

## Case Study



### What helps children born of rape in Rwanda – experiences from an uncharted land

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War-related sexual violence is systematic in many conflicts, and countless children are born as a result of conflict-related rape. This is sometimes a “by-product” of the violence, and sometimes a deliberate part of genocidal logic. These children have many things in common, such as societal discrimination, abandonment, and in extreme cases infanticide, and often bear names that reflect the dehumanising context of their origin. They are extremely vulnerable economically, do not get emotional, social or material help from their families, and their sense of identity is severely challenged. Patriarchal logic dictates that, as the children of the “enemies”, they cannot be part of the communities they grow up in, and in extreme cases they may even become stateless. Despite their specific vulnerabilities, they have largely been neglected by researchers, human rights activists, and psychosocial practitioners.

However, we must ensure that their individual identities are not lost in the process of slowly uncovering the systemic and systematic dimensions connected with children born of rape. Each has their own story and faces their own challenges, but each one also has their own potentials.

At *medica mondiale*, we are careful to root our approach in both our analysis of patriarchy and our solidarity with

each survivor of war rape and each child born of rape. This approach is shared by our sister organisation SEVOTA in Rwanda, and we would like to share their story with you.

Although we are aware that not everything we describe here will be applicable to children born of rape in other contexts, we believe that the lessons learnt may inspire other actors in this field to invest in psychosocial interventions for this particular group of children.

#### Rwanda and the genocide

Between 250,000 and 500,000 women, mostly Tutsi, were affected by sexualised violence during the Rwandan genocide in 1994. Large numbers of them were systematically raped, tortured, genitally mutilated, or forced to choose between death or sexual exploitation from their “husbands” in forced marriages. Thousands were also deliberately infected with HIV/AIDS. Many became pregnant, and while an untold number tried to self-abort, killed their children, or abandoned them to die, between 2,000 and 5,000 of these babies survived. Even now, 25 years after the genocide, they are still called children of “bad memories”, “hatred”, or “bad luck”.

The context of genocide follows a perpetrator's logic where one group attempts to annihilate another. And since patriarchal societies view children as extensions of their father's identity, war rape and the ensuing pregnancies extend that logic by implanting the perpetrator's offspring into the survivor group, thus destroying it even further. This still resonates so powerfully in Rwanda that many survivors and their children continue to be ostracised by their families. Some of these children – now adults of 24 years, and easy to identify because of their age – still live with the threat that their families might kill them, since they carry the identity of the perpetrators.



The Rwandan women's rights activist Godelieve Mukasirasi founded SEVOTA with the motivation to rebuild the deeply shaken interpersonal relationships of Rwandan society.

When the Rwandan non-governmental organisation SEVOTA (Solidarity for the Blooming of the Widows and the Orphans aiming at Work and Self-promotion) started its mission there were no systematic psychosocial approaches to dealing with the aftermath of the genocide and the massive social grief it left, let alone any ideas of how to work with children born of rape. SEVOTA developed their methodology over the course of more than a decade, always with the clear idea of breaking the silence – between the survivors themselves, between mothers and children, between family members, and ultimately within the wider Rwandan society.

### The wounds of the mothers ...

The survivors of systematic rape during the Rwandan genocide are heavily traumatised. Not only from the brutality of sexual violence, but also from witnessing the horrific deaths of many of their families, including their own children. Those who became pregnant and kept their children still face stigma today, and are rejected by their families and communities for giving birth to the chil-

dren of the perpetrators. Some children resemble their fathers so closely that their mere physical presence is a constant reminder of the destruction of sexual violence. Many of the women continue to be destabilised by living every day with this constant psychological and social reminder of what happened to them.

**SEVOTA** was created in December 1994, a few months after the genocide ended, with a clear mission of supporting Rwandan widows and orphans. This was later extended to include survivors of sexual violence and children born of rape. SEVOTA deliberately calls them survivors rather than victims, and calls their children “young people who are capable” (Urubwiruko rushoboye in Kinyarwanda) to avoid reducing their identity to merely that of the product of an atrocity. **medica mondiale** has supported SEVOTA since 2008 both financially and technically through trauma psychological expertise.

### ... and the wounds of the children

While the life experiences of SEVOTA's “youth who are capable” may differ, they all share the fact that their mothers did not want them and, since they are clearly the children of the perpetrators, they suffer for being living signifiers of this intended annihilation. Many of these children have been mistreated since they were born; sometimes even earlier, when their mothers tried to self-abort. Many were severely emotionally and physically neglected as babies and, as a result, are less physically developed than their peers and suffer from severe cognitive disabilities. Most of them had nobody to respond to their needs, no matter how urgent they were, and were mistreated by their families. They are often blamed and physically punished for anything that goes wrong, and have become the scapegoats for every kind of misery.

In some cases these children were the only members of their mother's families left alive after the genocide, and grew up under the overwhelming and impossible existential burden of being both their mother's consolation and the symbol of their loss. They were denied their right to a childhood.

### The “forum Abiyubaka” – a unique approach to empowerment

SEVOTA, along with a number of others, introduced their psychosocial approach to working with women survivors of rape in 2006 through the “forum Abiyubaka”. A forum is



The “youth who are capable” learn to share about their problems in pairs or small groups in the therapeutic camp.

a place, real or virtual, where people meet to share ideas, while Abiyubaka is a Kinyarwanda word meaning “the women who rehabilitate themselves”. The group’s name underlines the importance of coming together as a vehicle for healing: meeting and sharing ideas in a safe space helps the survivors to recover and to learn to work towards building more positive relationships with their children. In this way, the forum becomes a point of reference that allows the women to feel that they are part of a “new community” that reaches beyond their own individual stories and empowers them to take care of, support, and encourage each other.

Each group’s path begins with a “therapeutic journey”, which lasts for up to one year and consists of therapeutic encounter sessions covering a diverse range of topics such as self-reflection, exercises for managing the symptoms of posttraumatic stress, and understanding the needs and rights of children. This includes the need to tell them the truth about their origins, with support from their fellow women. While the focus is on the “here and now”,



After their therapeutic journey, the women start solidarity groups in which they continue sharing their problems and work together towards economic empowerment.

the women also learn to deal with their painful pasts, and perhaps more importantly learn what THEY can do to take control of and create their own futures. As they move beyond seeing themselves as “destroyed” they become aware of the contribution they can make towards creating a fair and just society, learn about their rights, and explore together their potential as women. In the second part of the forum, called “journey towards empowerment and solidarity”, they continue in a spirit of sharing, meeting regularly in small groups in their communities to talk about their lives and problems. This includes taking part in small income-generating projects such as communal farming, sharing their experiences and offering each other advice. Since many live without any financial support from their families, these projects empower them both materially and psychologically.

The women do most of the healing work themselves as they meet in dyads and small groups to share their experiences and views; their tears and laughter. While SEVOTA does work with psychologists, their approach is firmly based on helping the women to build and access the power they have “between” themselves. As they learn about and understand the choices they have in their lives, their self-perception changes. This is beautifully expressed in one survivor’s description of the healing journey she underwent: “Before joining the forum, for years, I have not taken care of my body and not of my hair. I looked dirty and filthy. When I learned that I still have my dignity, I started to wear clean clothes and to look after my hair. And when I started valuing myself, I could see my child also being beautiful – just like any other child.”

## The youth camps

The children initially took part in recreational activities during the forum’s meetings, but in 2015, SEVOTA introduced a structured therapeutic approach for the “young people who are capable” by facilitating two “camps”, each lasting five days.

The first is a “therapeutic camp”, which aims to create a safe space with secure relationships where the young people can open up and share their experiences of pain and violence. During this therapeutic journey, a variety of facilitators help the participants work through several exercises compiled by SEVOTA, the most valuable of which include “understanding myself and my feelings and what I can do when I feel bad”, and “understanding where I come from and learning how to accept myself and my history”. In one regular session, a mother gives a personal testimony of how women and girls experienced sexual violence during the genocide. For some of the young people, hearing these stories and understanding their historical context breaks more than two decades of





Talent evenings help the “youth who are capable” to realise what they are capable of, which is an essential part of their journey towards recovery.

silence between mothers and children, and becomes one of the camp’s most powerful experiences.

The second camp, called “the camp of becoming responsible”, is held about half a year later and helps the young people to deepen their sharing and their knowledge about the previous topics, but this time with a stronger focus on future and empowerment. A major part of the camp is dedicated to “the project of my life”, which validates the youth’s individual and group talents, their strengths and interests, and explores the various income-generating activities that are within their capabilities. The young adults learn revaluing themselves through sharing their experiences and being supported in finding their talents.

## Hope, empowerment and change for both the mothers and their children

The mothers report that the first changes they experience come when they open up to each other through the sharing exercises, especially when sharing in pairs (known as dyads). They begin to feel that they are not alone with their painful experiences, and that maybe there are others who may have suffered even more. But more importantly, they can see the progression that other women like them have made in their recovery process. This creates hope.

The young people have reported changes such as improvements in their performance at school and in their relationships with their mothers. As one said, “when I heard the testimony of Mama A., I understood what my own mother had gone through. I could forgive her. I could see it was not

her fault. And it is not my fault.” The children’s self-esteem has been reinforced, giving them the courage to engage in small income-generating projects or to form talent groups. In some cases, they are now giving public testimonies at national conferences and freely speak to local authorities and leaders about their experiences and needs. One of the most common feelings that young people report as a result of the approach is “I am not alone, others understand what I have gone through”, and many of them are now forming youth groups to build on the progress they have made in the camps.

The genocide left deep wounds, and placed a multitude of challenges on Rwandan society. Many youths will continue to need individual psychological support for years to come. But even in the midst of despair, there are more signs that a sense of empowerment is developing. Some of the survivors have married, and their husbands are now coming to SEVOTA for support. Couples seminars are helping to break the silence between spouses, facilitating a process of greater acceptance from the husbands towards both their wives and the children born after the genocide. The husbands have even formed their own association, which shows that empowering psychological trauma work can lead directly to societal change.



The mothers share their experiences with each other in pairs (dyads). If they feel overwhelmed, they help each other to recover their emotional stability with body exercises.

So, how do we navigate this uncharted land? SEVOTA’s experiences can serve as orientation points, showing us that the psychosocial empowerment of the mothers and their children must go together, and that empowerment is not only therapeutic, but must also include the political and societal arenas. ■