

ever, efforts to extend FARG support to children born of genocidal sexual violence¹⁵³ ultimately failed and these children continue to be dependent on the support of NGOs.¹⁵⁴

IV. HEALING PROCESS



“In our culture, talking about sex is very private. That is why it was very hard for survivors to come up and reveal that they were raped. Some even killed themselves following the genocide. But nowadays things are changing slowly. We believe that we should not keep quiet; we should speak the truth so that justice could take its course. If you speak out, it can be a lesson to others. When you release your burden, you release your heart.”

MAMA LAMBERT
Head Counselling Department at Solace Ministries

THE GENOCIDE TORE apart the fabric of Rwandan society. Hundreds of thousands of victims were left to grapple with their agonizing memories and new realities, and to recover from paralyzing trauma. By sheer perseverance, survivors have a restored sense of dignity and an identity that transcends their experiences of the genocide. As one survivor and trauma counsellor described, “Empowerment is a process.”¹⁵⁵

NGOs have played an invaluable role in supporting survivors following the genocide. By 1997, more than 15,000 grassroots women’s organizations and fifty national associations for women were established, most of them multi-ethnic.¹⁵⁶ These groups have created unique and responsive programming, and an accepting environment that addresses survivors’ trauma and suffering. These programs include, among other things, comprehensive individual and group counselling, spiritual healing, medical clinics for survivors living with HIV or AIDS, material support, income-generating and capacity-building activities, educational support and sponsorship initiatives.¹⁵⁷ Having lost so many loved ones in the genocide, many survivors find a safe space within these organizations, where they can heal and gradually re-establish their community.¹⁵⁸ Survivors find comfort in sharing their challenges and joys with each other, and forging new bonds within an enduring and mutually reinforcing support system.



Pascasie sharing her story during a group counselling session at Solace Ministries in Kigali

For some survivors, counselling and prayer were essential first steps towards healing, as it freed them to “accept to live on.”¹⁵⁹ According to a Solace Ministries staff, for genocide survivors who were left feeling like “insects or snakes—not humans,” the opportunity to “tell their story and be heard restored their dignity.”¹⁶⁰ Group counselling sessions have been particularly helpful because they allowed survivors to feel accepted by others, and sharing mutual vulnerabilities has strengthened these bonds.¹⁶¹ Notably, in a country such as Rwanda where religion plays an important social role, religious aspects of group meetings have been vital to the healing process; as one Solace Ministries staff observed, these meetings have helped survivors “to restore their relationship with God.”¹⁶² Once survivors are able to recover a sense of self-worth, they can resume “activities they had abandoned,” and feel that “they are really human.”¹⁶³

Most remarkable is survivors’ capacity to forgive: the majority of survivors featured in this book reported that they had forgiven their perpetrators, although it was generally more difficult for survivors whose perpetrators failed to admit to their crimes or apologize. This was mitigated, to a certain degree, for survivors who had the unconditional support of their new families. Forgiving was a crucial step for many survivors to enable them to move forward with their lives.

WITHOUT EXCEPTION, SURVIVORS’ inspiring resilience continues to fuel their determination to heal and live on.