

Women Genocide Survivors Retreat Project Report

Introduction:

Women Genocide Survivors Retreat was held from the 24th to the 27th August, 2017 in the southern part of Rwanda. This retreat brought together 30 women survivors of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda. The retreat started with a brief self-introduction by each participant. Thereafter, welcome comments were given by Liliane Pari Umuhiza the pioneer of the retreat followed by Sam Munderere the CEO of Survivors Fund (SURF) an organization that supports genocide survivors and which provided both financial and technical support to make this retreat a reality. They both showed their gratitude to these women for attending and for their daily courage, resilience and inspiration despite their horrible background.



Attendees with Sam Munderere (CEO of Survivors Fund) far left, and Samantha Hunt (Chair of Survivors Fund) centre

A large number of the attendees are women who experienced rape during the genocide and as a consequence, they are HIV positive and have children born from that atrocious experience. Others are women who are in horrible poverty status, have chronic diseases like Hepatitis and cancer, and many other detrimental and incurable diseases, all as consequences of the genocide. The main purpose of the retreat was to give psychological support to these women by giving them time and space for self-expression, and to empower them so that they can be more resilient and move forward on the path of healing.

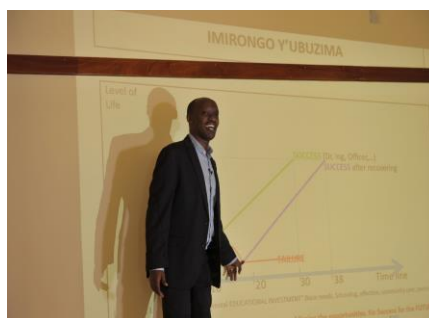
Topics and activities covered during the retreat:

❖ *Trauma and Resilience:*



A topic addressed by Dr. Rutembesa Eugene was a way to assist and touch the hearts of these women so that they can be able to express and share battles they have been fighting in their lives because of the genocide; especially that they live with the consequences of that horrible tragedy. Not only the horror stories were shared, but also successful stories that some of these women have which is a sign of strength and courage that these women have despite the unbearable experiences they have gone through.

- ❖ ***“Possibility that life can be better after the genocide & formal and informal education for children born from rape.”*** A topic addressed by Nkuranga Jean Pierre a co-founder of AERG (Association of Students Survivors of the Genocide) and a board member of IBUKA (An Umbrella Association for Genocide Survivor’s Associations.)



This topic was addressed with a purpose of building hope and restore the faith in humanity in these women who often face trauma and depression because of what they experienced. A large number of these women have children born from rape and the relationship between them and their children has not always been good. They were reminded that education is the key for any change they would like to see in their children and that they are the ones to give them the basic education. It was so inspiring to hear all of the woman setting goals of making education of their children a priority, and ready to approach them so that they can improve their relationships.

- ❖ ***The business and saving initiatives:*** A topic addressed by Emmanuel Prince Ndahiro, STF (Synergia training firm) managing facilitator



This topic was addressed with a purpose of opening these women's eyes to be able to develop business ideas and improve the management of what they have. Also, to do not let their lives be determined by their circumstances instead to make the best out of those circumstances. These women left the training feeling positive and confident about applying what they learnt in real life situations, so that they can be financially independent. At the end of the retreat they formed six groups made of 5 women so that they can work together because, they said that team work is a better way for them to rapidly progress in the business career and an opportunity for them to support each other.

❖ *Small groups and relaxation exercises.*



Every day we had a session of creating small groups each made of a half of the group. This were done with a guidance of professional counselors in order to reflect on the presentation, talk in details and deep about topics covered and actively listen to the women as they share their experience, challenges and goals. This were followed by meditation and laidback physical exercises as a relaxation activity to help the women to restore the energy.

❖ *Music:*

Music was the last activity of the day. Every day after dinner it was time to dance and sing, an activity appreciated by all the participants. It is scientifically proven that music can be used as a therapy to improve the mental health of people with trauma and depression. For these women, music therapy was more special than I expected!



One of the women loudly and joyously said, “I don’t remember the last time I have laughed this hard and allow my body to relax, move, breath and stop thinking negatively about life like it is happening right now as I dance.” Music was a good way to relax and refresh each and everyone’s mind. It was a great tool for a healing journey that these women were going through during the retreat and, for the future.

Highlights of the retreat:

1. It was the first time for some of these women who attended the retreat to share their stories. To hear someone being able to tell her story after 23 years is one of the greatest outcomes of the retreat because sharing their stories is the best tool in the journey of healing and resilience.
2. Solutions for problems that these women are still facing came from themselves. Presenters and counselors were working as facilitators who were there to strengthen and encourage the women to express themselves, not as to solve those women’s problems. It was so powerful to see one woman giving advice to another woman of how to get out of a struggle that she is facing because maybe, that woman faced the same problem some time ago.
3. SURF (Survivors Fund) offered financial support to women who formed groups to start an income generating activity so that they can use it as a capital.
4. Women who are in a very critical health status have been recognized by SURF for a quick and adequate medical assistance.
5. The youngest among the women who attended the retreat was raped during the genocide and gave birth at the age of 12. She finished high school but couldn’t afford to go to university. She was recognized during the retreat and SURF granted her a scholarship.
6. One of the women who had a problem of shelter, was recognized by SURF as well. They guaranteed her that they would pay for her 6 months’ rent and keep advocating until she can have her own shelter to live in with her three children.

Challenges:

We had an extreme emotional crisis case because of a testimony shared by one of the participants. This woman lost her husband during their honeymoon and she has been raped by a number of men that she can't recall. A few years after the genocide, after regaining her conscience, she found out that she is HIV positive and pregnant as a result of rape. This testimony became a reminder of what most of the women in the room experienced which caused an emotional crisis. The woman who shared her testimony is the one that SURF accepted to pay for her six months' rent. With the help of counselors we were able to overcome this crisis.

Conclusion:

This retreat was successful beyond the greatest expectations! I knew that these women need psychological support, but I didn't know to what extent. The women's feedback said it clearly, that it was a relief for their lives. They went back to their homes with new thinking, goals and plans for their lives and their families. In their words full of love and unselfishness, they requested that this opportunity can be extended to their fellow women genocide survivors that they share the same experiences. They also requested for a retreat for their children because they also face a high emotional crisis because of growing facing the consequences of the genocide. Some of these children were born HIV positive because after the genocide health-care was inadequate to prevent mother to child transmission of HIV. They also need a psychological support for them to keep moving forward in life especially that they are too young and full of many dreams and goals.

SURF and I, decided to keep advocating for these women, to have this retreat at least twice a year or more depending on the feasibility, to do a follow up on their projects, and keep assisting them in any way possible. We also planned to have a retreat for the children born from rape and invest in their education as much as possible. The end of the retreat was an appreciation to these women for their bravery, courage, smile and resilience. They are an inspiration to the world!