



AFRICA/BURUNDI - Education for women, to allow the whole society to grow: the commitment of the JRS

Bujumbura (Agenzia Fides) - Educating women means to advance the whole society of Burundi, one of the poorest Countries in Africa. This is why the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is investing in educational projects aimed at women who, while representing the true engine of Burundian society, are still strongly excluded from access to education and the opportunity to achieve full personal and dignified development. Only 31% of girls, in fact, continue to attend lessons at the end of their primary studies, according to official UNESCO figures. Yet, says the JRS in the information sent to Fides Agency, raising the level of education of women not only will make them feel more confident and aware of their capacity, but will also serve as a vital contribution to the development of local communities and society as a whole.

Swavis Nzeyimana is 22 years old and is the mother of two children, aged 5 and 7 months. Since January, she has been attending classes to learn to read, write and do maths. Until a few years ago she lived in a refugee camp in Tanzania and never went to school because her father, who did not have sufficient financial resources to educate all of his eight children, preferred the girls to remain at home to do the household chores while the boys were studying in class.

"Now that I have learned to read and write I feel a strong and independent woman and I see that my husband has more respect towards me - says Swavis -. For example, if I am not at home and needs to tell me something urgent before going out, he may leave a written note and he knows that I will understand. And in turn I can do the same. In addition, I learned how to do calculations and I can see the benefits when I go to the market. Before, perhaps, I would often be cheated by the shopkeeper, who took advantage of my ignorance."

Among the major obstacles concerning school attendance of women in Burundi, we have early marriage of young girls who, as a result, drop out of school because their husbands want them at home and to work in the fields. Sensitize men to send their daughters to school or their wives is therefore a core mission in the JRS education project.

Fidel Nahayo is Swavis' husband and shows all the pride of having an educated and capable wife: "Due to the fact of being able to read and write, Swavis became president of a women's association and when she obtains the literacy certificate of the ministry she will have what it takes to find a job," explained the man. "I was convinced of allowing her to attend the courses because I thought that when I was a child I had the opportunity to go to school and I am grateful for this opportunity given. So I thought it was right for her to receive education."

"There is a clear correlation between the level of literacy and poverty: a Country with a high rate of school education will be a developed Country, on the contrary a Country where most people do not know how to read and write will be mired in poverty - is the analysis of Director of JRS, Father Tony Calleja SJ -. Burundi cannot be separated from the path of education as a key factor in its development and in doing so must absolutely focus on increasing the number of women in schools. Reinforcing women, in fact, has a positive impact on families, men and society as a whole." (L.M.) (Agenzia Fides 09/10/2012)