

2nd Women Genocide Survivors Retreat (August 13th to August 15th, 2018)

“During the genocide, we have been verbally, sexually, and physically assaulted. We have been tortured, raped and humiliated, we have lost our family members, and as a consequence until today we have been carrying both the invisible and visible scars for 24 years. Through this retreat, I discovered the HERO in me and all you! My fellow survivors, we have suffered too much, however it is time for us to stand up and fight this battle called life. Let’s support each other in the journey of healing, to be able to move forward. Let’s do not let our horrible background hold us back because we are HEROES! #TURIINTWARI.”
This is a message from one of the women who attended the retreat.

The 2nd retreat brought together 40 new women who are genocide survivors (last year we had 30) from different districts of Rwanda. Women who attend the retreat experienced rape during the genocide. As a consequence, many of these women are HIV positive, have been single mothers in the last 24 years raising children conceived from that atrocious experience and they have an ongoing trauma, mental illness and many other diseases as the effects of the genocide. It took place at Kabgayi and lasted for three days.



In her introduction for the retreat opening, **Liliane Pari Umuhiza**, the founder and coordinator of the retreat said how grateful she is to each and every one for attending. “Thank you for being role models for resilience and courage regardless of the horrible experience you have all gone through.” She also added that for the retreat to be possible, there are many people who offered support, which is a sign that there are still people who care which is one of the reasons to bring back hope in humanity.

Topics and activities covered:

DAY 1 Topic: Trauma and Resilience

- ❖ We had Pastor **Antoinne Rutayisire**, one of the significant people in Rwanda who has been supporting genocide survivors to rebuild their lives after the genocide. By using his personal story of being a genocide survivor as well and the gospel as a tool for healing and resilience. His message was that the fact that these women are still alive, 24 years after going through such a horrible experience, it is an indication of resilience, a sign that the future can be brighter and that there is a purpose. “You are more valuable than you think!” The women very much appreciated Rutayisire’s talk, especially because a large number of them are religious and were very inspired by him. This presentation left the women feeling positive about life and it changed the conversation into powerful and positive story sharing/exchange, because it gave them the power to celebrate life and their success no matter how big or small.



- ❖ We also had **Dr Ntete Jeanne Marie**, who did a research on the effect of Group Therapy in Restoring Psychological Wellbeing of Sexually Violated Women of the 1994 Tutsi Genocide in Rwanda. She helped the women to understand that it is human to experience trauma after going through the horrors like the genocide. However, they should seek for support to help them cope with that trauma starting with supporting each other by forming groups like the retreat in their villages where they can share their tips on keeping moving forward. From this presentation women came up with an idea of meeting once in a while in their zones for a strong support system between themselves. .

Day 2: How mothers can support their children born of rape

- ❖ **Dr Gishoma Darius**, addressed this subject through a topic he called “the journey to healing from trauma and genocide wounds.” Dr Gishoma is a clinical psychologist and since 2005 part of his work practice has been to provide intervention and support to people who suffer from genocide related trauma. In his presentation he encouraged the women to support their children and find strength to tell them their stories. “One major thing that the children face is the society giving them only the label of children born of rape.” Remind them that life is made of many pieces and focusing on a negative piece only can hinder a person’s progress. Support and encourage them to not let that label/their history constrict their inner strength, power and potential. A common remark from the women was that it is evident that their support toward their children can contribute to the success and better mental wellness of their children, that is why they are going to do the best they can to make this possible.



- ❖ **Dr Assumpta Muhayisa**, is a clinical psychologist who has done a research in a systematic approach to support children born of rape. In her presentation during the retreat she shared her experience interviewing children born of rape. This helped the women to see different perspectives of children born of rape and they did an exercise together of coming up with solutions of what kind of support that can be effective to their children. This was powerful because the solutions were based on true facts from the research and solutions came from the women which can make the next step of supporting their children to be easily implemented. Dr Muhayisa explained to the

women that it is the right of the children to know their stories and encouraged them to find ways to share those stories with their children because that is the best way for them to cope with their backgrounds. From this talk, many women gave themselves a task of starting the journey of sharing their stories with their children and those who have done it already, shared with others how that changed positively their relationships with their children. It is incredible to see these women on a level of striving to support their children psychologically.

Day 3: Income generating activities and Health

- ❖ ***Income generating activities training (IGAT)***: Using his 10 years of experience as an Entrepreneurship training facilitator, **Ndahiro Emmanuel Prince** helped the women to learn about how to develop a business idea, saving and investment techniques. Many of these women live in a total poverty because they lost everything during the genocide. One of the purposes of the retreat it to empower the women and this includes financial empowerment. Our approach in financial empowerment is to “teach the women how to fish not to give them fish.” IGAT serves as a way to open these women’s minds about the possible opportunities around them that can generate income. We believe that training them about how to make a living is a sustainable way to break the vicious circle of poverty because they do not only support themselves, they do invest in their children as well. Through this training some women took the initiative of starting small businesses and we will offer them all the possible support and assistance.
- ❖ ***Health***: **Ubarushimpuhwe Immaculee**, a nurse since 13 years ago at Kacyiru health center gave this presentation. She talked about menopause, HIV and basic self-care for a woman in the range of their age. A large number of these women are HIV positive and have other incurable diseases related to rape and the genocide. Some of them are also reaching menopause and face trauma so often. It is hard sometimes for them to differentiate what is causing their everyday health status so that they can ask for treatment when needed. This topic was appreciated by the women because they asked questions and shared their health experience, and it was a relief for many to find out that some of the health issues they face are normal at a certain age in life. This presentation’s greatest outcome, is that 2 women who had refused to take medication for HIV positive treatment decided to contact their doctors to start taking medication again.

Extra activities: Small group conversation, Music and relaxation

Small group conversation: Women go into small groups at least once in a day for them to share their stories deeply. This is because some are able to share in small groups rather than in large ones, and in small groups people are more connected and have much attention of other group members which creates an opportunity for deep and personal stories.

Music: Music is therapy! The two nights of the retreat, we had the music session after dinner. “I don’t remember the last time I have laughed, relaxed with a free mind and felt my body and soul connected like it happened last night! The dance brought so much joy to me. I also slept so well!” One of the women sharing her experience with the dance at the retreat. This was an important mental and physical exercise for the women, especially because many of them live a life of loneliness. They deserve happiness!

Relaxation: Relaxation techniques are psychologically proved to be a good way to decrease the effects of stress on mind and body and cope with various related health problems. The trained counselors helped the women do the relaxation techniques twice a day. One of the women said that relaxation techniques brush the negative thoughts away!



Highlights of the retreat

- ❖ Two women who had given up on taking HIV positive medications accepted to take them again.
- ❖ This year, again we had survivors' who shared their stories for the first time after 24 years. This is a huge relief and a great start toward the healing journey for survivors!
- ❖ Some of the women will receive funding for a capital to put into action their business ideas.
- ❖ Through Income Generating Activities Training, women with some capital decided to start a business on their own.
- ❖ We figured out that some women who are HIV+ are giving up on taking medications and it is a reminder for us to put much effort in encouraging them.

Next Step & plans:

- ❖ To have the retreat every year
- ❖ To fund more business ideas of the women
- ❖ To have a more consistent counseling and follow up on the women's healing progress
- ❖ Finance a regular local gathering of the women living in the same zones with the guidance of counselors.
- ❖ Put more effort in supporting women who are giving up on life e.g.: Not taking medications, not skipping counseling programs, etc.

Conclusion:

It's been 24 years since the genocide but regardless the time, both visible and invisible wounds of the survivors are still fresh. Different kinds of support have been offered but the journey is still long. On the closing day of the retreat, **Samantha Hunt** the chair of Survivors Fund and **Samuel Munderere** the chief executive, both talked about the courage and bravery of the women survivors and appreciated their strength of embracing life regardless how unfair it has been for them. Healing is a long journey but it is empowering! Let's keep the advocacy to help bring back faith in humanity to these wonderful women and survivors in general.