

LIS professionals supporting women living in conflict situations
<https://www.ifla.org/node/11319>

The Girl Child and Genocide: Mapping Lived Experiences of Girls from Gitarama Prefecture who Survived the 1994 Rwandan Genocide

Musa Olaka

African, Global & International Studies, University of Kansas, Lawrence, USA.
musaolaka@ku.edu



Copyright © 2017 by Musa Wakhungu Olaka. This work is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License:
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Abstract:

The voice of girls who survived the 1994 genocide in Rwanda has, to a great degree, remained mute or has been drowned by other voices. A pervasive cultural sanction in many traditional African societies was that girls were only supposed to be seen and not to be heard. Rwanda was not an exception. This may partly explain why experiences that girls endured during the genocide have not been widely and strongly articulated as they ought to. Ironically, girls are the ones who bore the brunt of the genocide yet they were not party to its planning and execution. In late 1999 and early 2000, IBUKA, the umbrella association of other associations of survivors of the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda organized a solidary camp, ingando, that brought together close to 1000 children who survived the genocide. IBUKA requested the children to document their own eye witness accounts detailing what they experienced from the time the mass killing started on the night of 6th April 1994 till the time they were rescued. Most of these testimonies were written by girls who survived the genocide. The purpose of this paper is to map and analyze testimonies of girls who survived the genocide and whose homes were in Masango, Nyamabuye, Ntongwe, and Mugina communes of Gitarama Prefecture that was a major killing field during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.

Keywords: Rwanda Genocide, Girls Genocide, Gitarama Prefecture, Testimonies Girls, Genocide

Introduction

Atrocities that characterized the 1994 genocide in Rwanda gravely affected the Rwandan girl-child especially those who survived the genocide. Unfortunately, their voices seem not to have been robustly represented in discourse as there have been very limited analysis of what the girls experienced during the genocide at the various administrative levels, ranging from the *prefecture* which was the largest administrative area, to the *cellule* which used to be the most granular administrative area in the country. The Rwandan genocide claimed close to one million people, and the 2007 census of genocide survivors found that there were approximately 309,368 survivors still alive and 58.4% of these survivors were female. Out of the total number of survivors, 66% were between the ages of 13 to 35 years. A total population of 93,588 were between the ages of 13 and 20 years and 50,807 (54.3%) within this age bracket were female (Republique du Rwanda Institut National de la Statistique du Rwanda 2008). This shows that the majority of the survivors were below the age of 35 years by 2007.

The genocide in Rwanda therefore left indelible painful memories in the lives of survivors. Immediately after the genocide, the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) reported that there were approximately 1.1 million children who were unaccompanied (United Nations Rwanda [2001]). The sheer number of victims in the very short span led to the 1994 genocide to best be described as “the most efficient genocide.” Regrettably, systematic preservation and dissemination of survivors’ testimonies, oral histories, and primary documents that show how the Rwandan genocide was planned and executed has rarely been done at a granular level. This article therefore tries to analyze handwritten testimonies of girls from four communes of Gitarama Prefecture who survived the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. This prefecture was located at the central part of Rwanda that was a major killing field.

These four communes were randomly selected and they include; Masango, Mugina, Ntongwe, and Nyamabuye. They were not only among the major killing fields but also places where many Tutsi tried to seek refuge. Masango commune was on the southwest part of Gitarama Prefecture and it bordered Kibuye and Gikongoro Prefectures that had very active and vicious militia groups such as Interahamwe. These militia groups were very instrumental in the killing spree and destroying property in Masango commune. On the other hand, Mugina commune was situated on the eastern part of Gitarama Prefecture and it bordered Kigali City. Mugina was therefore the first commune in Gitarama Prefecture to be attacked, leaving gross destruction of property and heartless killings in its wake. Ntongwe commune was on the southeast part of Gitarama prefecture and bordered Kigali Ngali prefecture that had a large Tutsi population and the prefecture was thus a major killing field. Ntongwe commune also housed a big population of Burundian refugees some who joined the dreaded Simusiga militia group that massacred thousands of Tutsi. Finally, Nyamabuye Commune was at the center of Gitarama Prefecture and housed one of the oldest Catholic missions in Rwanda that was located at Kabgayi. This commune was a refuge center for Tutsis across the prefecture and those from neighboring prefectures.

Map of Communes in Gitarama Prefecture



Source: (Prioul and Sirven 1981)

The 1994 Genocide

Genocide is a process and can clearly be categorized into 8 stages, namely: categorizing people in discrete groups, creating symbols to identify the groups, equating a group of people to non-human objects or animals, organizing teams that would attack the group of people being targeted for extermination, creating a polarized environment, identifying specific individuals to be exterminated, starting to exterminate the target group, and finally trying to deny that the killings took place or trying to get a scapegoat for the horrendous actions (Stanton 2004). Genocide is thus not a spontaneous act but rather, a process (Mugesera 2014). In Rwanda, the genocide process became pronounced in late 1950s and culminated in the 1994 genocide that claimed close to one million people in a span of 100 days and resulted in massive destruction of property whose value has to this date not been quantified. The 1994 genocide in Rwanda occurred against the backdrop of war that had ravaged the country from 1990. In October 1990, Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) which was by then a rebel group comprising mainly of the Tutsi who had fled into exile from 1959 and a disgruntled moderate Hutu population that was unhappy with the way the country was being run, attacked Byumba prefecture in Northern Rwanda.

Many scholars have tried to advance the real cause of the 1994 genocide and they include: hatred between Hutus and Tutsi that has been in existence for a long time (Nahimana 1993); introduction of multiparty democracy in Rwanda in early 1990s giving rise to political parties with extremist views (Mugesera 2014); multiparty democracy apparently brought about new freedoms that led to exponential growth of media outlets especially newspapers and magazines, the majority of which spread hate messages encouraging Hutus to rise up against Tutsi - such media included radio RTLM, Kangura newspapers among others (Thompson 2007); poor governance on the part of the ruling party MRND (Kalinganire 1992); leadership in Rwanda that practiced exclusion of members of society based on ethnicity and regionalism (Mugesera 2014); slump in Rwanda's economy and value of agricultural export products (Verwimp 2003); and Rwanda being attacked by RPF in 1990 resulting in a prolonged war (Verwimp 2003).

Collecting Testimonies of Children

Before 1998 there was minimal effort in Rwanda to systematically collect testimonies of survivors of the 1994 genocide. This may partly be due to: Survivors' experience during the genocide still being very raw in their memories, limited funding to have a large-scale effort to collect testimonies, and fear to rekindle memories without knowing how to best handle the situation in case it arises, among other reasons. Telling people to narrate what they experienced was thus most likely to further traumatize the survivors. During *cyumamo*, the genocide commemoration period that takes place each year in the month of April, survivors used to narrate what they experienced during the genocide. During this period, there was an increased number of people who got traumatized and even ended up being hospitalized. Majority of them were girls.

One of the few organizations that tried to collect testimonies of child survivors was *IBUKA*, a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) established in 1995 whose mission was to address the welfare of the 1994 Rwanda genocide survivors, and to be the voice of all the survivors and keep the memory of survivors of the genocide alive. It also set out to provide physical and mental health treatment to survivors, support education of survivors, and ensure survivors obtained justice. *IBUKA* means memory/remember in Kinyarwanda and is the umbrella association comprising 15 other associations dealing with genocide survivors. Among the association under the ambit of *IBUKA* include, AERG, ARG, Avega-Agahozo, Duharanire Kubaho, AOCM, among others.

In late 1999 and early 2000, *IBUKA*, organized *ingando* (solidarity camps). *Ingando* was a cultural institution in traditional Rwandan community that was meant to bring together members of the society so that they could bond and discuss very pertinent issues affecting society at that given time. The *ingando* that *IBUKA* organized brought together close to one thousand children whose homes were in Gitarama prefecture and who survived the genocide. The purpose was to discuss with these child survivors the issues affecting them and how the challenges they were facing or had been experiencing in their lives could be alleviated. By late 1999, these children had grown and were students in secondary schools and by then, most were within the 12 to 20-year age bracket.

Collecting these testimonies was a pilot project that *IBUKA*'s undertook with the hope that, if it became successful, *IBUKA* was to scale up the project so that they could collect testimonies from all the other remaining prefectures around the country. Unfortunately, they never managed to collect testimonies in the other remaining 10 prefectures partly due to lack of sufficient funds to support scaling up the project. *IBUKA* collected approximately 1,000 testimonies. In 2012,

IBUKA and University of South Florida libraries collaborated and digitized the testimonies with the hope to disseminate them so that people could know what these children had experienced. It was also hoped that the testimonies could be used as a catalyst to deter future genocide. A total of 823 of the testimonies were digitized, out of which 470 were written by girls.

Inability to collect testimonies from the entire country becomes a challenge as it leaves to question what happened to girls in areas where testimonies were never collected. This makes it difficult to understand the full magnitude of issues such as mental trauma and size of intervention needed in specific areas. Collecting testimonies from girls thus helps in a way to document the nature of the challenge that girls face and the extent of those challenges. Ability to put in place victim support services to support the girls and follow-up mechanisms become a challenge if the testimonies continue to remain undocumented and, therefore, inaccessible.

Portrayal of women and girls

The role of girls and women in traditional Rwandan society and during the colonial period was to be relegated to the home. The colonial Belgian government introduced *foyers sociaux* (social homes) in 1940s and 1950s as a form of social welfare education where women went to be trained in dressmaking, knitting, cooking and looking after the home as a way of promoting and empowering women (Buscaglia and Randell 2012). It is only in late 1980's that greater emphasis on the promotion of women and girls became more pronounced (Buscaglia and Randell 2012). By 1994 women had started being incorporated in mainstream political parties and a few were holding senior government positions such as Agathe Uwilingiyimana who was the Prime Minister, and Pauline Nyiramasuhuko who was Minister of Family and Women's Development and who became one of the major perpetrators of the genocide in Butare Prefecture.

Women and girls, and especially those who were Tutsi, became tools for propaganda; with the sole aim of the propaganda being to target Tutsis and children from the marriage between Hutus and Tutsis. One such propaganda tool was the Hutu Manifesto of 1957 that was used to denounce Tutsi dominance in the political, social, economic, and cultural spheres of Rwanda (Latham-Koenig 1962). *Kangura*, a newspaper spreading hate, published ten commandments that Hutus ought to adhere to and they glorified Hutu women over Tutsi women and encouraged Hutu men to marry Hutu women. These commandments portrayed Tutsi women and girls as being people of loose morals who could not be trusted (Kangura December, 1990). Cartoons appeared in newspapers showing Tutsi women and girls having sexual affairs with members of the MINUAR, the United Nations peacekeeping troops. Tutsi girls were thus portrayed as prostitutes to demean them. Rumours were rife in Rwanda and it was said that whenever a Hutu married a Tutsi, the Tutsi woman would always have at least one child out of wedlock with a Tutsi man and this propaganda led to many children of mixed marriage to be killed during the genocide. This included some Hutu men killing their own children that the man had with a Tutsi woman. Pregnant Tutsi women had their wombs ripped open and fetuses removed in a grotesque act of rage.

Experience of the Girl Child during and After the Genocide

What children experienced during the genocide was beyond comprehension. Some were severely traumatized, while others were extremely exhausted due to the long distances they had to trek in search of refuge. Most of the escape routes they tried to use were unsafe and

some were arrested, taken to be drowned in river Nyabarongo but were lucky to survive. Other experiences the girls went through included:

Fighting Back

Tutsis had to try and fight back attackers. A female student R15-0067 from Mugina narrates how she fled into a church in Mugina. This church had refugees from Kigali, Runda, Ntongwe and Bugesera and was attacked by Burundians who had been living in Ntongwe commune. She narrates how she joined other people who had sought refuge in the church when they formed a team to ward off attackers. Describing how people seeking shelter in the church fought the attackers, she said “...*We used to join men who used spears, machetes, and clubs and us children gathered stones that we used to fight the attackers. We were at times lucky to repulse the attackers. The attackers would later come back and throw grenades towards us and a couple people who has sought refuge in the church got killed by the grenade.*”

Rape

Girl R15-0032 from Nyamabuye commune narrates how she fled and sought refuge at Kabgayi. She talks of how she witnessed the army bring 2 to 3 vehicles to take Tutsi boys and men to be killed. Those targeted included those that looked like they were educated or were from economically well-off families. Teenage and middle age girls who had not yet married were taken away by the army and were raped for about 2 days. The lucky ones were brought back while others got killed after being raped. Rape was therefore used as a tool to dehumanize Tutsi women and the entire Tutsi community. Women were also raped and some had children out of the rape. Many such women got shunned by society and so were the children.

Hiding

Many students tried as much as possible to save their lives. Some hid in swamps, in the ceiling of homes of people who accepted to hide them. Others hid in deep pits, forests, pit latrine, in bushes and in banana or millet farms. Unfortunately, militia groups hunted Tutsis down using dogs and there were very few places to hide. A female student R15-00080 explains how a good Samaritan discovered her hiding inside a drum/barrel and she continued hiding her till the time the girl was rescued. Student R15-0014 narrates how someone hid her in a trunk/box inside the house.

Killing and beating

Many of the girls witnessed killings taking place and examples include student R15-00229 from Nyamabuye who witnessed people being killed at a roadblock in Kivumu. While student R15-00232 witnessed a young man being shot by a soldier at Kabgayi. The bloodied body of the young man was dragged and dumped at the entrance of the institution this girl was hiding in. Many of the students witnessed people being arrested and taken to be drowned in River Nyabarongo while other students even witnessed young infants being strangled or smashed on walls. Many girls also witnessed people being killed by members of the Interahamwe militia group that were using machetes, hoes, or clubs. Student R15-00023 witnessed her sister-in-law who was carrying a new-born baby being beaten mercilessly by a killer gang. These eyewitness accounts were very traumatizing.

Destruction of property

Many of the girls witnessed their homes being looted, destroyed and even put on fire. Some who were hiding nearby were helpless and could not dare to salvage the property because they were likely to get killed.

Starvation

Getting food was a major problem. Very few people were willing to give food to the Tutsi seeking refuge and many went for days without food or water. At the beginning of the genocide when girls were on the run, they could wear several layers of clothes and sold some to get some money to buy food. Others who were hiding in the bush would look for a field with cassava or sweet potatoes and they would dig them out and eat them raw. In case the owners of the field caught them, they would call militia groups to come and hunt the girl down.

Nursing

Girls played major roles in nursing the sick despite not having the knowledge, experience nor training in medical practise. They simply tried to save the life of fellow people being targeted. Female student R15-0014 narrates how, after the genocide, she had to nurse her younger brother who had contracted cholera. Unfortunately, the boy died because there was no qualified doctor or medical practitioner nearby.

Bribing to save life

A female student R15-00055 from Masango commune says “...A man called *Kirisitaforo* and *Kayonde* added 200F to the 800F the victim was giving the perpetrators to save her life.” Another female student R15-0056 from Masango said that she had to bribe the perpetrators 4500F to release her.

Money being seized

As Tutsis were fleeing, they would occasionally come across roadblocks manned by the army or Interahamwe militia. The first thing that most of those people manning these roadblocks did was to seize all the money the people fleeing had. R15-00232 from Commune Nyamuye narrates how her home was in Mbuye and tried to flee and seek refuge at the Kabgayi Catholic mission. On the way to Kabgayi, they came across a roadblock at a place called Rugeramigozi which was very close to Kabgayi. The roadblock was manned by the military who seized all the money her mother had in return to be allowed to proceed to Kabgayi.

Impact of the Genocide on the Girl Child

The genocide had a tremendous impact on the lives of survivors. This impact included:

Exponential increase in number of orphans

Due to the high number of people who were killed during the genocide, approximately 400,000 children in Rwanda got orphaned during the genocide or slightly after the genocide (Kaplan 2013). This huge number of orphaned children thus led to approximately 300,000 children living in child-headed households (United Nations Rwanda [2001]). Oftentimes, these child-headed households were headed by girls who were less than 18 years and had to fend for the other siblings in that household. Unfortunately, such households were more likely to be vulnerable to exploitation.

Trauma

Approximately 600,000 children were severely traumatized because of the genocide. 95.9% witnessed violence taking place, 87.5% saw corpses or body parts, 79.6% lost a family member, 69.5% witnessed killing or wounding, while 90.6% felt that they were going to die (United Nations Rwanda [2001]). It has been found that children exposed to war and violence have tended to exhibit symptoms of trauma especially depression, aggression and other forms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Foster and Brooks-Gunn 2015). Despite having

limited resources, organizations such as Association Solidarite des Femmes Rwandaises (ASOFERWA) strived to provide psychosocial support to children who survived the genocide and even those who were imprisoned because of having been alleged to have participated in the genocide. IBUKA had a few counselors but many were stationed in urban area.

Education

R15-00210 from Masango Commune narrates how she has never had peace of mind from the time of the genocide. Her academic performance at school is dismal due to a combination of challenges including unwelcome home environment after her father married another wife after the genocide. She is at loggerheads with the stepmom and takes care of her 2 younger siblings, in addition to poverty at her home. There are many children who dropped out of school because they could not afford to buy uniforms or school supplies. In 1998, the Rwandan government put in place Fond d'Assistance des Rescapes du Genocide (FARG) which was a fund to support paying school fees for the very needy child survivors. Unfortunately, this Fund did not have sufficient money to cater for all survivors.

Work

Student R15-00014 from Masango narrates how her mother was crippled during the genocide. She says that it is a major strain to look after her mother and two of her siblings who are 9 and 12 years and never help much with chores at home. Many girls who survived the genocide had to redouble their efforts in all that they did in order to try and live a decent life.

Destroyed future and dreams

Studies have shown that children who witness or are victims of violence both at home and in the environment that they live in tend to have a greater risk of either engaging in aggressive or violent behavior later in life or they may become antisocial (World Health Organization 2014). Many of the girl survivors feel helpless and there is need to empower them so that in future they do not end up being a burden to society.

Role of Librarians in Documenting and Preserving Testimonies of the Girl Child

Digitizing

In 2011 University of South Florida libraries, which housed a Holocaust and Genocide Studies Center (HGSC), collaborated with IBUKA and conducted a survey of rare and unique primary materials in the IBUKA archives. They found that these archives contained close to 8,900 pages of handwritten testimonies of children whose homes were in Gitarama Prefecture during the genocide, there were another 18,000 pages of reports about genocide survivors; 20,000 pages about the top five genocide perpetrators in each commune across the country; 80 hours of survivors testimonies on video tapes; 40,000 pages on justice from all the *Tribunale de Premiere Instance* dating back to 1998; 10,000 pages of selected Gacaca court proceedings; approximately 2,000 photographs; and countless survivors testimonies on audio cassette tapes and reels.

All the materials in the IBUKA archive were in dire need of systematic preservation and dissemination. The materials were kept in a poorly ventilated tin-roofed room whose temperatures fluctuated drastically thereby making that room inhospitable for housing important documents such as the ones IBUKA held. The likelihood of the materials being

destroyed was enhanced especially if a water leak occurred because some of the valuable materials were kept in boxes and placed on the floor.

Digitizing all the documents held at IBUKA was most likely going to stimulate national and international discussion about the Rwandan genocide and atrocities that had been committed. It was also likely to encourage other agencies in Rwanda to consider digitizing and preserving their archival holdings to support scholarship. For 22 days starting in late October 2012, one librarian from University of South Florida libraries and one employee of IBUKA used a DSLR camera on a tripod stand that they connected to a laptop and digitized close to 16,000 pages of documents held in the IBUKA archive. The documents that were digitized included the handwritten testimonies of children from Gitarama Prefecture. Using a DSLR camera was thus a cheaper option than using a scanner taking into consideration the limited time that was available.

Transcription, translation and disseminating the testimonies

To be able to make a full text search of each of the testimonies, a librarian at University of South Florida tried to transcribe the handwritten testimonies and by the end of 2014, they had transcribed approximately 25 testimonies with the goal to have all the testimonies transcribed so that they can be full text searchable. 15 of the testimonies were translated into English and approximately 500 testimonies had an English language abstract written by the librarian at University of South Florida. All this effort was to enhance access to the testimonies. Approximately 120 testimonies were availed online. Almost all the abstracts were also availed [online](#). The purpose of availing these abstracts is to enable a wider audience to access the testimonies and to know what the children experienced from the time the genocide started till the time they were rescued.

Conclusion

The girl child in Rwanda was never spared during the genocide. Many girls were killed and a lot more were traumatized. Unfortunately, the few recorded testimonies from girls who survived the genocide have not been easily accessible. There is an urgent need to disseminate testimonies of these girls so that society can be more proactive in stopping genocide and conflict before they start. There is therefore need for Rwanda to be proactive in not only collecting eyewitness accounts of girls who survived the genocide but also information from girls and women who are victims of violence. Even though a genocide comes to an end, the challenges that girls continue facing after a genocide are enormous and may hinder them achieving their maximum potential in life. Therefore, these girls who survived the genocide need a long-term psycho-social support system from professional counsellors. Their welfare also needs to be taken into consideration including access to healthcare, and jobs so that they can live a decent life.

References

- Buscaglia, Ilaria, and Shirley Randell. 2012. "Legacy of Colonialism in the Empowerment of Women in Rwanda." *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 4 (1):69-85.
- Foster, Holly, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn. 2015. "Children's exposure to community and war violence and mental health in four African countries." *Social Science & Medicine* 146:292-299.

- Kalinganire, Joseph. 1992. *Pensee pour la republique en mal d'être, Conscience de notre temps*. Butare: L'imprimerie Nationale du Rwanda.
- Kangura. December, 1990. "Abahutu baba mu mahanga barasaba abahutu bose kurushaho kunga ubumwe." *Kangura*, 6-8.
- Kaplan, Suzanne. 2013. "Child Survivors of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide and Trauma-Related Affect." *Journal of Social Issues* 69 (1):92-110.
- Latham-Koenig, A. L. . 1962. "Ruanda-Urundi on the Threshold of Independence." *The World Today* 18 (7):288-295.
- Mugesera, Antoine. 2014. *The persecution of Rwandan Tutsi before the 1990-1994 genocide*. Kigali: Dialogue Editions.
- Nahimana, Ferdinand. 1993. *Le Rwanda, émergence d'un Etat, Collection "Racines du présent"*,. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Prioul, Christian, and Pierre Sirven. 1981. *Atlas du Rwanda*. Nantes: Association pour l'Atlas des Pays de Loire.
- Republique du Rwanda Institut National de la Statistique du Rwanda. 2008. Recensement des Rescapes du Genocide de 1994. Kigali: Institut National de la Statistique du Rwanda.
- Stanton, Gregory H. 2004. "Could the Rwandan Genocide Have Been Prevented?" *Journal of Genocide Research* 6 (2):211-228.
- Thompson, Alan. 2007. *Media and the Rwanda Genocide*. Ottawa, ON: IDRCBooks.
- United Nations Rwanda. [2001]. Child protection : common country assessment- Rwanda 1999-2000. In *common country assessment paper 11*.
- Verwimp, Philip. 2003. "The political economy of coffee, dictatorship, and genocide." *European Journal of Political Economy* 19 (2):161–181. doi: 10.1016/S0176-2680(02)00166-0.
- World Health Organization. 2014. *Global status report on violence prevention 2014*. Geneva: World Health Organization.