

I wouldn't still be alive if it wasn't for sociotherapy

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I was born 1961 in Kayonza District, Eastern Province. We were ten children, three girls and seven boys. My family was rich and we had a good life when I was young. What I liked about my childhood was conversing with my parents and siblings while we were together at home. My mother loved me and I loved her.

The first violence I experienced was in 1973. People came to my school and selected Tutsi pupils to be killed. After killing some of the students they threw them into a hole. I managed to escape by running and hiding in the bush. Because of the harassment, I stopped going to school and stayed at home. In 1988, I got married to my first husband and was happy during that marriage, even though my husband had forced me to marry him. When the genocide happened, we had four children together.

During the genocide, my husband and children were killed, which made me a widow. The genocide came totally unexpectedly. It was beyond my imagination that the Interahamwe could cut and kill so many. All of my siblings as well as my parents were killed. I do not know where they threw their bodies. The most shocking thing for me was that my mother was killed by the beating from the Interahamwe who were brought to my mother by one of my sisters-in-law. That sister-in-law was Hutu. She is now imprisoned for the crimes she committed during the genocide.

When the genocide started, I took refuge with my husband and children in the Catholic Church in Nyamata. Two days later,

they were killed there by the Interahamwe. The one child I carried on my back was taken from me and thrown by the killers against the wall of the church and died. I had blood all over my body, but I survived. Before I left the church to go where I thought I could find refuge, I covered the child with the clothes I had on. After I left the church, I made my way towards Kayumba. On my way I met four men who raped me and threw me down near the street. After they had gone I continued my way and I met two more men who also violated me. I recognized the men as Twa (a minority ethnic group in Rwanda). I continued my way and another man raped me again. He ran away when he heard the footsteps of another person; it was during the night.

When I finally arrived in Kayumba, I realised that many people had been killed. I then went to hide in the bush. A crowd of Interahamwe found me there. I do not remember their exact number. They must have been around six. I do not know where I was in my mind. When they caught me sitting in the bush, my breasts were swollen because of not breastfeeding. These men raped me one after the other. They then took me from there to the house of a soldier who was collaborating with the Interahamwe and locked me up. After coming back from killing people during the day, they violated me at night. In the morning, before going to kill people, they used to block my vagina with a banana pack (*umukanana*). I could not move nor could I remove that pack because they had injured my arms. I was taken out of the

house by the Inkotanyi who found me there with swellings all over my body and suffering from diarrhoea.

After I had left the house of the soldier, I was hospitalized at the health centre of Nyamata for four months, where I was treated for vaginal discharge and other reproductive health problems. After these four months, I lived in Nyamata town in a vacated house. I could not go to my former place because my own house there was destroyed. A few years after the genocide, I married my second husband, who was also a survivor. We went to live in Kigali, where we had two children. The four of us came back here to Nyamata in 2010 because the standard of living in Kigali was too high for us. Unfortunately, my second husband died in that same year due to AIDS.

Following my genocide-related experiences, I suffered a lot due to the fact that all the time I was thinking about the rape and the loss of my children, parents and siblings. I felt intense sadness and guilt about still being alive. My sadness related to the rape became so severe that I started to have attacks of *ihahamuka*. I would run away without being aware of what was happening. After regaining consciousness, I saw my neighbours around me.

The fact that I suffered in particular from the rape experiences was because I was raped publicly by many different men who were unknown to me, and because I had lost all of my children. There was also no consideration for the sores on my arms and swellings all over my body where they had beaten me with sticks. I was deeply troubled by the banana pack that the Interahamwe used to leave in my vagina after the rapes. The rapes were the source of my seropositive status. I learned about this status later, after I gave birth to my second child who is also HIV positive. My being HIV positive was the reason for

the surviving family of my second husband to stigmatize me. I have also been rejected by my first family-in-law because of having lost my children.

After I became aware that my whole family had been killed, I became very depressed. I felt like a nobody; like a tree without branches. Physically, I became infirm and could therefore not do any hard work. This plunged me into poverty. At a certain point I wanted to commit suicide, but my cousin caught me before I finished preparing myself and prevented me from doing so. I did not benefit from any support in the form of counselling to help me heal my psychological wounds. In daily life I am supported by my neighbours. FARG helped me to survive by giving me some money as direct support. World Vision supported me by giving me utensils.

When I was still living in Kigali, I was not healthy at all. Because of the fear of stigma, I shared my rape experiences with only two of my relatives. I was frightened of being talked about all over by the people to whom I told what had happened to me. After breaking my silence for the first time, I felt a bit better.

In 2011, the two relatives I had shared my full story with invited me to join sociotherapy. The first day I joined sociotherapy, I heard the two facilitators say that speaking about our problems would relieve us. After having observed the other group members, I decided to speak. Before speaking and thinking about the story I would share, I felt afraid, expecting that the other women would laugh at me, stigmatize me and blame me, like my neighbours had done. My fear was due to the fact that when people know you have been raped, they say that you are unimportant and finished. They presume you will soon die of AIDS. However, after having observed the others in the group when they were speaking, I did decide

to tell them the sadness I feel because of suffering from HIV.

I shared my story with the sociotherapy group members during the thirteenth session. When I was speaking I cried a lot. While speaking, I felt intense sadness mixed with fear. After I had finished my story, however, the panic I had before was gone. I was happy that at least I had succeeded for the first time to speak about my suffering to a group of people and I started to be strong. Because the others had listened to me, I started to have trust in myself. They had also looked sad when I was talking to them. They comforted me and told me that life continues and that I should not be worried.

When I joined sociotherapy I was very much traumatized, but after joining it my health began improving. Sociotherapy made my *ihahamuka* disappear. Before, I suffered from that illness each time I was thinking about the rape, in particular during the commemoration period. I am no longer running away and I think that this is because of the lessons I have learned from sociotherapy. After joining sociotherapy, I started to pray, asking God to protect me and prevent me from running away and leaving my children behind. It is amazing that during the last commemoration period (2012) I did not get *ihahamuka*. I listened to the speeches with patience. It was the first time that I switched on the radio and followed all the news and speeches related to the commemoration period. I did not feel any other problem.

Another thing I liked about sociotherapy is that it provides good advice to people. It restores broken hearts and strengthens a process of self-reconstruction. Besides that, it also contributes to regaining hope for the future. The grief I had disappeared. I can now think clearly, which I could not do before. My relationships with others changed. Before, I lived in solitude and was

always angry. Sometimes, when my children were going to school, I used to lock my house, stay inside and sleep. While sitting alone at home, my heart would pound out of fright. I was always afraid. All these bad symptoms disappeared through sociotherapy. Now I am able to converse with other people when I meet them. Sociotherapy taught me to be patient. It helped me to be strong in my heart and to be able to strengthen others. I am proud that I can help others this way. Regarding Gacaca, I regard it as an important form of justice that reconciles people. It facilitated Rwandans to meet with each other again and helped genocide perpetrators and survivors to talk to each other. Before the Gacaca courts started, I was afraid because everybody was still angry. This is no longer the case due to Gacaca.

I did not personally testify against the rapists in Gacaca. Apart from being angry and afraid, I was ashamed of standing up in front of people in public and testifying against the men who raped me. Another reason that I did not testify about the rapes is that I only knew two of the rapists. One had died already and the other was imprisoned for reasons other than rape. I only testified about the looting of my property. Regarding the killers of my entire family, I have no hope that I will ever know who they are, because I was not living near the home of my parents when the killing took place there. It is my sister-in-law, the one who brought the Interahamwe who killed my mother, who should testify against the other killers of my family. I appreciate that Gacaca encouraged killers to confess in Gacaca, even though I realise that in particular many of the killers who are responsible for the deaths of a large number of people did not do so. I would suggest that all pending trials should be completed by Gacaca before it stops operating.

After I received a cow through the 'One Cow per Poor Family' Programme, and because of the goat I got from sociotherapy, I am now planning to sell some of the cattle that will be born later. That will enable me to pay people for cultivating my land. I expect that in the future I will have enough food to nourish my children and I think that I will then be able to afford their school fees. However, because I am handicapped and living in poverty, as long as the cattle have not multiplied I will be worried about getting the necessary food and school fees. My advice to other women is to join sociotherapy, because it teaches important lessons that all women may need. I would also tell them to be patient because, despite everything that happened and made them suffer, life continues. For those who are not handicapped like me, I would encourage them to cultivate their fields in order to prepare for the future, instead of being overwhelmed by bad thoughts. I wish self-respect for all women. They should also not become a prostitute, because nowadays there are terrible diseases that can take them away, which means that they would leave their children behind without anyone to raise them.