

Experiences of rape unique to Rwandan women survivors of genocide

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In recent conflicts, most notably in Rwanda, women and girls have been systematically raped as a policy of war. During the Rwandan Genocide of 1994, Hutu leaders ordered their troops to rape Tutsi women as part of their genocidal campaign. United Nations' officials estimated that a quarter of a million women were raped and subjected to sexual violence on a massive scale. A new study published in the *Journal of Nursing Scholarship* explores the lived experience of women who were raped during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and finds many themes unique to Rwandan women survivors.

While rape is always a matter of regulating power relations between the sexes, some differences exist between rape in peacetime and wartime. Donatilla Mukamana, Head of Mental Health Department, Kigali Health Institute, Rwanda (and Masters degree student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa) and Petra Brysiewicz, Ph.D., of the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa (research supervisor), interviewed seven women who were raped during the 1994 Rwandan genocide. The researchers gathered data that were focused on what happened in the lives of the women and what was important about their experiences.

The participants reported many themes specific to the rape victims who survived the Rwandan genocide.

The women felt violated by perceived inferiors as well as a loss of dignity and respect. To be a woman in Rwandan society implies respect

from all members of the community. Women were humiliated by public rape, which was carried out in the community by those who were supposed to respect them.

The women felt a loss of identity, loss of hope for the future, and social isolation. In Rwanda, rape and other gender-based violations carry a severe social stigma. Children resulting from rape were seen as being difficult to integrate into Rwandan society and were a source of conflict since they were a constant reminder of what happened during the genocide. The genocide also destroyed support networks because participants lost many members of their community and family.

Bringing rape survivors together in an association like AVEGA (Association of the Widows of the Genocide of April) allows them to recreate a community for themselves. AVEGA helped participants overcome their sense of isolation and gave them medical, psychological, and material help.

This study is published in the December 2008 issue of the Journal of Nursing Scholarship.

Source: Wiley

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