

Introduction

Annemiek Richters, MD, PhD*

It is generally known that during the 100 days of genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda in 1994, sexual violence was committed on an unprecedented scale. Many women were first raped and then killed. With a certain degree of probability, the majority of Tutsi women who survived had been raped. Limited information is available regarding the experiences of these women. However, there is enough empirical evidence provided in human rights accounts and research reports substantiating that these women were exposed to unimaginable horror, which for the majority of them had a range of devastating short and long term effects.¹⁻⁴ What is hard to find are voices of female survivors who succeeded in taking steps towards healing of at least some of these lingering effects. The stories collected in this Supplementum stand out in this respect. The authors describe the genocide as a period that turned them into living dead persons while they end their stories with the rebirth they experienced through participation in sociotherapy.

The programme of community-based sociotherapy was implemented in 2005 in the north of Rwanda in what was previously known as Byumba province, and subsequently in 2008 in Bugesera district in the south-east, one of the epicentres of the genocide. Since its start I have been involved in the programme as a researcher. One of the

questions I pursued was what, if anything at all, sociotherapy as a psychosocial intervention can effectively do for Rwandan women with experiences of rape. I had come to know a few women in Byumba who had shared their rape experiences within a sociotherapy group resulting in a 'relief of the heart'. In Bugesera, however, female sociotherapists told me in a focus group discussion on sexuality that experiences with sexual violence as a source of problems in people's daily life were largely absent in sociotherapy. It is an issue they as sociotherapists also avoided in group sessions, even though they know 'it is there', because they did not feel confident to handle it. This observation resulted in a training to enable sociotherapists to facilitate healing of suffering resulting from gender-based violence, in particular sexual violence.

Sociotherapy approach

Sociotherapy uses a group dynamic approach. In Rwanda, sociotherapy developed into a community-based intervention that provides psychosocial assistance to everyone in need of it. Its particular objective is to restore human dignity and communal safety. People are invited by sociotherapists, local leaders, church officials or former participants to join a sociotherapy group. A group meets weekly for two to three hours in the neighbourhood where its participants live. The average number of sessions is fifteen. Each group has two sociotherapists, also called group facilitators, who guide the group on a journey through the six sociotherapy phases: safety, trust, care, respect, new rules, and memories. The women who

* Department of Public Health and Primary Care, Leiden University Medical Center, the Netherlands; Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Correspondence to: jmrichters@gmail.com

present their stories in this Supplementum refer to these phases as ‘the steps’ one takes towards healing. Throughout the journey the following seven principles are applied: interest, equality, democracy, participation, responsibility, here-and-now, and learning-by-doing by using current situations. Both the phases and principles function as encouragement for everyone to take care of each other and support one another to find solutions for their (daily) problems.

Once a certain degree of safety and trust is established in a sociotherapy group, through, for instance, role plays, games, singing, prayers and discussions about the meaning of safety and trust, people usually start sharing everyday troubles and advise each other what to do in response to their suffering. The dynamic in the group provides many moments for participants to learn from one another. Gradually they regain the vitality and trust to introduce changes for the better in their personal, family and community life.^a

In Bugesera, a group is usually composed of a mixture of male and female genocide survivors, widows and widowers, ex-prisoners, and women with a husband or son in prison. The idea was that this mixture of people in one group would be the best way to contribute to reconciliation within communities known for their ethnic cleavages and conflicts. Gradually, however, so-called single category groups were also formed; first groups with women with husbands in prison and groups with ex-prisoners and later two groups with female genocide survivors. It was these latter sociotherapy groups that contributed to the story project.

The story project

The purpose of the collection of life histories of female genocide survivors who partici-

pated in sociotherapy was to gain an in-depth understanding of their suffering and to contribute to answering the question of what sociotherapy can do for female genocide survivors in terms of care, support, and healing. A lot has been written about the genocide and its aftermath, but hardly any literature on this theme is available in the Kinyarwanda language that would be easily accessible to the Rwandan population. What is lacking in particular is literature that convincingly demonstrates to the many Rwandans who suffer in silence and in social isolation that they are not the only ones who suffer and that change is possible. The women who told their life history consented to the publication of their stories hoping that women with similar experiences, in Rwanda, in neighbouring countries and anywhere else, will learn that they are not alone, and that it is possible to leave their sadness behind and regain a chance of a better future.

The first sociotherapy group with female genocide survivors consisted of 12 women and two facilitators. All 14 women contributed their story. Subsequently, another five women of the second sociotherapy group volunteered to do the same. The 19 stories have been published in a book in Kinyarwanda which is now being distributed throughout the country. Ten of the 19 stories have been selected for publication in English in this Supplementum.^b

The stories were told in an interview setting to either Grace Kagoyire or me, or to both of us. The number of interviews with each woman ranged from one to four. The interview duration varied between half an hour and four hours. In the final interview

^a For detailed descriptions of the sociotherapy approach, its impact and its challenges, see the documentation listed on www.annemiekrichters.nl/rwanda/publications.

^b For the remaining nine stories please visit www.annemiekrichters.nl/publications.

phase any missing non-sensitive information that we thought was important to complete or clarify the story was collected by phone or in informal meetings.

For interviews about intimate topics to proceed well, a trust relationship is essential. Kagoyire's previous experience as a trauma counsellor for vulnerable people greatly contributed in getting the women's full cooperation and made the interview process also a healing experience for them. While the women shared their complete life history with us, some did not want all details published. We obviously respected their wishes. All names of the authors of the stories are pseudonyms. Details in the stories that could lead to the identification of their authors were changed or deleted. However, at the explicit request of the women nothing was changed in the overall content of their stories.

The interview process started towards the end of 2010. The audiotapes of the interviews were transcribed into Kinyarwanda. The transcriptions were subsequently translated into English. The English summaries of the stories were then back translated into Kinyarwanda and edited. Each summary in Kinyarwanda was read to the author of the story and, if requested by her, details were changed. A draft of the collection of all stories was given to the women to either read themselves or give to others to read and get their reaction. Once we were sure that the women remained with their wish to have their story published we went ahead and published the book with all stories in Kinyarwanda in May 2013.

Characteristics of the women

The ages of the women who participated in the story project range from 36 to 60 years. The older ones, especially, had experienced affliction, torment and loss of a family

member related to violent episodes in Rwanda's history preceding the genocide. Nevertheless, like the younger women, they recalled a happy youth, because they had their families as well as neighbours and friends with whom they were in close contact. Discrimination against Tutsis before the genocide, as well as the effects of the genocide, deprived the women of the education they were eager to have. The women's daily work is cultivating, unless they are physically too weak to do so. Among the women are widows, women who remarried after the genocide as well as women (the younger ones) who married for the first time after the genocide. All women have children to take care of; children from their own (successive) husbands, children from rape, or orphans (often children of family members who were killed during the genocide). Most of the women live in Nyamata, the main town of Bugesera, some in the surrounding countryside.

The women have in common that the genocide was an event that they had never imagined could happen, even though the older ones had been confronted with pogroms before. But, they said, these only lasted a few days. Furthermore, in earlier times churches were safe places of refuge and people still showed kindness. This was entirely different during the genocide. All women experienced the genocide as the definite period in their lives that fundamentally changed them. The stories demonstrate that their lives are structured by a before, during and after.

Contextualizing the stories

In order to make prominent themes in the women's stories understood, I briefly present a selection of elements of the history of Rwanda as they are featured in these stories. I then introduce a selection of government

programmes aimed at healing and reconciliation followed by the women's main responses to them. I stay close to the themes highlighted in the women's stories and do not pretend to give a full account of Rwanda's genocide history (see, for instance Prunier⁵) and the impact of government programmes.

History of the genocide

Between April 6 and July 17 of 1994, during a period of 100 days, genocidal violence swept over Rwanda targeting predominantly Tutsis, a minority people who composed 10-15 percent of the population of Rwanda. The violence claimed the lives of more than one million people. It was carried out by the then Rwandan regular army (Forces Armées Rwandaises [FAR]) and government trained and equipped militia (the Interahamwe) as well as many ordinary citizens. The genocidal violence, betrayal, intimidation, harassment, sexual violence, imprisonment or killing, was frequently committed by people who were known to the victims, whether as family, neighbours or community members. However, even if victims were not socially familiar to the perpetrators, the violence was often quite personally humiliating. More than two million people were forced into exile, and hundreds of thousands of people were internally displaced inside the country.

A history of ethnic discrimination and killings preceded the genocide. Massacres of Tutsis began in 1959 with the transfer of power in favour of the Hutu elite through political violence. This was followed by eruptions of repression and killings of Tutsis, reaching their paroxysm in 1994. In the women's stories reference is made to the years 1962, 1967, 1973 and 1992; the 1992 massacre being concentrated in Bugesera. As one can read in the stories, during these years Tutsi children in school were frequently insulted and humiliated by being called

snakes. The term cockroach was even more degrading. Its use was exacerbated when the former Rwandan government and the media, hateful of Tutsis, started to openly accuse the Tutsis of invading the country from neighbouring countries for which act they should be killed. It was the Rwanda Patriotic Army (RPA), the armed wing of the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) Inkotanyi, which in actual fact did invade Rwanda in 1990 from the north and east. The RPF was an organized group of primarily Tutsi who had been in exile since 1959 and had been prevented by the former Rwandan government to return to their home country. The 1990-1994 war between the RPF and the Hutu-led Rwandan government exacerbated ethnic tensions which culminated in the genocide against the Tutsi. The RPF brought an end to the 1994 genocide. Women refer to the Inkotanyi as the people who eventually freed them from their plight, while in actual fact it was the soldiers of the RPA.

Before and during the genocide, complex sexual politics interacted with ethnic politics to demarcate social boundaries and achieve the racial purity that was seen as a necessary component of Hutu identity. Hate media called upon Hutu men to protect the purity of the nation by eliminating Tutsi men. Torture and rape were used to inscribe the Hutu nation on each Tutsi body. As the genocide proceeded, Tutsi women and children were also identified as legitimate targets of killings. They were perceived as the roots that kept the bad weeds (the men) growing back and therefore had to be pulled out.⁶

The collective result of all horrific acts that took place over the years could only be mistrust in all human ties that make life meaningful, affecting all population groups and leaving a society in disarray. In order to deal with the violent past and provide conditions

for a peaceful future, the new Rwandan government made promotion of national unity and reconciliation central to its political programme. This vast enterprise included both judicial responses and non-judicial strategies, such as community courts and annual commemorations, which both play a prominent role in the women's stories.

Commemoration and *ihahamuka*

Each year Rwanda commemorates the genocide over a period of 100 days, starting with an intensive national week of mourning. Every Rwandan is called to be part of it. Activities include ceremonies at memorials and gravesites; solemn reburial of human remains; conferences, meetings and vigils across the country; and continuous broadcasting of programmes about the past atrocities and current mourning week events. Questions these activities raise are: how much memory can a society take without losing itself too much and how can individuals find a route between too much memory and too much forgetting preventing re-traumatization?

Constant memorialization of the painful past has incapacitated the women in their daily life tasks. For most of them bad memories frequently provoked severe physical and psychological distress (*ihahamuka*). The mourning week is an episode full of provocations, which women try to avoid. Professionals in Rwanda label the distress of *ihahamuka* as a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder, while others⁷ categorize *ihahamuka* as somatic panic attacks. The women distinguish *ihahamuka* from *ihung-abana*. The latter, according to one of them, is a milder form of distress. It refers to something you live with inside your heart and to sadness when you think about anything that troubles you. In contrast,

ihahamuka generally draws the attention of other people. A person affected by *ihahamuka* runs away, often screaming, when remembering the threatening situation she was in during the genocide.

Gacaca and rape offenses

The Rwandan government has not only chosen against collective amnesia of what happened but also against amnesty for the genocide perpetrators. To deal with the massive and unparalleled genocide crimes, it reinvented traditional Gacaca as a way of participatory justice, which involves gathering information from the community and participatory judgment and punishment. Gacaca tribunals were to function in addition to, and in conjunction with, the other justice mechanisms available. They were supposed to be instrumental in bringing forth the truth about what happened, which should not only lead to conviction of those found guilty but also to healing and reconciliation. In 2001 the government enacted a law establishing the Gacaca courts, which went into operation the year after. Ten years later, on June 18, 2012, the courts were officially closed. Notwithstanding the impressive numerical achievements of Gacaca in those 10 years, there is a general agreement that not all its effects were positive. Gacaca certainly did meet its objectives, at least to a certain degree, but it also contributed to re-traumatization and new tensions in society.⁸ The years to come will undoubtedly shed more light on the overall impact of Gacaca on the population and on the unity and reconciliation as promoted by the government.

Genocide-related rape cases were categorized as one of the most serious crimes that were heard in conventional courts. In May 2008 the government changed course and passed a new law. The latter transferred

all genocide rape cases to the Gacaca courts, where they could be heard behind closed doors in order to protect the victim's privacy. In practice, this provision could not guarantee the safety of those who intended to testify against their rapists and of those who had in actual fact done so. The potential harmful consequences of being publicly known as a woman who was raped and has accused her rapist(s) discouraged many women from testifying. For them silence was a means of self preservation. Other reasons women may have had for not testifying are narrated in the women's stories.

After this brief background information, which I hope will facilitate the understanding of some of the details in the stories, I now let the stories speak for themselves. In the conclusion I will reflect on a selection of themes addressed in the stories.

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