68. Women in this World

The majority of our SSS members are women and I have come to witness and admire the courage with which they reach out, and metaphorically, embrace the local people. Yes, the men do it too but there is a special bond between women in this country who are forced into stereotyped roles of cook, washerwoman, water carrier and bearer of children. Too many girls are deprived of educational opportunity but instead are trained into the stereotype. A report prepared for the European Union in 2009 states the dreadful statistic: ‘Only 8% of female adults in the south can read and write.’

The same report states:

*Development indicators in Southern Sudan are amongst the lowest in the world; over 90% of people in Southern Sudan live on less than $1 per day. One out of six women who become pregnant will die and one in six children die before their first birthday. The under-five mortality rate remains high at 135 per 1,000 live births, despite having reduced significantly from 250 in 2001.*

Many women are condemned to the role of being wife No. 2, 3, 4 or even 34! Polygamy is still common. Recently, as part of International Women’s day on 8th March, Sr Josephine and Sr Rosa travelled 80 kms to Ibba to meet with the women there. The message had not been passed on and there was no-one expecting them when they arrived. But with the aid of the local catechist, almost 100 women gathered to discuss the place of women in this country and the necessity of giving their daughters greater opportunity.

A few days later I drove Sr Josephine to Nande, almost 100 kms in the opposite direction. This time a group of about 20 women were waiting for our scheduled 9:30am seminar. We were given a very warm welcome but were told there were not more present because too often outside organisations have arranged to attend but did not show up. By the time Sr Josephine began, however, just before noon, there were more than 100 present. Josephine said to me: ‘I won’t try to do everything. We shall cut it a bit short.’

Four hours and 20 minutes later, Josephine explained: ‘They wanted to talk’. We had lunch at 4:30pm and departed at quarter past five for the two-hour drive back to Riimenze. It is prudent, in this area, which is prone to LRA attacks, to be home before dark. ‘Next time you come, we shall bring our husbands’ one woman said. Women in Sudan have a strong bond as loving, giving people but many are abused by a traditional system that gives them few rights and limits them to a very stereotyped role. Sr Josephine, with passion and conviction, is helping them to see their world can be different and offer wider opportunity. I felt proud of her energetic advocacy.

A highlight of these seminars was the food we were able to provide. When I opened the container to give the people meat we had brought, their gratitude was effusive. We also supplied 25kilo of rice and a large bag of cassava leaf – plus onions, salt and oil, all important in the cooking process here. The people graciously provided us with some smoked, dried fish – very tasty even if there were a few bones.

We made it home safely after a long day but a very affirming one. This is a society in which even a little consideration and kindness is appreciated a great deal. Sister Josephine is Kenyan. She is a great example of what African women can aspire to be. Her helper at Ibba, Sr Rosa, is Vietnamese. She converses with the people in the local Bazande language. With determination and sensitivity, they are working to help the local people, and especially the women, create a better future.

- Br Bill
Child care

Hat man
Hello

Little girl
Nande women

Races
Sr. Josephine in Ibba

Sr. Rosa and girls