

Women, we need to be courageous

Illuminée Munyabugingo

My name is Illuminée Munyabugingo. The 1994 genocide against Tutsis happened when I was thirty-four years old. I was born in Kigali in a camp for internally displaced persons. My family had moved there from Eastern Province because of the 1959 massacres of Tutsis. We were a family with sixteen children. During the 1959 massacres, the house of my family was not destroyed as it was during the 1994 genocide. People still had kindness when I was younger.

The 1959 violence continued and claimed my father in 1963. The same happened to other people who were sub-chiefs during the monarchy regime and who were seen as accomplices of the cockroaches. My mother died a few years later when I was fourteen years old. In 1979 I married a man from a prosperous family. I lived with my husband in Bugesera until the genocide started in 1994. We had a good life and together had seven children. The 1994 genocide took my beloved husband, two of my children and thirteen of my siblings.

The genocide was in many ways different from the previous wars of 1959, 1963, 1967 and 1973. In those wars, a person could hide in the house of a neighbour. In 1994 no one was willing to rescue another person. I had never realised before that someone can kill his or her neighbour, slay an innocent child or even kill his own sibling. What I experienced then brought me far in my thoughts, it traumatized me deeply, up to a point that I thought God had forgotten me.

After only two days of genocide I saw a bus arrive full of people, who entered the local church and started murdering people. They killed them all and burned them. I do

not know how we – me, my husband and five of our six children – escaped. We had nowhere to go. Eventually, I ran with my husband, three children and some other people who had survived the killings to a nearby swamp. There I experienced unspeakable woe. I was pregnant and very tired. A crowd of Interahamwe found me in the marshes and violated me. I was not able to put my legs together anymore. Among the many men who violated me, there were two boys I knew quite well. One had been adopted by my husband and me. My husband had supported him. On the eve of the genocide he had even spent the night at our house. After raping me they left me behind. A neighbour of mine who was hiding in the swamp nearby happened to find me. He put my legs together. As a result of the rape I lost a lot of blood and gave birth while still in the swamp. After the genocide, I was hospitalized for a period of four months.

When my husband was on his way to get money to pay the Interahamwe so that they would let him live, they killed him. It happened the day after my child was born. With my husband they also killed two of my children. The child who had not escaped from the church with us I found later. He had been lying in the church with dead bodies on top of him and survived that way. He was found by other people who went back to the church to search for people who might have survived. Since that time he has been suffering badly from symptoms of trauma.

During the genocide I lost my relatives as others lost theirs, I became a widow like other women. But what destroyed my heart

in particular was having been raped in front of my children. It deprived me of my dignity and my value. Every time I think about the rape I can still smell the odour of the sweat of my rapists.

In the period following the genocide I was so depressed that I could not feed my remaining children nor do anything at home. I despised myself and lost all my faith, to the extent that I could not go to the Protestant Church anymore. Among the church members were Hutus who had killed my family and I hated them for that.

I started to regain some hope when I reunited with my brother who had returned from Uganda. He found me in the hospital. Once I was discharged I remained sick. I was depressed. I used to go to the fields that belong to me and my family in order to get something to eat from there. I passed the nights there in the ruins and came back in the morning. I became a smoker. My daughter who was born while I was hiding in the swamp dried out because I did not breastfeed her. I hated everything, including myself.

I changed my behaviour after my brother brought me some crops and showed me how to run a small business instead of selling *kanyanga* and being a slave of drugs. The interventions by my brother helped me to take a shower again, wash my clothes and eat again, and regain my senses which I had lost completely. Unfortunately, my brother had been shot in his head while serving in the military in Congo and became mentally ill. Now I take care of him instead of him taking care of me. I also take care of my other sibling who survived, my youngest sister who was also raped and is suffering from AIDS as a result of the rape.

My own health problems included severe back pain and *ihahamuka*. After the genocide, us victims lost our minds. We had no

thoughts. Before anyone else in Rwanda I suffered from *ihahamuka* symptoms. I was a truly traumatized person. I repeatedly left my house at night, continuing to move during daytime without knowing where I was going. I was just walking without thinking about the goal of my journey. I was always wearing a dirty jacket and sitting on the hill, where I observed everything. I was no more than a skeleton, without anything inside. I felt that my head was broken, but was not able to locate where it broke. I could not find anybody to share my feelings with. I had nowhere to cry. I could not approach anyone. I was always alone, inside of the house. I was lying in my bed without sleeping. I judged everybody, including my children who hated me.

As a genocide widow, I was invited by AVEGA to attend a meeting it had organized. I did go, but only once, because I had no interest in surviving. I was still depressed. Back home I asked myself whether AVEGA's meetings would bring back my loved ones who had been killed. Some time later, because of the haemorrhage resulting from the rape, I became sick. At that time, six months after I was back from the hospital again, I was supported by AVEGA in getting medical care and individual counselling sessions. After I had recovered a bit from my illness, AVEGA trained me as a lay counsellor so that I could facilitate other widows who were suffering from psychological problems. Because I know from my own experience what it means to be severely traumatized, I like to help people with similar experiences of suffering. AVEGA also supported me in income generating activities in order to help me feed myself. I also benefit from mutual health insurance and school fees for my children provided by FARG.

Another tragedy in my life is that my firstborn who had survived the genocide was

killed ten years later, in 2004, with her two children in a car accident.

When Gacaca started I did not want to participate because I still had psychological wounds. Later on, when Ibuka, an organization supporting genocide survivors, and Kanyarwanda, a human rights organization, noticed that many survivors were traumatized during Gacaca sessions, these two institutions organized a training of lay counsellors who would be assigned to intervene when people were traumatized. I took part in this training. It enabled me to attend Gacaca, as I had to accompany witnesses. When perpetrators were testifying against each other, I recognized some of them as looters of my property. I was only paid back for the looting by two of them. Even though I did not testify against any perpetrator, Gacaca helped me to find the remains of the dead bodies of my relatives. After burying them I felt happy and slept well.

The training by AVEGA helped me to establish a relationship between the trauma symptoms I was feeling in my entire body and the genocide-related events I had experienced. As I said before, before being trained I was depressed. I was not eating nor sleeping. In my view, I was a mad person. The work of lay counselling helped me to get some revenue and feed my children. The training provided by Ibuka in partnership with Kanyarwanda also taught us how to control ourselves during the Gacaca court sessions.

In 2010 I began sociotherapy, where we listened to each other and came out of loneliness. I first joined a group in which women and men, Hutus and Tutsis, participated. About a year later I joined a group with women who had experienced rape like me. During the sessions I had with my counsellor at AVEGA, I had told her about

my rape. I did so because I was sick, not because I wanted to talk about it. With the women in the second sociotherapy group I shared my rape experiences in the tenth session. The group helped me by caring for me. However, back home I regretted that I had exposed myself to the public. Nevertheless, I continued participating in all sessions.

As a result I started feeling better. Some of my symptoms, such as hating myself and my children, gradually disappeared. Now I love my children, four of my own and two orphans, the children of one of my brothers, that I adopted. Before, I did not care for them as a mother. When I now see a person, I consider him or her as a human being. I can sleep easily. I am able to plan for what I will do the next day. When I have money, I invest that money in farming. I also bought doors for my house, which I did not have before. I am now healthy. I sometimes ask for a loan. I know how to manage it and how to repay it. Sitting with other women gave me hope for the future. From sociotherapy I learned that when you live in grief and anger it can destroy you, others forget about you and your children lack proper food. In my heart I forgave those who wronged me.

Sociotherapy helped me to put down my grief and have a good relationship with others. Before I joined sociotherapy, I could not greet any Hutu. I was afraid of all Hutus and avoided them. I could not receive any of them in my house. I was sad and always angry. In the first sociotherapy group I met a man who had joined in the killing of my relatives and killed one of my children. He had been imprisoned after admitting his crimes and was later released. It was through sociotherapy that I started to understand that he also suffered, particularly due to the loss of his child who was killed in Congo and because of the guilt he felt about the crimes he had committed. It must have been the

bad government who had put something in him that caused his criminal behaviour. I learned to forgive him and started to exchange food with him. He later died because of psychosis generated by ongoing allegations against him in the Gacaca court.

Sociotherapy made me feel strong. I love my children. I now have a value in front of people. I came back to my senses in time. Before, I could lose my belongings wherever. Sociotherapy helped me to join a group of people with the same problems. Now, I am fine. Thank God, I do not have AIDS. I control myself. I will not go back anymore to my previous state of mind. I have hope for the future. My sickness has lessened. I sleep well. I wake up in the morning, whereas before I was used to getting up at one o'clock in the night. I communicate with my children. I organize everything at home. I now experience my neighbours as being alive, whereas before it was as if they did not exist. I came out of isolation.

I like sociotherapy because it operates step by step. Through its steps, everybody can find the step that may heal the problems she or he suffers from. Sociotherapy helped me to speak out about the rape in a big group. I can now aid my children traumatized by the genocide by using the steps of sociotherapy. I realised that they were healed because they became able to speak out. My youngest daughter, who was born in the swamp and was always fearful and felt insecure without me being near, is now doing much better.

The added value of sociotherapy for me is that I now feel secure. Because I got out of my loneliness, I became a member of a number of small associations in which every member contributes some amount of money. After a certain time we share the total amount we have. These small associations facilitated me to reduce poverty in my home

and to feed my children. When I compare sociotherapy to other kinds of psychosocial healing I benefited from, I realise that these other healing programmes are complementary to sociotherapy. Before, we as survivors were in bad health. We were like waste. While other trainings took us out of the dustbin, sociotherapy helped us women who were raped to meet each other and feel better because of that. Another difference with previous trainings is that in those trainings we primarily focused on ourselves, while through sociotherapy we also started to focus on better care for our families.

Regarding the effect of Gacaca for me, I was happy to find the remains of the dead bodies of my family members. But the men who raped me have not been brought to Gacaca in order to be judged. Because other women with rape experiences whom I accompanied to the Gacaca courts did not receive any positive results from it, I decided not to testify against the rapists. Instead of getting the justice the women needed, the public started to gossip openly about them. The rights of the women were not met. Instead, they exposed themselves to the public for nothing. In Gacaca, rapists used to ask the victim of rape to bring witnesses of the rape. Where can I find those witnesses? Could I bring my children who observed everything during the genocide, and ask them to repeat face-to-face whatever those rapists did?

What Gacaca has done is to release the rapists instead of imprisoning them. We did not want to expose ourselves in public for nothing. I was disappointed by the judges of Gacaca who were appointed as such, because they were supposed to have integrity. Instead they accepted bribes and released perpetrators. In addition, the truth has only been told partially and Gacaca did not finish all of the trials it should judge. I wish that Gacaca

would finish all trials related to the genocide and that all survivors would be refunded for their looted properties and destroyed houses.

I advise other women who experienced rape to build good relationships with people who live around them and to be courageous in whatever they do. I encourage them to talk about their problems to people close to them, because that will help them to recover. These women have to respect themselves instead of being taken over by their problems. They have to fight against being colonized by the consequences of their bad experiences. For those who are less experienced, I advise them to approach those who are more qualified and learn from them.