why did you start working with refugees?***

In 1998 I worked in South Africa with Catholic Development Welfare and for the first time I was confronted with refugees and the difficulties they face. I thought if there are refugees in Kenya I want to tell them karibuni [welcome], don't be afraid, just feel at home!

***What changes do you see taking place in the refugees you accompany?***

I see that they move forward in many regards. When I first meet them they are sad and lonely and nobody looks after them. Once we start accompanying and assisting them they realise they are not alone. They notice they are not just refugees in a foreign place, but there is someone to support them. They regain their dignity. They feel they are people again and begin to look at life differently although they have lost everything. Suddenly, they feel confident and become creative. They are not afraid anymore, may even set up a business; they know they are here to stay and find their way to survive.

***What has changed regarding the context they live in?***

I have noticed that refugees in Nairobi have become more aware of their rights and the same applies to Kenya as a host country. The government acknowledges that refugees have

rights. Moreover, the experience of the post-election violence in Kenya in 2008 was like a wake-up call for many Kenyans. They realised that from one day to the next, they themselves can become refugees and this has changed their attitude towards refugees. I have seen Kenyans who share their compound with refugees and support them with materials or food. They see they are poor and even if they have nothing, they help them.

***Where do the refugees you accompany come from and where do they live?***

Nairobi hosts refugees from countries such as Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Burundi and Sudan among others. They live among the local population, which means they rent houses among them and share the same daily struggles. However there are areas in Nairobi where each nationality prefers to live, for instance the Somalis in Eastleigh or the Congolese in Kayole or Kasarani. Once they are settled they integrate with the Kenyans.

***What are they most in need of?***

What they are most in need of is shelter, a mattress, somewhere warm where they can put themselves. Another major need is food. Only when these needs are met will they start looking for education. My general experience is that human beings experience a kind of isolation in the depth of their being, which at times is a spiritual loneliness and there is that desire to share with others. People who are displaced by war and have gone through crises have a strong desire to share their past experiences.

***What are your responsibilities as a JRS pastoral worker?***

My greatest responsibility is to listen and be available to the refugees. It is only through listening that I come to discover them and their material, spiritual and psychological needs and can start accompanying them and advocating for them. The first step is always to build a friendship based on confidentiality and trust from both sides. With this the journey



Sr Mercy has accompanied refugees in Nairobi for six years and many have become her friends.

of accompaniment, service and advocacy starts.

***What does your average day look like?***

There is no average day. Ordinarily each day starts with a well planned schedule. However once I start moving, plans change immediately because I might be on my way to a specific family but before I reach them I meet refugees who ask me just to listen or they tell me someone is sick and I go to visit that person, inform them where they can get assistance or contact the office to find a solution.

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The refugees I visit are normally big families, they live in poor areas and often share one room which is both bedroom and kitchen, for which they pay around KSh 2,000 (USD 25) rent per month. If they are lucky they have a mattress, otherwise they sleep on a mat. We normally sit on the floor.

The men often leave in the morning to look for casual work but even Kenyans have difficulties finding casual jobs. They can only be hired if they have an ID card which for most refugees is not the case. For the rest of the day the men are idle, sitting outside, chatting while the women are in the house. If the children do not have access to school, they are at home as well.

I normally tell them what kind of assistance JRS can offer or I refer them to other agencies.

***Why are home visits so important? Is material assistance not sufficient?***

Home visits offer refugees a chance to share personal experiences which they may not have been able to share

during the initial interview. It is a time to listen, to look at the difficulties they face, to encourage them and to pray together. We normally sit on a mat on the floor while we share and we are equal, at the same level. This makes them share more than at the office.

I normally conduct these visits with great respect because I cannot take it for granted to be welcomed into someone else's home. I am happy to be accepted in their community, in their life. It gives me joy when someone opens the door for me. I thank God for this opportunity to meet the refugees. We have become as one.

Some of the refugees live far away and are bedridden and unless I visit them I will not get to meet them and they may not come to the office. Once I found a burnt child during a home visit and we took him to hospital. The parents told me they had no money to take the boy for treatment and did not even know where to take him. He would have died if I had not come.

Another time I visited a lady and noticed that her six year old boy was very shy and withdrawn. I asked her what was wrong with him and she told me she was raped in front of him. Now we are in the process of finding a place where they can both get counselling.

There was one young man who said he had a lot of problems. He worked as a house boy for a Kenyan who made him work until late at night. I asked another family if they could host him and he is a different boy now, he is at peace. I am very happy about that. Through the home visits I have met and made friends with so many refugees and I can bring them together so they can support each other.

Also, I make home visits to verify information refugees give to JRS. Sometimes it says on the mandate that a person has six dependants. But once you go and visit them you find that one may be very old and needs special care. You cannot tell this from just looking at the document. Sometimes I meet pregnant women who don't know where to go, so I direct them. Others have food but no pots.

That is why I find home visits very important. They help me to assess their situation and determine their needs.

***Which challenges do you face in your work?***

The home visits are not always smooth. In some places I am turned away or shouted at and expected to identify myself. Sometimes refugees who have just arrived misunderstand



JRS distributes food to refugees in Nairobi through five parishes.

the purpose of the visits and become suspicious.

It is a big challenge for me to meet refugees whose claim for asylum was rejected and who were not granted refugee status by the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) in Kenya. They have a lot of problems. JRS gives them time and tries to help with food, medical assistance, blankets or basic utensils where possible.

Another challenge is when I go on a home visit and find a family is not able to take their children to school because they cannot afford the uniforms. Some organisations only give two uniforms so if there are four children, the other two will have to stay at home. So you find young girls going around doing odd jobs, while others are at school.

Refugees who are sick are yet another challenge. They cannot afford to buy

medication, so they suffer. Or the young girls who arrive without their parents and are forced into prostitution because they need shelter. And you cannot offer them any alternative. That is very hard.

***If you could change something about the situation you deal with on a daily basis, what would it be?***

I would try to set up a place where these girls would be safe and where they can learn some skills to make a living. A 19-year-old Somali girl just told me the other day "I have nowhere to stay; I have no money, nothing." I had to tell her I cannot take you home, I cannot provide shelter for you. I encouraged her to move to the [refugee] camp where she could work as a teacher. Young boys are also in trouble. There is no safe place to take them.

***Your job sounds very exhausting. Where do you recharge your batteries?***

When I come home in the evening I can share with my community, they are good support. I can also share and discuss with my team at JRS and together we find solutions. At the end of each month I go for counselling and debriefing. That is how I offload the strain. I wish it could be twice a month because when I go at the end of the month carrying that entire load is a lot.

And prayer helps. In my community we have an hour of adoration each day. There I can kneel at the feet of Jesus and let it pour out. This gives me the energy to come back the following day. Without prayer, I don't know how I could deal with it all, it would be too much. ■

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