

Being patient provides peace

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When I was still young, my parents used to tell us how our family had been deported by the government from Ruhengeri to Nyamata in 1959, when massacres based on ethnic conflicts happened for the first time in Rwanda. My father also told us that the whole region of Bugesera had been a forest and that there were many animals there. Most of my relatives who had been forced into the forest by the government at that time died due to a sleeping sickness caused by tsetse flies. In 1965, six years after my family had been displaced and forced to live in what is currently known as Bugesera District, I was born.

The hardships that Tutsis faced when they were first brought to Bugesera continued. When I was only eight years old I observed it with my own eyes. In 1973, as we were coming home from school, I saw people burning houses on the side of Gitarama. Many people from there took refuge in Bugesera. Even though the 1973 war calmed down at one point, the unfairness towards Tutsis continued, especially in schools. Because of this, I stopped my studies after completing primary school.

I have good memories of the period before the genocide, being with my parents and siblings. My life changed during the 1994 genocide, during which I saw many people die. My parents and seven of my siblings were killed in that time.

In the period following the genocide, I sometimes felt very lonely because I had no one to talk to. The genocide took my peers and neighbours. No one from my extended family escaped. Before the genocide happened, I never thought that it could happen

as it did. What surprised me was the wickedness with which it was performed. On April 6, on the night of the death of President Habyarimana, we observed some of our Hutu neighbours change their behaviour. That same night, they started burning Tutsi houses. Our father, who was an old man, told us that our lives were finished. We did not know what he meant by this. Over the next few days he ordered us to spend the nights in the bush and come back home in the morning. After only two days, young Interahamwe started slashing the cows of Tutsis with knives and machetes and eating them, and beating up Tutsis. On the other side of our sector, houses were burning.

On the morning of April 8, we saw crowds of Interahamwe led by an ADEPR pastor, approaching our neighbourhood. We ran away towards Ntarama, because there were many Tutsis living there compared to other parts of Bugesera. On the way to Ntarama, we jumped over dead bodies of people who had been killed. I separated from my siblings and parents on that day as I was trying to find a place to hide and save myself. After I separated from them, I continued on my way, together with my little sister who was ten years old. Our first stop was Ntarama primary school. We stayed there for three days. On April 12 the Interahamwe attacked us, which made us seek refuge in Ntarama Catholic Church. Three days later, on April 15, we saw a bus full of civilians and soldiers coming to the church to kill. The Interahamwe killed all of the men. The women and children who survived the ordeal went back to Ntarama primary school. There we also found that many people had been

killed. The Interahamwe had changed their attitude, looking more angry and gloomy than before, so we thought that if we stayed in the school they would also kill us.

Because we had nowhere else to go, we spent two weeks hiding in the bush. When the Interahamwe started to burn the bush, we left towards the swamp, where we hid for two months. The Interahamwe tried to set fire to the swamp grass in order to burn us, but they did not succeed; all of the grass was burned, but the places where people were sitting were not affected by the fire. Next, they threw grenades at these places, but they did not injure us because the swamp was full of water. They then entered the swamp themselves and slaughtered many men and young boys, while women became the sex slaves of the pitiless men.

What I faced while hiding in the swamp is not something to be told. They raped me in whatever way they wanted, and as a consequence I am still feeling the freshness of the wounds they inflicted on me. But throughout my life I have not wanted to talk about the rape. In my experience, they killed me, even though I am still standing. I do not remember the faces of the rapists, maybe because I had lost consciousness as they degraded me. Most of them were not from our neighbourhood, but they were brought by people who did know us. If I had been raped without also being infected with HIV, the experience would have been less severe. What shattered my heart most is that I contracted HIV because of the rape I endured.

After being saved from the swamp by Inkotanyi, I lived in Nyamata town together with my sister and my nieces. I only learned about my seropositive status one year before my husband died in 2006. I married him in 1996 and gave birth to our first child in the same year. Our second child was born in

1998 and was infected with HIV, though I was not aware of it at the time. In 2001, I gave birth to another child, who was also HIV positive. I do not know whether they got infected during birth or during the breastfeeding period. In 2005, I became ill. I went for voluntary counselling and testing for HIV and received HIV positive results. After receiving this result, I was very sad. A year later, my husband died. Since then my children started falling ill, and I led an unpromising life. Even though I had no job, different people helped me take my children and myself to the hospital. Since then I take antiretroviral treatment. My husband died before becoming aware of what had happened to me. During the whole period of my sickness, there was nobody from my family or from my husband's family who could support me, because they were all killed during the genocide.

I now earn some money to survive when I sell the harvest from our fields or from renting my parents' fields to others. When I am very sick, the mutual health insurance given by FARG helps me get almost free healthcare. The same government fund provided me with metal sheets for rebuilding my own house. After a few years, I heard about the Rwanda Women's Network and I attended counselling provided by them. I sometimes also get medical care from there. Due to the poverty I experienced after the death of my husband, my state of health continued to be weak, so the organization Ibyiringiro bishya (New Hope) also supported me. But still, there is no support for my children. Because of my HIV status and other genocide-related problems, I became so traumatized that I went to the hospital and spent a couple of days being hospitalized. I was deeply wounded by my seropositive status and being a widow without any relatives around to talk to. When I was feeling

depressed, the Rwanda Women's Network provided me with counselling. Thanks to this counselling I became able and willing to work, whereas I was not interested in working before.

While I was in the process of gaining back hope to survive, Gacaca reopened my wounds. Gacaca courts should normally facilitate the process of reconciliation and holding perpetrators accountable for their deeds. However, for me Gacaca was a source of more grief instead of happiness. Up to now, I have not buried my closest family members because I do not know where to find the bones that remain of their bodies. This also makes me feel very sad. They were killed in Gitarama and I do not know whom to denounce. Because participating in Gacaca was obligatory, I participated in Nyamata, in this way avoiding being exposed to Gacaca in my region of origin. I only participated once in Gacaca, and hated the courts. The first reason is that the looters of our properties did not accept that they had ransacked them, while I am sure that they took our belongings. They said that we had nothing at home, that we just have a desire for property, which is not true. The fact that those who are guilty did not want to accept the sins they committed, as well as their responses and the language they used, traumatized me. Thus, I did not participate in Gacaca anymore and also will not do so in the near future, because the value of property is less than the value of the brothers and sisters I lost during the genocide.

Regarding Gacaca as justice, personally, it did not achieve what I was expecting from it. Justice has only partly been done. For example, the killers of those relatives I buried are already released and freely walking around. We regularly come across each other in the street. I do not understand how setting a killer free, if he accepts what he did, is full

justice. What is the importance of testifying against a perpetrator if his punishment will be to be released from jail?

I did not share the rape with anybody before because this kind of story is unspeakable. I did not even talk about it with my sister, because I did not want to traumatize her for the second time. I sometimes feel that this story is beyond my comprehension. For this reason, I feel that the perpetrators having been set free means that I will be dead before rape-related justice in my case will be done.

The first time I disclosed my story about the rape was in sociotherapy. I did not expect anything from sociotherapy, because it was the first time I had heard about it in my neighbourhood. The problems I had before I joined sociotherapy were life- and sickness-related problems. I could not share these problems with anyone; instead I was always silent. After joining sociotherapy I became happy, as I could chat with my sociotherapy colleagues. Before, I felt that my problems were mine and there was no reason to share them with others. But talking and chatting with others changed my life. I was motivated to talk in sociotherapy, rather than to my friends, because of the training and counselling I had benefitted from before. After joining sociotherapy, I freely shared with others the story of my life, the life of my children, and the HIV infection that made my life even more difficult. As I participated in two different groups of sociotherapy, each group helped me in its own way. The first group I attended enabled me to talk about the death of my loved ones, while the second group allowed me to talk about my suffering from HIV as a result of the rape I faced. However, even if I was discussing my problems with my sociotherapy colleagues, I never explicitly presented my HIV positive status as being

related to rape. I kept thinking that I had to keep the rape a secret and carry the burden myself.

Sociotherapy helped me to be patient and thus give peace to others and to myself. What I liked about sociotherapy was meeting people who could understand my worries and anguish. My laziness disappeared. Before, I felt down and like I could not do anything, wondering why I should work at all. In sociotherapy I regained strength, which helped me continue working and look after my children – three of my own and two adopted. Group members encouraged me to work.

My relationships with others also changed during the sociotherapy process; before joining, I hated everybody and used to insult them. Since participating in sociotherapy, my behaviour has changed. I now communicate with everybody, including my neighbours. Having taken the step towards a sense of care and safety helped me recover peace in my own heart. I had lost trust because of my problems, but because of sociotherapy I regained patience and trust. The result is that I can now also give peace to others, including those who do not want to cooperate with me.

I usually experienced *ihahamuka* each year, especially during the month of April, which is the time to wash the remaining bones of genocide victims. I used to suffer from constant headaches, loss of consciousness, weeping and hearing drums playing in my head throughout this genocide commemoration period. But during the 2012 commemoration period that followed my completion of fifteen sociotherapy sessions I did not experience any *ihahamuka*. It is for this reason that I wish that this story of my life and the other stories that were also collected will be read by many people, including my children. Hearing what

happened to us only as a history lesson in general is not enough to really understand. I hope these detailed stories will help the readers know more.

Despite all of the good things that have happened to me lately, I am always worried about my children. A major issue is where to find the funds to pay for their school fees. Secondly, feeding five children is problematic. Above all of these problems, the psychological problem my niece suffers from as a result of the heavy blows she received during the genocide worry me, as this sickness becomes worse day after day. But still, I hope that my future will be good, because I trust in God and God is good.

I would like to inform all of those who read my story that after having been degraded and deprived of human rights as a human and as a woman, after having felt like I was being killed, after a life characterized by darkness, after losing my senses and living with a troubled mind, after lacking safety, life can still continue. I say that any person can move from darkness towards light if they want, and if they are supported by the will of God.