

I died and was resurrected

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I was born in 1974 in the Southern Province of Rwanda, where I grew up with my ten siblings. I moved after the genocide. Today, I live in Bugesera District, in the Eastern Province. My parents were killed during the 1994 genocide. Before they died, I had a very good life. The affection I was given by my aunt is the most pleasant thing I can remember from my life before the genocide. Since my aunt was also killed during the genocide, I cannot enjoy getting her affection anymore.

Even though I was sometimes tortured by the secretary of our commune, who used to tell me that once the war started they would violate me with a piece of tree in my vagina, I never thought a genocide would happen. It was in 1992 that I saw Tutsis being killed for the first time. Before the soldiers killed them, they made them dig the holes into which they would be thrown. Once, on the way to visit my relatives who were refugees at the Catholic Church of Nyamata, I was taken out of the bus and almost raped by soldiers. Another Tutsi passenger was killed in front of my eyes. I went home very scared, but still it did not enter my mind that genocide could happen in my home area.

I experienced the genocide in the South where I grew up. One day, my sister's domestic worker, who was married to a Hutu, came and told us that we should not go to sleep because the plane of the president had crashed. That raised ethnic tensions and immediately touched off heaving fighting around the presidential palace and a frenzy of killing of Tutsis. That same night, I observed houses being burnt down. We slept outside of our house. After three days, the

killings in our area started. Perpetrators came to our house asking for me. I was with my parents. With a big abscess on his buttocks, my father could not run. On the fourth day, while I was discussing with my father about whether to carry him on my back in order to search for a place to hide, a crowd of Interahamwe and Burundian refugees caught us at our place. I saw the Interahamwe cutting off my father's neck with a machete, after they had hit him with a hoe on the head. They threw him into our old latrine. I cannot say what went through my mind while they were cutting him. Afterwards, they also killed my mother and threw her into the same latrine as my father.

Then they decided to rape me. The old men who were in that crowd went away and six young men stayed with me. All six men raped me, one after the other, until I became unconscious. It happened outside the house where other people were observing us. The men raped me until I started to leak vaginal discharge mixed with blood. I asked them to give me water, but they did not. The Interahamwe had cut my legs with machetes. Nevertheless, I succeeded to stand up, naked, to look for water myself. Having heard them say that they were going to kill me, I threw myself into the latrine. They threw stones into the hole, wounding the left part of my head and my back. They also threw dead bodies on top of me. My head bled and the left part of my body was paralysed. I took the clothes of a dead girl in the hole and succeeded to escape. The rapists were my neighbours. Some fled to Burundi, others to Malawi.

In the genocide I lost six siblings plus my

parents. While the killing of my family brought me much sadness, the rape was the most traumatic for me. After that rape I lived in deep solitude. I would sit under a tree and think about my life. I would not want to see anyone. I wanted to live alone. I was depressed and decided not to get married as long as I would be alive in this world. The truth was that I was disgusted with men because of the rape. On the other hand, I thought that no man could accept me, because I was no longer a virgin. I was neither a girl nor a woman. I felt demeaned.

Two months after the genocide I was raped for the second time. When I was still feeling depressed because of being raped by the Interahamwe, I was taken by force by another 'husband'. It happened one evening in August 1994. My little sister, some other orphans and I were still living in a camp for internally displaced persons in Bugesera, where the Inkotanyi had brought us after they had captured the country. The man grabbed me when I was coming out of the kitchen. He threw me into a car full of other men. I tried to make noises so that people would hear me and rescue me. However, they were telling people that I was suffering from *ihahamuka*. That same night I found myself locked up inside his house.

I did not enjoy any form of love like other women receive from their husbands. My husband would beat me and threaten to kill me. In 2003, I officially separated from him and went back to my home area in the Southern Province. Since I had left him with our three children, his family begged me to come back to look after the children, who were suffering so much after I had left them. His family convinced me, saying that he had changed his behaviour. I came back, but he continued abusing me. I was tired of being beaten and in 2005 I decided to leave him and live on my own, in order to save my life.

I had resigned from my job after our first separation, and my health gradually became worse. In 2006, my mother-in-law convinced me to marry my brother-in-law in order to have a decent life and raise my children in good living conditions. I followed her advice, but left him in 2007 because he refused to help me raise my children. When I left him, I was pregnant with his child, who is my lastborn.

When I went back to the house of my first husband in order to take all the things that the court had assigned to me, I did not find anything. He had sold everything. I had expected to be able to buy a house in the village after selling what had officially belonged to me. When I found there was nothing, I fainted. I found myself in the hospital without knowing what had happened to me. At the hospital they told me that I had heart disease. During my stay there I was also diagnosed as HIV positive. Since then, I have been falling down whenever someone asks me anything about my home and my life with that man. I had nowhere to start a new life. I was feeling disturbed in my head.

I sometimes had palpitations, especially when I was thinking about my physical condition. When I was in my bed, I was always freezing, feeling maggots in my hair, smelling corpses, and not wanting to be inside the house. After the genocide, I still had pus and blood coming out of my private parts. I had back pain. I was living in loneliness and I had intense heartache. I was often feeling like a brainless person. I had a severe kind of *ihungabana* especially in April during the commemoration period.

Even though I recovered a bit, I had no hope. I was always bringing my problems to the local authorities. I had nowhere to live. By chance, a social affairs officer-in-charge enrolled my two children on the list of pupils

whose school fees were paid by Caritas, a humanitarian aid organisation. In addition, the Compassion International project agreed to support my third child. In 2010, I received FARG's mutual health insurance. In that period, my former neighbour lent me a small house where I lived from 2007 until 2011.

Benefiting from mutual health insurance and school fees for my children did not diminish my suffering because I was still homeless, dejected, and suffering from HIV/AIDS. I am not sure whether I got HIV from my husband or from the Interahamwe who raped me.

In 2011 I was invited by my neighbour to join sociotherapy. At first I rejected her invitation. Even though she was kind to me, she insisted until I accepted, but I did not do so wholeheartedly. While attending, I met other women with the same problems as mine. I observed everybody and listened attentively to what they were saying. On the first day already I found sociotherapy interesting and decided to continue participating. I found a place where I could talk. I met fellow women with the same experiences. I spoke out about all of my suffering during the second session. Thereafter, my sadness was replaced by happiness.

Before I joined sociotherapy I was always feeling grief. I had persistent headaches and was always thinking about my sadness. I was lonely. I thought I was the only woman who suffered a lot. I was constantly wondering how I would live in the future. I felt insecure and hopeless. After joining other women in sociotherapy, just before I shared my story with them, I was afraid and sweating. I was wondering what I would tell the group. When I was speaking, I felt as though I was resting, and feeling happiness because of sharing the bad experiences with others. I was also in tears. After I had finished my story, I was

happy and at ease, because finally what I had kept in my heart the whole time came out.

When I was participating in sociotherapy, I started living peacefully with others. Some symptoms like headaches, trauma and paralysis have somehow reduced. All heart-related symptoms have gone. The isolation has gone. I liked how sociotherapy brought us together. We were chatting together as well as laughing. I found people to tell my problems to. I learnt that it was not only me who experienced those catastrophic events. In sociotherapy I have been healed. I felt happiness that I had never felt inside my heart before. After talking, I started to feel that I am a human being, while before I felt that I was not. I consider the sociotherapy group as my family. I cry there. I do everything from there. The panic I felt at the beginning has gone. Sociotherapy helped me to be patient. I developed good communication and relationships with my neighbours and children. The severe *ihahamuka* I had been suffering from for a long time reduced after joining sociotherapy. I got out of the darkness and now live in lightness.

Although sociotherapy healed my psychological wounds, I am still homeless. I do not know how my children will survive if I pass away early. I am waiting for God to take pity on me. I was treated for several of my sicknesses, but never for the bad smelling vaginal discharge due to the rapes.

The killers of my parents apologized; those who looted our properties paid back what they took. But still the rapists were not brought back from where they are. I wish that Gacaca would bring all perpetrators to justice so that I can then benefit from the justice I am entitled to. Forgiving the rapists will be difficult as long as they do not seek forgiveness from me. They could do so even without me seeing them face-to-face.

I advise women who have experienced violence to join with other women and talk about each other's suffering. This releases broken hearts, helps to get out of isolation and find friends. I further advise them to forgive those perpetrators who have sought forgiveness, even if it is not easy. It is what the Bible tells us to do. When you forgive others, you also forgive yourself.