

# Rape and HIV/AIDS in Rwanda

Paula Donovan

In the mid 1980s, the US committee for UNICEF sent its first fundraising letter requesting donations for African women and children with AIDS. Alongside the appeal we reprinted the only photograph then to be found in the organisation's files under "AIDS in Africa", an image of an emaciated young Rwandan mother and her infant daughter: people from a little-known country, dying from a little-understood infection. At that not-so-long-ago point, none of the epidemiologists tracking the spread of HIV had yet predicted that the virus would soon explode into history's most deadly global pandemic. No-one had speculated that a lethal sexually transmitted infection would find easy inroads among the subordinated young women of sub-Saharan Africa. Analysts of central Africa's long civil conflicts had not yet begun to imagine that a genocide would eventually hurl Rwanda out of obscurity. Even the most apocalyptic forecasters of doom could not have anticipated that HIV/AIDS and ethnic hatred in that tiny country were travelling on a collision course, headed for 100 ghastly days of genocidal carnage and rape in 1994.

HIV/AIDS and Rwanda have since attained eternal notoriety. Today, the photo libraries of aid organisations are laden with images of women, men, and children worldwide infected with HIV/AIDS—now 40 million in total, all destined to die of the thus-far incurable syndrome. Ever since 1994, mention of Rwanda also evokes images of death. The impoverished nation is now infamous for its efforts to incite ordinary civilians to unthinkable violence with the aim of exterminating a minority ethnic group. Some 800 000 Rwandan Tutsi and moderate Hutu were slaughtered during the resulting genocide by Hutu from all walks of life, using every weapon at hand,

from grenades to tree limbs to farm tools. Like the few genocides that preceded it, Rwanda's 100-day campaign of extermination was one of the most vicious series of war crimes ever implemented by human beings.

Integral to the plan to annihilate the Tutsi population was the systematic sexual molestation, mutilation, and rape of women and girls. It will never be possible to establish the exact number and nature of the individual sexual atrocities committed in 1994. Some have calculated that thousands of women were raped; others estimate that the total is in the hundreds of thousands, including countless women and girls who were first raped and then murdered. Survivors consistently report, however, that sexual violence was used just as methodically as other crude weaponry in the effort to torture and exterminate.

Accounts of barbaric amputations and mutilations of breasts and genitals abound. Inestimable numbers of women and girls struggle with the understanding that they are alive today because they bartered sex for survival, only to be granted a life sentence of severe physical, sexual, and emotional dysfunction. According to government reports after the genocide, 2000–5000 children were born to women who were raped, in some cases by more than one man or repeatedly over the course of several weeks or months. Most survivors describe the genocide as a bloodbath during which rape was inevitable for practically all females—implying that, whether or not they have chosen to describe what happened to them, nearly all the women and adolescent girls who survived the genocide are now living with the traumatising memory of a brutal sexual attack that they had suffered or witnessed firsthand.

Among the weapons of choice calculated to destroy while inflicting maximum pain and suffering was HIV. Eyewitnesses recounted later that marauders carrying the virus described their intentions to their victims: they were going to rape and infect them as an ultimate punishment that would guarantee long-suffering and tormented deaths.

The passage of time and valiant national efforts at rehabilitation and reconciliation may have dulled the edges of 1994's agony and terror for some who lived through the orchestrated nightmare. But, for countless women and girls who survived rape only to learn that they were HIV positive, the end of the massacre in July, 1994, was just the start of their slow torture.



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Many analysts now believe that if warnings had been heeded, the international community could have contained the Rwandan genocide to a conflict and the AIDS pandemic to a controllable infection. Without doubt, patterns of both ethnic and gender-based violence should have predicted the eventual nexus of the two. When men are at peace, appalling levels of violence against women are tolerated with little compunction. So it is little wonder that men raised in cultures of gender-based subordination vent their violence and rage on women without restraint.

Although the same actors who failed to intervene were subsequently shocked and horrified by the barbarism of the genocide, it is doubtful that many were surprised by its sexual violence. Throughout the recorded history of warfare, rape during conflict

or whether, if uninterrupted by that horrific period of wholesale destruction, the natural course of the pandemic would have brought the country, like so many of its neighbours, to a comparable rate of infection today.

Perhaps that matters, but surely what matters more is that the convergence of genocide and HIV/AIDS in Rwanda finally strained humankind's capacity to indulge rape as an unpleasant but unavoidable byproduct of armed conflict. Through their suffering, the women and girls of Rwanda illustrated—and the international community finally accepted—that rape is not incidental to armed conflict; it is a distinct and insupportable war crime. Crimes against humanity transcend other criminal acts; they are more grotesque, more abhorrent, and more antithetical

to the collective perception of what constitutes human behaviour than other acts of mass aggression. Genocide carries a unique definition among hostile eruptions. As defined in the 1948 UN Convention that was adopted by the General Assembly to prevent and punish this most abominable of all war crimes, genocide is mass murder "committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group". Through the UN International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, which was established to investigate and punish those responsible for the 1994 genocide, sexual violence during civil war has now been classified among the least tolerable of atrocious acts. The Rwanda Tribunal determined that rapes committed in the service of armed conflict are not only war

crimes, but also crimes against humanity and, in some instances, acts of genocide.

What matters most is that we combine the new acknowledgment of rape's role in war with a further recognition: humankind's level of tolerance for sexual violence is not established by international tribunals after war. That baseline is established by societies, in times of peace. The rules of war can never really change as long as violent aggression against women is tolerated in everyday life.

Blessedly, planned attempts by one group to wipe out all traces of another have been rare in history's catalogue of orchestrated human atrocities, and no genocide has ever entirely succeeded in exterminating a people. But with the help of HIV—itsself aided and abetted by the subordination of women—Rwanda's marauding rapists have been granted something close to the most gruesome of their hate-filled, genocidal wishes. Until the very last of their rape victims dies of AIDS—and until all the HIV-positive children born to those victims, and all the sex partners subsequently infected by them have died—in effect, the genocide continues.

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Anthony Njuguna/Reuters/Popperfoto

#### Remains of civilians massacred in the Ntarama Church Compound, Rwanda

has been viewed as less atrocious than inevitable. Aberrant behaviour, after all, is contextual. When the rules of peace classify forced intercourse within marriage and widow inheritance as men's entitlements; when domestic violence against women and girls is quietly condoned as a necessary means of behaviour modification; when female genital mutilation is defended as an acceptable precaution against promiscuity; when domination by males is seen as the natural order of the universe, rape exists in a limbo of mixed perceptions, viewed neither as laudatory nor especially loathsome. In a world where sex crimes are too often regarded as misdemeanours during times of law and order, surely rape will not be perceived as a high crime during war, when all the rules of human interaction are turned on their heads, and heinous acts regularly earn their perpetrators commendation.

No-one knows how many of the genocide's massacred were already HIV-positive, or what proportion of the nearly 9% of adult Rwandans now living with HIV/AIDS became infected during the genocide. We will never know whether the rapes committed during the genocide account for today's high HIV/AIDS prevalence in Rwanda,