

Rwanda’s resilient women

A decade ago, we met survivors still haunted by rape and the loss of their loved ones, but determined to change themselves and their country for the better. This is where they are today

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SAMER MUSCATI

Samer Muscati is a lawyer, documentary photographer and former journalist. As a senior researcher for Human Rights Watch, he focused on women’s rights in conflict zones. He runs the International Human Rights program at the University of Toronto’s faculty of law. This project is a collaboration with **Sandra Ka Hon Chu**, director of research and advocacy at the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network.

An estimated 250,000 to 500,000 women were raped over 100 days during the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. No one was spared: Grandmothers were assaulted in the presence of their grandchildren; girls witnessed the massacre of their families before being abducted. As Rwanda commemorates 25 years since the onset of the genocide on April 7, 1994, much of the world’s attention will be focused on the senseless violence that devastated this African country as the international community stood passively by. While this commemoration is important, too often the stories we tell of genocide end with its horrific violence, forever framing its survivors as victims.

This April 7, there is another story that needs to be told. Rwandans who endured the most ruthless acts of sexual violence imaginable have managed to not only survive, but to heal in the face of

trauma, loss and poverty. Although the stains of the genocide are permanent, survivors illustrate the importance of international and domestic support during and after a conflict. This support has allowed survivors to access health care and socioeconomic support, including counselling, HIV treatment, housing and microcredit programs.

To document their remarkable journeys, our team returned to Rwanda in November, 2018, to interview and photograph survivors who had shared their testimonials with us 10 years earlier. We were struck by their transformation. Our new book showcases survivors’ extraordinary will, resilience and determination to make a better life for themselves and their children, in the face of seemingly irreparable harms. These women are an enduring testament to our collective abandonment of them. But they also represent the promise of transformative change.



MARIE LOUISE, 43, was living with her family when the genocide began. As the violence spread, she sought shelter in a Catholic church, which swiftly became the site of a massacre. She miraculously survived after being left for dead among the bodies of

others. After the génocidaires left, she hid for several days in bushes, but was eventually spotted by a soldier, who abducted and enslaved her in a house where he raped her repeatedly over five days. He was not the last. “Before the genocide, I had never been

intimate with a man, and yet now, I have gotten to know many without my consent,” Marie Louise told us 10 years ago. Today, she is living with HIV as a result of the sexual violence, one of many Rwandan survivors who share this fate.

Support from the Rwandan

government and international aid organizations has allowed Marie Louise to become self-sufficient; she now has a plot of land where she cultivates cassava and beans, and also owns a cow.

“Nothing gives me more joy than being a mother. Many women of my

age died during the genocide, so I am so happy that I am still alive and even have children,” she told us last year. “When I look at my children, I see my family: my brothers, sisters, uncles. When I see them, I see my future ahead; because of them, I have hope.”



MARIE, 62, a Hutu woman, was targeted during the Rwandan genocide because her husband and children were Tutsi. Marie hid in the bush with her infant son, both surviving on wild fruit. An Interahamwe militia member discovered and raped Marie, who was pregnant with her fifth child. During those 100

days, other militia raped Marie and she contracted HIV.

“I want you to know that the horrors people inflicted during the genocide are more than any human being can endure,” she told us 10 years ago. “For a long time after, I despised myself for what had happened to me. I hated everything

that surrounded me, because it reminded me of what I had lost.”

Today, Marie says she is doing much better after connecting with other survivors and getting counselling. She has joined other women to establish an agricultural co-operative to grow pineapples and fruit trees. “Before I shared my

testimony a decade ago, I had no hope for the future. All I could think of was, ‘How am I going to live?’ I did not want to say anything about what happened to me; my story was mine, and I did not see a need to share it. But when I finally found the courage to share my story, it went out into the world and that

helped restore my hope. By speaking with counsellors, I began to deal with my trauma. I also connected with other genocide survivors of sexual violence. Until then, I thought that I was alone, but when I heard that others suffered the same problems that I faced, it touched my heart.”



GLORIOSE, 43, watched the Interahamwe stab and beat her father to death during the genocide. A priest tried to rescue Gloriose, her sister and some other children by hiding them in a classroom in a priests’ compound. After four days, the Interahamwe searched the compound and

discovered them. This was the beginning of many horrible encounters. “One Interahamwe approached me and asked me to choose between life and death,” she told us 10 years ago. “I couldn’t answer him, so he tore my clothes off and ordered me to lie down. When I refused, one of

the other militiamen hit me on the back with a nailed club. I fell and was bleeding heavily. This disgusted the Interahamwe who had wanted to rape me, so he left me there.”

After the genocide, Gloriose became homeless, wandering the streets, begging for food and

doing odd jobs. Today, with support from non-governmental organizations, she has been able to rent a nice home, run a small business selling charcoal and pay for her children’s school materials and uniforms.

“I see a good future ahead for my children and me. If God keeps

me alive, and if my children finish their studies and find a job, our lives will be good,” she told us last year. “Despite all that has happened to me, I will stand firm. I feel strong. I am a responsible woman and I will continue on the right track. I want to be a good example for others.”