

BOOK REVIEW

Title: *The men who killed me: Rwandan survivors of sexual violence*
Editors: Anne-Marie de Brouwer and Sandra Ka Hon Chu
Published: 2009
Publisher: Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre (as from May 2010 also in Dutch from:
Nijmegen, Oisterwijk: Wolf Legal Publishers)
ISBN: ISBN 978-15536-5310-3

Rape – a brutal act of violence almost as old as the human race and an intrinsic part of nearly every conflict since time immemorial as a “necessary bounty for fighting men”. Indeed, until very recently, the world largely turned a blind eye to the use of rape in war, regarding it as private actions committed by individuals. Perpetrators were and are rarely held accountable for their actions. Rape survivors, on the other hand, suffer severe stigma and discrimination, especially if they are also living with HIV. In addition, they largely shy away from speaking openly about sexual violence. In many conservative societies, rape survivors have also to endure the denial of their right to employment, to property and to inheritance. This, in turn, makes them economically and socially vulnerable, and in many cases leading to further violence in a world where, ironically, the phrases “human rights” and “women’s rights” appear almost daily in newspapers around the globe.

The stark reality of what rape survivors have to endure in today’s “free” world hits one like a ton of bricks when reading the intense, heart-wrenching testimonials of 17 genocidal rape victims as reported in this publication. Sixteen years after the 100-day genocide in Rwanda between April and June 1994, these 17 brave souls have become the voice of between 250 000 and 500 000 women, young boys and men, who were the victims of the genocidal sexual violence. Their faces, beautifully captured in black and white by photographer Samer Muscati, still bear the marks of intense suffering. They have survived, but at a great cost. They have lost the innocence of childhood, their partners, their families, their livelihood, their homes, their self-respect and in many cases, their health, since many of them were deliberately infected with HIV by the Hutu perpetrators, in an orchestrated method to ensure that the future sexual partners and children of Tutsi survivors would be infected as well and eventually be killed by the disease. Even more horrifying is the fact that while many genocidal rape survivors lack access to health care and antiretroviral (ARV) treatment, those accused of high-level participation in the genocide receive antiretroviral treatment and health care in prison while awaiting trial. Numerous survivors live with a disease that renders them unable to perform physical work and earn an income, leading to utmost poverty, in many cases within walking distance of the very people who committed the sexual atrocities against them. Indeed, although each survivor’s story is unique, one commonality in their testimonies is that they feel justice is not being served. Under Rwanda’s genocide law, rape and sexual torture are recognised as genocide and crimes against humanity, punishable by a maximum term of life imprisonment; yet, many survivors do not participate in the traditional *gacaca* courts,¹ because many rapists receive short sentences and are released back into the community in exchange for their confessions. In addition, survivors fear that they would be intimidated and mocked by the supporters of the perpetrators – a real fear when one takes into consideration that between 1995 and mid-May 2008, about 167 genocide survivors were murdered. The words of one survivor sums up the general feeling: “I go to the *gacaca* courts, but I am more and more frightened to give my testimony when I see what happens to other survivors when they do so. They are intimidated, or, even worse, killed” (p. 123).

Yet, 16 years after being called “cockroaches” by a Hutu propaganda machine aimed at “cleansing” Rwanda of its Tutsi population and having to endure gruesome sexual torture and violence, the survivors in the book chose to speak out loud and clear against this ugly chapter in Rwandan history and an international community that turned a blind eye to the atrocities which were committed at the time. Numerous accounts of the genocide have been published over the years, including coverage of the use of rape and sexual violence, but the voices of the survivors themselves have been strangely absent. This book changed this. Through the patient devotion of the editors, Anne-Marie de Brouwer and Sandra Ka Hon Chu, former colleagues at an international women’s rights organisation in The Hague, and their friend Samer Muscati, a Canadian lawyer and freelance photographer, victims of sexual violence during the Rwanda genocide were given a voice. With the help of Solace Ministries, an ecumenical survivor-run organisation that supports widows, orphans and survivors of sexual violence, each survivor was interviewed on three or four occasions. It must have taken immense courage from the side of the survivors, but as one of them stated clearly: “I want the world to know what happened here in Rwanda and what we had to endure and I want to heal myself by unburdening my heart”.

The approach and timing of the book could not have come at a better time. Published 15 years after the genocide, at a time when there is once more a growing denial internationally of the events that occurred in Rwanda, coupled with a resurgence of genocidal ideology in Rwanda, the book is geared to speak to the soul and conscience of every person who reads it. Hopefully, this will mobilise the same international community who once turned a blind eye to the plight of victims in Rwanda (and, in the case of the French, often witnessed the atrocities first-hand), to become determined to bring an end to such acts.

In recent years, some positive steps have indeed been taken in terms of international law, specifically by recognising genocidal rape as a crime. The first international judicial body to recognise rape and sexual violence as genocide was the International Criminal Tribunal in Rwanda (ICTR), which was established by the United Nations Security Council in November 1994 with a mandate of judging those responsible for the genocide and other serious violations of international law in Rwanda, or by Rwandan citizens in neighbouring states, between 1 January and 31 December 1994. Following this was the establishment of the permanent International Criminal Court in 1998 that came into effect on 1 July 2002. In June 2008, the United Nations’ Security Council adopted UN Resolution 1820, aimed at ending sexual violence in conflict.² But, sadly, it was not the Rwanda genocide alone that brought about these changes in international law – it also took the ethnic conflict in the former Yugoslavia (1991-2001) to put war crimes against women on the international human rights agenda for the first time in history. Following reports of a systematic policy of ethnic cleansing that saw thousands of women being raped, mutilated, and executed in concentration camps, feminist legal scholars for the first time began to discuss rape as genocide.³ As the authors assert: “The use of rape had finally captured the world’s attention, and sexual violence was transformed in people’s understanding from the private actions of individuals to a public and political tool of aggression” (p. 18). One can only trust that these steps would not prove to be just one more toothless international resolution with no tangible results, as has happened so often in the past.

In Rwanda itself, although the stakes for the survivors of the genocidal rape are stacked high, there is a glimmer of hope. There have been a number of positive legislative changes since the genocide, including laws that guarantee women and girls the same rights as men and boys to inherit property. Furthermore, in recent times, the country has been lauded for its progressiveness in promoting the inclusion of women in many aspects of public and political life; the 2003 Constitution, for example, provides equal protection under the law for all, including protection

against discrimination on the basis of sex or HIV status. Today, despite still being a very conservative society, Rwanda has a constitutional requirement of 30% female parliamentarians. It can also lay claim to women occupying 56% of seats in the Rwandan Parliament – the highest number of women MPs in the world. Judicially, the *gacaca* courts have gone some way to seeing justice served, despite the generally negative views expressed by survivors in the book. Coupled with the unique work of non-governmental organisations like Solace Ministries, genocidal rape survivors are learning to deal with their traumatic experiences from peers who had suffered as much as they did. In the absence of government and other services, Solace Ministries provides individual and peer counselling, medication, and material support in the form of sustainable, income-generating activities, leading to women becoming a voice to reckon with in Rwanda.

The wheels are slowly turning in Rwanda in favour of women's rights, but the excruciating pain of thousands of women that preceded these necessary changes should never be forgotten or ignored again, as it was in 1994. As the authors aptly conclude: "Survivors of sexual violence are a living testament to our collective abandonment of them, but they also represent the promise of transformative change. We cannot afford to turn our backs on them again" (p. 158).

**Dr Anna-Mart van Wyk
International Studies
Monash University
South Africa**

¹ *Gacaca* is a Kinyarwanda word meaning "on the grass". It refers to the traditional courts of Rwanda. Prior to 2008, these courts had jurisdiction to deal with all crimes related to the genocide, except for crimes known as "category one crimes". Crimes committed by the planners and supervisors of the genocide, as well as rape and sexual torture, are recognised as category one crimes, to be prosecuted before national courts. However, the task of prosecuting the enormous number of individuals accused of category one crimes before the national courts became overwhelming, leading to the cases of approximately 6 808 individuals being transferred to the *gacaca* courts under an amended genocide law of 2008 (pp. 150-151; 171).

² United Nations. (2008, June 19). Security Council demands immediate and complete halt to acts of sexual violence against civilians in conflict zones, unanimously adopting Resolution 1820. Retrieved on 26 March 2010 from <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/sc9364.doc.htm>

³ Carpenter, R. C. (2000). Surfacing Children: Limitations of Genocidal Rape Discourse. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 22, 428-429.