

## TRAGEDY AND TRIUMPH: RWANDAN WOMEN'S RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

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When we first met Jeanette Uwimana in Rwanda almost three years ago she was living day to day, having been widowed by the Rwandan genocide in 1994. Although she received care and support from *Solace Ministries*, a Rwandan grassroots organisation run by genocide survivors, she continued to experience physical and psychological trauma resulting from her brutal experiences of sexual violence during the genocide. At the same time, Jeanette, whose formal education was disrupted during the genocide, struggled to support her children. Her prospects were bleak but she told us that she dreamed of one day running her own business.

Sadly, Jeanette's story is not unusual. More than seventeen years ago, an estimated 250,000 to 500,000 women in Rwanda were raped during a genocide that also saw the murder of about one million people. An estimated seventy percent of women who survived rape were infected with HIV—sometimes deliberately. Many of those women were abandoned by their husbands and isolated by their communities.

In spite of the many pressing and ongoing needs of survivors of sexual violence, inadequate attention has been paid to them. The prosecution of rape, both internationally and nationally, has rarely been a priority, while a government-administered fund in Rwanda to compensate genocide survivors is overburdened and does not specifically provide for survivors of sexual violence.

Nevertheless, there exist a number of promising initiatives in Rwanda that signal a shift in how sexual violence is addressed. Sexual violence was labelled a 'category one' crime, or one of the most serious crimes committed during the genocide and by 2010, the traditional *gacaca* courts<sup>1</sup> had presided over some 7,000 cases of genocidal sexual violence. Trauma counsellors have been available for survivors of sexual violence testifying before *gacaca* courts, and they were permitted to testify in closed sessions to avoid stigmatisation. Judges

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<sup>1</sup> After the genocide, the Rwandan government adapted the traditional *gacaca* courts (which had previously primarily dealt with family disputes) to preside over crimes related to the genocide in order to expedite the trials of more than 1 million identified alleged *génocidaires*. The *gacaca* courts, operational from 2001 to 2011, involve the whole community and are designed to promote justice, healing and reconciliation.

across the country have also been trained on the impact that testifying about sexual violence has on women. To address rape in present-day Rwanda, heavy penalties may be imposed and the government has established a gender desk and a free police hotline to report such crimes.

Positive developments are also apparent in Rwanda's institutions. Women occupy some of the most important government ministries<sup>2</sup> and comprise 56 percent of the country's parliamentarians, the highest proportion in the world. Women also account for 55 percent of the workforce and own 41 percent of Rwandan businesses. Women now have the right to own land and property and have a choice about which marital property regime they wish to be governed by when they marry. Correspondingly, inheritance laws have been passed that mandate the equal division of a man's property between his wife and children.

Internationally, initiatives to prevent and address sexual violence in conflict have increased in recent years, partly in response to reports of systematic sexual violence in ongoing conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Uganda and the Central African Republic. These include the establishment of UN *Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict*, uniting the work of twelve UN bodies to develop coordinated action to end sexual violence in conflict; the adoption by the UN Security Council of Resolutions 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009) and 1960 (2010) to end sexual violence in conflict; the launch of the UN Secretary-General's campaign *UNiTE to End Violence against Women*; the appointment of a Special Rapporteur on Sexual Violence in Conflict; and the International Criminal Court's investigation and prosecution of crimes of sexual violence committed by senior instigators of some of the worst conflict zones in the world. These initiatives reflect the historic momentum and an increasing willingness to more actively respond to sexual violence.

Yet, these positive developments have had little impact on the daily lives of survivors of genocidal rape in Rwanda. In the years following the genocide, the Rwandan government lacked the infrastructure and means to meet survivors' critical needs. Grassroots organisations assumed a leading role in rebuilding the country and were often the only institutions able to grasp early on the complex dimensions of the struggles facing survivors of sexual violence, who in addition to emergency material assistance require counselling and therapy for post-traumatic stress, nutritious food to maintain their health, stable housing, education, effective treatment for their illnesses, income-generating training and resources such as school fees and materials to support the children and orphans they care for. Organisations such as Solace Ministries were also able to provide a secure space where women could re-establish social ties, seek solace and find support. Yet many survivors are still mired in poverty and struggle to make ends meet. In 2009 — for the second time since the 1994 genocide — the UN General Assembly called for urgent international and national initiatives to assist survivors of the Rwandan genocide, in particular orphans, widows and

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<sup>2</sup> For example, women occupy seats in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Trade and Industry, Education, Gender and Family Promotion, and East African Community.

survivors of sexual violence, including through medical care, skills training and victim support.

Sometimes, change can come through individual acts of support. Soon after our first meeting with Jeanette, a benefactor in the Netherlands decided to sponsor her through *Mukomeze*, a Dutch organization that coordinates sponsorships for survivors of sexual violence during the Rwandan genocide. This past summer, we reunited with Jeanette and were thrilled to witness first-hand the impact the financial support had made: Jeanette was thriving with a small business selling produce and had completed studies in Restaurant Management. She was able to work occasionally as a cook in a restaurant to supplement her income. Part of her sponsorship money was also used to renovate her home. Gone were the days when she desperately worried about how to pay for her children's school fees. The support also improved Jeanette's overall physical and psychological well-being and that of her children.

More still needs to be done. The international community must provide wide-ranging support to survivors of sexual violence. While we continue to denounce crimes of sexual violence, we must also take immediate action to prevent their occurrence and ensure those responsible for such crimes are held accountable. The resilience of women like Jeanette is extraordinary, but certainly no reason for us to believe nothing more needs to be done. The world failed victims of sexual violence when they needed our help the most. We cannot afford to turn our backs on them again.