

# Rape and Genocide

## The Role of Sexual Assault in the Rwandan Genocide

By Sophia Zhao

During the 1990s, Rwanda had a population of 7 million and one of the highest population densities in all of Africa. However, a struggle for power between the two main ethnic groups, the Tutsis and the Hutus, had been ongoing since its independence in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and in 1994, the Hutu people executed 100 days of terror against the Tutsi people and exploited the close human proximity in an effort to exterminate the entire Tutsi population. Backed by the ideology of Hutu Power and the Rwandan government, the Rwandan Genocide was a crucial turning point in the use of rape as a weapon. In many ways, these rapes are unique in that the attackers violated the women and girls with incredibly clear intentions – intentions that included a desire to inflict the maximum damage onto their victims that would affect them for the rest of their lives. Unlike rape in any conflict before, the Hutu attackers intentionally utilized deliberate transmission of venereal diseases, forced witnesses, physical incapacitation, or more commonly, a combination of all the above. As seen from the longstanding impacts on the individual, communal, and societal levels, rape was intentionally used as a weapon of intense brutality that ultimately led to significant international legal change.

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The extensive planning behind the operation was the primary cause of the enduring effects of the attacks and its layered implications on the Tutsi people and their culture. Before the Hutu military leaders unleashed mass violence onto the Tutsis, they underwent a long period of preparation, during which the government and media collaborated to slowly turn public opinion against the Tutsis. By the start of the genocide, the Hutus had already disseminated their ideology of Hutu superiority, and the movement gained momentum as more Hutu extremists, especially men and boys, pledged to join and took arms. As they sought to eradicate the entire Tutsi community, the Hutus focused their attack on Tutsi women – the heart of the social network in both the family and the culture – utilizing rape to unravel the fabric uniting the people. Dr. Kelly Askin, a human rights scholar, lawyer, and activist, effectively summarizes why this specific type of rape is to be considered genocide, concluding that “if the intent of the abuser is to ‘destroy’ the female, for any reason or to any degree, that should merit genocide.” By killing the males and raping the females, the Hutus established their dominance twice-over: once through the slaughter of the brawn and another through the destruction of the heart.

The systematic sexual assault of Tutsi women by Hutu men was intended to cause lasting harm to each individual victim through intentional attacks fueled by a toxic, self-empowering doctrine that encouraged a desire for vengeance. In particular, the desire to personally inflict lasting pain to assert racial superiority through sexual domination transformed the act from crude and savage to calculated, premeditated, and purposeful—which made it all the deadlier. From many testimonies, survivors attested that Hutu men wanted to assert (or in the attacker’s opinion, reassert) superiority over the Tutsi

women through forced intimacy (Donovan, 17). On a more personal level, many assailants knew their victims prior to the rape, and this personal edge fueled their motivation of “hatred, contempt, a desire to oppress, intimidate and humiliate” (Zawāṭī, 143). Before the genocide, many of those women would have been considered inaccessible and beyond the scope of their societal statuses, but through the rapes, many Hutus could avenge their egos and validate their pride – which were often inflated through programming by Hutu Power. However, as the Hutus steadily gained control, the Tutsi women systematically lost theirs, both over their bodies and their dignity. The use of rape as a weapon of intense cruelty affirmed the Hutus’ conviction of their intrinsic supremacy – that their extreme malice towards the Tutsis and the lasting impacts on their health was justified from their ideology.

In the same vein, the Hutus observed the painful aftermath of rape (including STDs, injury, and pregnancy), and harnessed that pain to intensify the punishment to satisfy their appetite for violence and ensure that their victims would suffer long after the perpetrators were gone. Between 1988 (before the genocide) and 1996 (2 years after), HIV prevalence among pregnant women increased from 21% to 33% in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, from 8% to 22% in other urban settings, and from 2% to 12% in rural settings (Kayirangwa et al, 2006). This astounding increase in HIV positive women supported many testimonials from the survivors, who almost universally asserted that “[the] 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” (Donovan, 17). Through this, it is clear that the rapists put careful thought and consideration into the attacks to

maximize the damage onto each victim and through the purposeful violations, deliberately ruined the victims' health.

Above all, these rapes were carefully designed to repeatedly inflict damage into the victim's life, attacking the victim from all angles to leave them in a world empty of choices. Twenty years after the genocide, the NGO African Rights released a collection of stories from survivors, and among them, one woman named Grace and her fifteen-year-old daughter shared their especially disturbing experiences. During the genocide, both were repeatedly raped and beaten, and afterward, took HIV tests but were devastated to find out that they both tested positive for AIDS. The daughter, who had strived to regain some normalcy in her life by continuing to go to school, eventually discontinued her education to focus on her health. Despite taking HIV antiviral medication, she was becoming progressively weaker. Their story is just one of many that illustrate the longstanding effects of the rapes – that even after the victims attempt to recuperate the fragments of their lives and move forward, certain aspects reappear and continue to undermine their quality of life. A quote from the report by African Rights (2004) captures the essence of the effects of the rapes, explaining that “[victims feel a] sense of powerlessness... in relation to all aspects of their lives, and particularly with regard to HIV/AIDS [and their health].” More generally, the persistent and recurring repercussions of rape continue to erode victims' range of freedoms and restrict their prospects, especially those in which they had the potential to regain pride and self-worth.

In Rwandan society, a woman's sexual status and marital stage are closely linked to her value in the community, and by corrupting her innocence, the attackers also irreversibly tarnished her reputation, status, and consequently, her self-

worth and morale. With this in mind, Hutu attackers “intended to spiritually destroy the victim and fracture her community” by raping the women and then relying upon this societal norm to guarantee her silence (Zawātī, vii). Slowly but surely, these isolated violations concealed under shame and stigma disintegrated the once tight-knit communities, leaving each woman to drown in her own experience while women around her were unknowingly doing the same. In Rwandan society, the “sexual transition is celebrated within a marriage where, from then on, a girl is called a woman,” and so for many women, their loss of virginity also brought along a loss of identity (Mukamana, 152). On one hand, a girl is defined as any female with her virginity intact, and so for the victims of rape, their loss of virginity prevented them from identifying as a girl—a technicality that prevented many victims from associating with their peers and former equals. On the other hand, they were not yet “women” because their lack of husbands barred them from that classification (Zawātī, 173). This “in between” state contributed to the victims’ lack of belonging in their previous communities—communities in which many victims had based their entire identity upon. To this end, the affected Tutsis were victimized twice: once by the killing and displacement of hundreds of thousands of them, and another by the destruction of their cultural and social identity.

Furthermore, there is a consensus across sources that the rapes happened to nearly all the women and adolescent girls, so much so that an entire generation of Tutsi females is now living with the trauma of sexual assault, whether they suffered it personally or witnessed first-hand. From a report by African Rights, the youngest recorded victim was six years old and the oldest was 71—encompassing nearly the entire range of women alive during that time (Donovan, 17). Indeed, as seen from data

gathered by The World Bank, life expectancy in Rwanda in 1994 was 29.003 years old; the aggressors contemptuously abandoned traditional norms that mandated respect for the elderly, demonstrating that they would molest women in all stages of life, regardless of differentiating demographic characteristics (World Bank, “Life Expectancy” chart). Despite the isolated struggles of each woman, the prevalence of the attacks emphasizes the communal nature of the horror and the necessity for survivors to regain a system of support, much like the one they had before the genocide.

Similarly, a host of aftereffects of the attack permanently changed the status of the victim in her family and community, especially because the humiliation that accompanied the rapes were often central to the sense of violation and degradation victims felt afterward. For the men who joined the local militias hoping to aid the cause to obliterate the Tutsi population, the rape “was a form of revenge against those women... and thus it was also an act of revenge toward their entire community” (Mukamana, 151). By disregarding traditional standards that limit sexual acts to areas of privacy and seclusion, rapists often added an audience, forcibly involving the community and magnifying the victim’s self-deprecation and dishonor. One account from a middle-aged woman describes her defilement by a young prepubescent boy (no older than her own children) in front of her entire community, including her husband and children—the public display of the violation amplifying her mortification and shame afterward. In her interview with a representative of African Rights, she recounted the trauma of her rape, revealing that “I lost my value, my dignity as a mother and a woman...” before cutting herself off and refusing to give additional details about the public presentation of her assault (African Right, 150). The added dimension of witnesses to the

crime defies close to every rule of decency and fundamental standard of respect afforded to not just Tutsi Rwandans, but to all people in general, and the blatant contempt for universal human rights condemns the Hutu aggressors when justice finally began to be apportioned. However, for the terrified and affected women and girls—and by extension, the eventually numb audience—regardless of any legal changes, their personal identities and dignity in their larger communities continue to suffer persisting and damaging alterations, their most core values desecrated and disgraced.

Throughout the discussion of the mass rape in Rwanda during the genocide, the ideology of Hutu Power repeatedly comes into question since it is used both as a cause and a justification, and as a result, is inextricably linked to the long-lasting effects on the victims. Most of the propagators of the rapes firmly believed in their own racial superiority, some even feeling an obligation to aid the genocide or rape out of loyalty for the Hutu Power movement. For example, a common expression used by the assailants was “pulling out the roots of the bad weeds,” a direct reference to the killing of women and children (Prunier, 145). In this way, the reestablishment of Hutu leaders post-genocide helped maintain the social stigma in Rwandan society about rape, retaining social constraints that allow rapists to benefit from impunity. From this, it seems to be an almost natural consequence that there is a lack of recognition of pain and an absence of acknowledgment for rape victims’ losses during the genocide. After the genocide, there were organized rituals of mourning for those whose lives were lost—however, there were no ceremonies carried out for the victims of rape—no public events where the victims were able to “benefit from the sympathy and support of their community” (Mukamana, 155). In addition, because the genocide effectively

eliminated the majority of the Tutsi people, the public (aka mostly Hutu) continued to ostracize those assaulted and reject their stories. As a result, many survivors had no one to turn to for comfort and were wallowing in the isolation and loneliness.

However, as awareness of the genocide spread to eventually the global level, legal action in Rwanda quickly followed suit, with an increasing number of people around the world contributing to efforts to seek justice for the survivors. In particular, there was a push to change the possible legal punishment for those convicted of sexual assault, both in Rwanda and on the international scale (Kayirangwa et al., 2006). In Rwanda, rape carried a strong social stigma, and blame was typically concentrated on the victim; this attitude translated into the legal sphere, where rape was categorized alongside other petty crimes, including, most notably, the stealing of goats or farm tools (Westcott, 2016). For many victims, the weak legal ramification for the assailants was insufficient motivation to report their assault or seek any sort of reparation, yet another factor leading to the rapists' immunity. But as a result of a succession of women's marches to change the legal definition, the Rwanda Parliament relocated where rape stood in terms of punishable offenses and added it to the country's most serious criminal category – alongside murder (Westcott, 2016). This was a momentous change for survivors, whose pain was recognized for the first time. By grouping rape with murder to emphasize the destructive nature of the act, the Parliament formally supported rape victims and validated their agony and suffering. This precedent ushered in a new era of recognition for Tutsi women and the multifaceted aftermath of rape while simultaneously broadcasting to the guilty Hutu men that their actions during the genocide would not go unpunished.



Three years later, the most significant moment of change came in the culmination of the first case in the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), which successfully prosecuted rape as a form of genocide for the first time. The watershed moment came soon after the start of the UN Tribunal to hold the killers and rapists responsible – and the first person brought to justice was convicted on all counts, including genocide, crimes against humanity, and rape. The man in question, Jean-Paul Akayesu, was the mayor in his community of Taba, where he also served as the executive leader, ordering the murder of various groups of Tutsis and supervising a series of rapes. Before his historic case, there had been no official judgment made on the use of rape as a form of genocide, but by condemning Akayesu to the maximum possible sentence for his crimes, the Tribunal Chamber effectively redefined the term “genocide” to include this specific type of assault. Additionally, as stated by the ICTR, “in the same judgment, the ICTR also for the first time defined the crime of rape in international criminal law and recognized rape as a means of perpetrating genocide” (Kayirangwa et al, 2006). In the same year, the UN started the Support Programme for Witnesses and Potential Witnesses (similar to the United States’ Witness Protection Program) and continued its mission to “provide support and care to the victims of the Genocide,” this time directly defending victims and their stories against continued attackers by their violators (Kayirangwa et al, 2006). From these efforts, it is clear that the international community aspires to offset the rape victims’ cruel treatment during the genocide and lessen its seemingly-permanent effects through recognition and legal action.

Despite these massive strides forward in survivors’ rights, there is still ample room for progress in the push for not just recognition of the lasting effects of rape but also legal changes

that could reduce the possibility of recurrence in the future. In addition to the devastating physical and psychological consequences women and girls face on an individual level, they are also subject to detrimental communal and societal backlash, all of which combine to deface victims from all angles. The 1994 Rwandan Genocide was a critical point in the use of rape as a mechanism of genocide, and the world was shocked to discover that Hutu men, motivated by a destructive ideology of racial supremacy, committed deliberately harmful assaults that intentionally affected the victims in nearly all spheres of their lives. However, this was just the beginning of the escalation of rape as a weapon, and in later conflicts, including the genocide in Bosnia and Rohingya, racially motivated ethnic cleansings and rapes left both countries severely damaged and distressed. Even though guilty men have been legally recognized as such – Akayesu's case transforming into a symbol of hope for all survivors of genocidal rape – there is still a world of similar men unexposed, unpunished, and untarnished by the horror of their actions. The necessity for reparation to victims of sexual violence during and in the aftermath of armed conflict, including genocide and ethnic cleansing, is readily apparent, both in the Rwandan Genocide and similar conflicts afterward.

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