

Profiles of Women and Coffee

The Heart and Soul of Burundi

by Jeanine Niyonzima-Aroian

Helping women coffee farmers in Burundi rise above poverty through the production of high-quality coffee stands as the heart and soul of JNP Coffee's work.

A native of Burundi, I founded JNP Coffee LLC, www.jnpcoffee.com, in 2012 to help coffee farmers in my homeland, one of the world's poorest countries. By promoting quality and gender equity, we strive for social impact through education. We train women farmers on sustainable coffee production practices. We provide them with training in leadership and financial literacy. To do all this, I partnered with the Burundi chapter of IWCA, the International Women's Coffee Alliance, a nonprofit organization of women and men in the coffee industry.

Quality is the key to my work. JNP Coffee is a producer, promoter and trader of high-quality, direct-source specialty coffee. Some of our coffees have been awarded the coveted Cup of Excellence. I am the majority private shareholder in a Burundi conglomerate of nearly two-dozen washing stations, six of which process our women's coffees. We also focus on sustaining the communities where the coffee beans are grown.

The high elevations of the region contribute to the excellent quality of the coffee sourced by JNP. The dedicated, hard-working women who own the coffee farms care for the coffee trees and ensure that only red ripened cherries are harvested to yield the superior coffee. Cherries are handpicked every morning, sorted and delivered to the washing stations during the afternoon and early evening. The deliveries are processed daily in micro-lots that can be traced back to a specific hill.

One of the things I love most about working with the women coffee farmers is rewarding them for their high-quality coffee beans by giving them a portion of all sales. In addition to money paid for the green coffee harvested, in 2017, JNP Coffee paid about \$80,000 in premiums directly to the IWCA women farmers. That comes to about \$40 in U.S. currency, or 71,000 Burundian francs, for each woman. Washing stations received another \$35,000 in premiums from JNP Coffee to support our women's coffee initiative and promote high quality throughout the supply/processing chain.

The women coffee farmers use the premiums to create new economic opportunities and provide a better quality of life for their families, especially their children. Though it may not seem like much money, it can make a world of difference to people living in the countryside in Burundi. The women have told me the premiums enable them to provide their children with an education. They also use their payments to ensure the continued production of quality crops through the purchase of more coffee plants and fertilizer, and hiring help for the fields, which also benefits the community.



"The premiums help the women in many ways, particularly those who have children," said coffee farmer Gaudance Nijimbere, who represents other women at the Kinyovu washing stations. "We can provide a better future for our children by sending them to school, buying them uniforms, and purchasing school supplies to enhance their learning."

The premiums "mean a lot of change for the farmers and their loved ones," said Niyonzima Nastasia, a coffee farmer and supplier to the Kinyovu washing station. "We can purchase goods our families wouldn't have otherwise."

I am hopeful the significant premiums the women receive also will help them afford better health care for themselves and their families.

Managing this income wisely requires education. Working with Burundi Friends International, www.bufri.org, a non-profit I founded to fight poverty and educate youths, members of the IWCA Burundi chapter are involved in a financial literacy program. Some 130 women and 15 men in the Kayanza and Ngozi regions of Burundi now promote a culture of saving money to ensure a sustainable future. Though women make up 70 percent of the labor force, most still don't own land or have bank accounts and are economically dependent on their husbands. The program teaches the students to take a little money from their earnings and save it regularly.

Burundi Friends International represents another source of support for women coffee farmers. This organization is my contribution to this tiny east African country, which has suffered decades of civil war and genocide. In the future, I plan to work on approaches to improve water quality and other ways to ensure a healthy future for my homeland.

The world is slowly learning more about the opportunities to help women in Burundi through their choice of coffee. In May, coffee sourced through JNP Coffee became available in Nordstrom department stores across the United States. In an effort to highlight the roles women play in the global coffee economy, Nordstrom sold for a limited time Karehe coffee and two other brands grown by women. Karehe coffee is harvested by women farmers in Ngozi Province.

Though I was born and raised in Burundi, I have lived in the United States for 30 years. Applying the skills I have learned throughout my career, I am pleased to support the women farmers in my native land. Coffee, the main export of Burundi, has been key to rebuilding the country. Anyone buying or enjoying Burundi coffee joins me in my journey to make a difference in the lives of the people of Burundi.

