Trauma in Young Survivors of the Rwandan Genocide

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For the last fifteen years, child survivors of the genocide have learned to keep silent. They are neither heard nor understood. Many children have suppressed their traumatic memories through necessity, in order to care for and earn money to support their siblings.

Among the thousands of children orphaned by the massacres during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, some of the most vulnerable and marginalised are those struggling to survive and recreate a family life without the support of adults.

The whole family structure has changed in Rwanda. Huge numbers of children have organised themselves into a new family model in which children serve as the heads of households. The majority are headed by young girls in their early twenties, who for the last fifteen years have taken on the responsibility of four or five younger children – some siblings, others orphans. In fact, a census last year found 30,000 orphans of the genocide living in child-headed households.

The needs of children concerned are evident. Many of the households generate an income of less than a dollar a day. Many heads of households have never graduated to secondary school, having dropped out to earn a living. They have only basic reading and writing skills. Given the opportunity to develop, many of these 15- to 25-year-old survivors still have the potential to acquire professional skills and realise higher goals. Instead, poverty, combined with a lack of education and social protection, exposes them to high-risk behaviour and often exploitation and abuse.

An ACORD study highlighted the problem:

> Orphan heads-of-households have been abandoned and forgotten by members of their own families (those who are lucky to have them), by authorities and by the whole community. Whether they went through centres of foster families or not, no one concerns themselves with them. If they suffer from psychological or other problems, there is no structure, nor individuals, that can come to their rescue and offer them support. They float between the world of adults and that of children and have no means of drawing attention to their situation. They are ostracised by society. Their behaviour, even if no worse than that of children with parents, is labelled bad, difficult, delinquent and so on.

Most of these children have had no access to counselling or social support. In a culture where children are seen and not heard, the majority have remained silent and abuse continues unchecked. For those who have been lucky enough to access support, they still feel like second-class citizens. There are a handful of local organisations which are focused on young survivors, such as AOCM (Association of Orphan-Headed Households) and Uyisenga N'Manzi, but they have small budgets and there is no long-term support built into their interventions.

International organisations such as UNICEF and Save the Children, as well as local organisations such as IMBUTO founded by the First Lady of Rwanda, are currently providing a limited platform for these children to deal with trauma and mental health issues. Most lobbying and advocacy is done at the national policy level where these young survivors are not represented or heard. Even in those cases where child-headed households have received support from international agencies, there is a lack of long-term commitment and coordination. Existing rehabilitation or development programmes do not account for them.

The young survivors who are able to speak about their experiences talk of the brutal forms of sexual violence to which they were subjected. Many were individually raped, gang-raped, and witnessed the torture and killing of their families and destruction of their homes. Many bear machete wounds and scars. Many young women survivors who were raped are HIV-positive, some deliberately infected during the genocide so that they would die a more slow and painful death. A number continue to be sexually abused.

Because of their struggle to survive, many children heads of households have had no time to come to terms with and understand what has happened to their lives. Many were too young to understand why genocide occurred; they still don't know the facts. With no questions asked because no one is there to listen, these children are growing up to be angry, frustrated and resentful adults. Some think they are responsible for what happened, that God is punishing them for their sins. They need to be listened to and to be told what really happened and to be given support to address their trauma.

There is a very high level of trauma among these young survivors. Their support networks are decimated and it is hard for them to fully reintegrate in society. Most haven't had a chance to speak about their horrific experiences during genocide. Sometimes when young children have tried to discuss their experiences, the older ones have found it so painful to deal with, they have discouraged any discussion.

Before the genocide they may have lived in protected families. They had no understanding of the hatred and mistrust that existed in communities. Too young to understand at the time, they have never been able to find out why neighbours, friends, children, teachers and church leaders were involved in massacres that decimated their families. What these young survivors know is the horrific events they witnessed, but they need to understand the causes and to be reassured that this was not their fault and that it will not happen to them again.

Many of the young survivors feel they have no voice and are not represented in the community. They are often reminded of their second-class status by a society that largely ignores their existence. They live in a nightmare situation in the very communities responsible for their parents' deaths. Often they endure intimidation, exacerbated of late from the release of prisoners of the genocide through *gacaca*, and have had to leave their homes to live in cities or other locations where their past is unknown. Their image of an adult is dented with mistrust, and their respect for authority as a power that should protect them has been lost. They cannot rely or count on anyone.

The Survivors Fund Centre for Young Survivors

In response to the situation, the Survivors Fund (SURF), a UK-based nonprofit that aids and supports survivors of the Rwandan genocide, has established a Centre in Kamonyi, Rwanda for Young Survivors.

The Centre will serve as a vital resource for young survivors to enable them to deal with their trauma in a holistic, secure environment. They will be provided with the tools and the teaching to better understand how the brain is affected by torture, to identify symptoms and to manage intrusive memories more effectively. Hopefully, through this process, young survivors will begin to understand that experiencing panic attacks, palpitations, fear of loss of control, fear of dying, recurring nightmares, insomnia, and so on is a natural response to severe trauma. Getting in touch with the basis of their fear and sharing their anxieties will help to lessen the pain and assist them in learning how to manage their symptoms.

SURF staff members hope that psychosocial analysts and psychiatric experts will come to Rwanda to share knowledge with the young survivors and determine interventions that work in the Rwandan cultural context. To this end, SURF is exploring a strategic partnership with the UK-based Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture to leverage their expertise in the mental health field since the organisation already provides vital support to survivors in the UK. The Centre will also host conferences and forums on trauma and related issues.

For many who lived through the horrors of 1994, it was extremely difficult to even begin to communicate their suffering and fear. The trauma they experienced in some ways froze their ability to share their pain, and this inability to communicate is reinforced by living in a culture that discourages the expression of strong emotions. Many children have expressed living with the thought that they were, or would be considered to be, mad.

Using traditional listening skills and trauma counselling techniques, the Centre will encourage the voicing of feelings and the sharing of experiences. It will enable the Centre to identify those who needed treatment from specialists and who could be referred on to appropriate services. Speaking out will become a sign of confidence and being heard will increase that confidence. The voicing of inner feelings will start a process of sharing and this pooling of experiences in turn will generate or strengthen a sense of social cohesion as young survivors rebuild their shattered lives. ▪

About Mary K. Blewitt and the Survivors Fund

Since the Rwandan genocide, Mary K. Blewitt has dedicated her life to helping the survivors. In 1997, she founded the Survivors Fund to help survivors deal with and recover from the tragedies of 1994, supporting a wide range of services for victims in Rwanda, and assisting survivors in the UK. Funded by a variety of organisations and individuals, SURF acts as a channel to distribute financial assistance to groups, individuals and charitable organisations in the day-to-day operations of bringing the people of Rwanda hope, safety and a decent standard of living.

A veteran in dealing with the issues affecting the survivors, SURF holds the belief that support must address the host of difficulties and issues facing victims. Any one angle of assistance on its own, be it medical, economic or social, would be an incomplete answer. SURF provides an appropriate and integrated response to the needs of Rwandan survivors by supporting numerous projects geared at confronting the diversity of their needs.

Learn more at: http://www.survivors-fund.org.uk.

About the Research Center for Leadership in Action

The Research Center for Leadership in Action serves as a strategic solutions partner for public service leaders and organizations grappling with tough leadership challenges, particularly at moments of transition or when the way forward is unclear and uncharted. Mary K. Blewitt joined RCLA as a visiting fellow in January 2009. She prepared this paper for an event that is part of the RCLA Leadership Design Studio series, which brings together dynamic and accomplished leaders from different disciplines to serve as a brain trust that provides public service leaders with fresh thinking and expert advice. The membership of each advisory group is tailored to the topic, and the process is grounded in an understanding that leadership at its best relies on the wisdom and contributions of people working together rather than in isolation.

Learn more at: http://wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/.