How do women who survived rape among a range of other violations during a period of political conflict remember and, more or less silently, continue to bear their experiences? How has the violence affected them physically, psychologically and socially in the long term? How do they live their daily life years after the conflict has officially ended? What kind of support, if any, did they receive in terms of health care, justice and socio-economic rehabilitation? Can a psychosocial program like sociotherapy, as implemented in Rwanda since 2005, assist them effectively in healing? These and other questions made Richters start to focus on women with experiences of sexual violence during the genocide and its preceding war in Rwanda as a specific topic in her research about the practice and impact of sociotherapy.\(^1\) There are quite a lot of books and reports available with women’s testimonies of sexual violence experienced during the genocide (e.g. African Rights 2004, Amnesty International 2004, De Brouwer et al. 2009). However, less research focuses on healing processes over time among women who experienced rape in the context of the political violence in Rwanda (e.g. Zraly et al. 2011).

First Richters interviewed a number of women with experiences of rape who had participated in the program of sociotherapy in the north of Rwanda (Richters 2008). Two years later she discussed the issue of sexual violence in Rwanda with a group of female sociotherapy facilitators in eastern Rwanda, in an area that had been one of the epicentres of the genocide. These women stressed that they felt confident to facilitate sociotherapy group participants in dealing with ethnicity-related issues such as hatred and reconciliation between Hutus and Tutsis, but that addressing issues of sexual violence was beyond their competence. In the sociotherapy groups they had facilitated until then sexual violence was not openly spoken about, even though, facilitators emphasized, many women suffer from it. Our discussion eventually led to the composition of two groups of female genocide survivors with experiences of rape who each met for a full cycle of about fifteen meetings of two to three hour duration each. With the help of an interpreter Richters started to interview women who participated in the first group. Later Kagoyire took over from her and also interviewed a selection of women from the second group. Kagoyire had previously worked as a trauma counsellor for genocide survivors. She succeeded in building a high-quality trust relationship with the women, which successfully facilitated the interview process.

The result of our research project is a collection of nineteen life histories. This collection will first of all be published in Kinyarwanda, the national language of Rwanda. The underlying idea is that the stories may help other women with rape experiences find a way to share those experiences with others and by doing so may find a path towards healing. The women who tell their stories expect that this will indeed be the case. They also hope that perpetrators of rape will read the stories and start to realize the depth of the suffering they themselves have caused. All women gave their informed consent to have their stories published. At first, most of them explicitly wanted to do so under their own name. Eventually we agreed that, in particular for the protection of their children, names and some details of the stories would be changed or deleted for the sake of anonymity.

The story of Illuminée that follows below speaks for itself. It addresses themes that also come up in the other stories: a more or less normal childhood, despite being punctuated by periods

\(^{1}\) See for an overview of research done on the practice and impact of sociotherapy in Rwanda: www.annemiekrichters.nl/rwanda
of violence for the majority of the women; a total disruption of their previous life by the genocide; a range of genocide experiences in addition to rape (whether repeated gang rape or rape by a single man); the immediate suffering and suffering in due course of time; the expected and unexpected results of participation in the community justice courts; the various reasons for the silencing of rape in the public space of those courts; a variety of problems in relationships with men, surviving family members and children; a life of social isolation; support or lack thereof in terms of health and socio-economic needs; the role of sociotherapy in their lives; and advice for other women. However, in each story the details are unique.

The stories of the women demonstrate how the reconstitution of self-world-other relations among the women goes hand in hand with the regaining of the ability and freedom to speak. Particularly the intense social pain - suffering from social disconnectedness - as a legacy of the genocide violence proved to be language-destroying. Sociotherapy provides a safe social space for the women to find words for their experiences that before were unspeakable. In that sense we can conceptualize the sociotherapy group as a speech community, even though much more happens in such group than turning deadly silence into speech. The phases of trust, safety and care the women go through in the sociotherapy group helps them to reconnect to themselves and to others. The easing of their social pain is often accompanied by a decrease in other chronic health problems, whether physical, psychological or emotional, substantiating again the crucial linkage between collective and individual healing. Their healing is expressed in the self-chosen titles of the women’s stories: ‘resurrection’, ‘sociotherapy put my heart back in its place’, ‘smiling again after eighteen years of torture’, ‘I became a friend to myself’, and ‘meeting others helps your brain to take a break’. Illuminée, whose life story is presented below, chose as title for her story: ‘Women, we need to be courageous’. Over the past few years she has developed into an informal leader. She was and still is a main support for a number of the women who participated in the two sociotherapy groups. This, she tells us while shedding some tears, does not mean that she herself is without need of support to cope with her pain.

The life history of Illuminée Mukamana

Every time I think about the gang rape I faced during the genocide, I can suddenly smell the stench of the rapists’ sweat. What was (most) hurtful was being raped in front of my children. Now, I have my dignity back. I feel that I have value in the eyes of other people again, and I have hope for the future.

My name is Illuminée Mukamana. The 1994 genocide against Tutsis happened when I was 34 years old. I was born in Kigali in a camp for internally displaced persons. My family had moved there from Eastern province because of the 1959 massacres of Tutsis. We were a family with sixteen children. After a few years in the camp we moved to Kicukiro, where we lived for seven years. During the 1959 massacres the house of my family was not destroyed as it was during the 1994 genocide. People still had kindness. However, because of ethnic discrimination, I was not allowed to continue my studies because of being Tutsi, even though

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2 The transfer of power in favour of the Hutu elite through political violence was accompanied by mass killings of Tutsis in 1959. This was followed by repression and various episodes of massacres, which resulted in many Tutsis choosing to go into exile. On the first of October 1990, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) - an anti-Rwandan-government armed movement initially composed largely of Tutsi who had lived in exile for a generation - invaded Rwanda from the north-east. The ensuing war culminated in the 1994 genocide. Eventually, the RPF gained a victory over the previous government and its army ended the genocide and established a new RPF-led regime.
I was a bright student. I only attended vocational training. Eventually we went back to the East of Rwanda. The war violence continued and my father was killed in the North of Rwanda in 1963. The same happened to other people who were sub-chiefs during the monarchy regime and were seen as accomplices of the cockroaches. My mother died a few years later when I was fourteen years old. In 1979 I married a man from a prosperous family. I lived with my husband in Bugesera until the genocide started. We had a good life and together had seven children. The 1994 genocide took my beloved husband, two of my children and thirteen of my siblings. I was born during the war, I experienced other wars when I was young, but it was the genocide that really wounded me to the core. Before the genocide I was an orphan after I lost my father and later also my mother. However, I still had my siblings with whom I lived happily. I did not live in bad health because my brothers were working, so that we had enough income. After getting married I became part of an affluent family. The life I was living helped me to forget my previous bad experiences. Nothing wounded me as much as what I experienced during the genocide.

The genocide was in many ways different from the previous wars of 1959, 1963, 1967 and 1973. In those wars a person could hide in the house of a neighbour. In 1994 no one was willing to rescue another person. I had never realized before that someone can kill his or her neighbour, slay an innocent child or even kill his own sibling. I expected that, like in previous periods of violence, we could go to a church, would be protected there and after a few days would be able to go home safely. Also, before, our houses were not destroyed and our cows were not eaten. Servants occupied them but gave them back once the violence was over. All of this was different during the 1994 genocide. What I experienced then brought me far in my thoughts (traumatized me deeply) up to a point that I thought God had forgotten me.

After only two days of genocide I saw a bus arrive full of people, who entered the church and started murdering people. They killed them all and burned them. I do not know how we - I, my husband and five of our six children - escaped. We had nowhere to go. Eventually, I ran with my husband, three children and some other people who had survived the killings to a nearby swamp. There I experienced unspeakable woe. I was pregnant and very tired. A crowd of Interahamwe found me in the marshes and violated me until I felt as if my mind was totally gone. I was not able to get my legs together anymore. Among the many men who violated me there were two boys I knew quite well. One had been adopted by my family. My husband had supported him. At the eve of the genocide he had even spent the night at our house. After raping me they left me behind. A neighbour of mine who was hiding in the swamp nearby happened to find me. He put my legs together. As a result of the rape I lost a lot of blood and gave birth while still being in the swamp. After the genocide, I was hospitalized for a period of four months.

When my husband was on his way to get money to pay to the Interahamwe so that they would leave him alive, they killed him. It happened the day after my child was born. With my husband they also killed two of my children. The child who had not escaped from the church with us I found back later. He had been lying in the church with dead bodies on top of him and survived that way. He was found by other people who went back to the church to search for people who might have survived. Since that time he is suffering badly from symptoms of trauma.

Of everything I experienced the rape was the most traumatic. I lost my relatives as others lost theirs. Nothing can replace the loss of most of my siblings. I became a widow like other

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3 In the propaganda fuelling hatred against the Tutsi ethnic group and persuading Hutus to kill all Tutsi, Tutsi were labelled as cockroaches.
women. But what destroyed my heart in particular was having been raped in front of my children. It deprived me of my dignity and my value. When thinking about the rape I still smell the odour of the sweat of the rapists.

In the period following the genocide I was so depressed that I could not feed my remaining children nor do anything at home. I felt hopeless and behaved like a mad person. I despised myself and lost all my faith to the extent that I could not go to the Protestant church anymore. Among the church members were Hutus who had killed my family and I hated them for that.

I started to regain some hope when I reunited with my brother who had returned from Uganda. He found me in the hospital. Once I was discharged I remained sick. I was depressed. I used to go to the fields that belong to me and my family in order to get something to eat from there. I passed the nights there in the ruins and came back in the morning. I became a smoker. My daughter who was born while I was hiding in the swamp dried out because I did not breastfeed her. I hated everything, including myself. I changed my behaviour after my brother brought me some crops and showed me how to run a small business instead of selling kanyanga (local whisky) and be a slave of drugs. The interventions by my brother helped me to take a shower again, wash my clothes and eat again, and regain the intelligence which I had lost completely. Unfortunately my brother became infirm. He had been shot in his head while serving in the military in Congo and became mentally ill. His wife died shortly afterwards. Now I take care of him instead of him taking care of me. I also take care of my other sibling who survived, my youngest sister who was also raped and is suffering from AIDS as a result of the rape.

My own health problems included severe back pain and ihahamuka. After the genocide everyone became crazy, including me. We had no self-control, no intelligence. We had no thoughts. Before anyone else in Rwanda I suffered from ihahamuka symptoms. I was a true traumatised person. Because I know from my own experience what it means to be severely traumatised I like to help people with similar experiences of suffering.

I repeatedly left my house at night, continuing to move during day time without knowing where I was going. I was just walking without thinking about the goal of my journey. I was always wearing a dirty jacket and sitting on the hill, where I observed everything. I was no more than a skeleton, without anything inside. I felt that my head was broken, but was not able to locate where it broke. It was a bad time for me because I could not find anybody to share my feelings with. I had nowhere to cry. I could not approach any one. I was always alone, inside of the house. I was lying in my bed without sleeping. I judged everybody including my children who hated me.

As a genocide widow, at some point I was invited by AVEGA - an organisation supporting genocide widows - to attend a meeting it had organized. I did go, but only once, because I had no interest in surviving. I was still depressed. Back home I asked myself whether AVEGA’s meetings would bring back my loved ones who had been killed. Some time later, because of the haemorrhage resulting from the rape, I became sickly. That time, six months after I was back from hospital again, I was supported by AVEGA in getting medical care and individual counselling sessions. After I had recovered a bit from my illness, AVEGA trained me as a lay counsellor so that I could facilitate other widows who were suffering from psychological problems. AVEGA also supported me in income generating activities in order

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4 Ihahamuka is a local idiom of distress resembling the Western psychiatric diagnostic category panic disorder. See e.g. Hagengima et al. 2003.
to help me feed myself. I also benefit from mutual health insurance and school fees for my children provided by FARG.\textsuperscript{5}

Another tragedy in my life is that my first born who had survived the genocide was killed ten years later, in 2004, with her two children in a car accident.

When gacaca\textsuperscript{6} started I did not want to participate because I still had psychological wounds. Later on when Ibuka and Kanyarwanda\textsuperscript{7} noticed that many survivors were traumatized during gacaca sessions, these two institutions organised a training of lay counsellors who would be assigned to intervene when people were traumatized. I took part in this training. It enabled me to attend gacaca, as I had to accompany witnesses. When perpetrators were testifying against each other, I recognized some of them as looters of my property. I was only paid back for the looting by two of them. Even though I did not testify against any perpetrator, gacaca helped me to find the remains of the dead bodies of my relatives. After burying them I felt happy and slept well.

The training by AVEGA helped me to establish a relationship between the trauma symptoms I was feeling in my entire body and the genocide-related events I had experienced. I came to understand why I was suffering from the symptoms of a mad person. As I said before, before being trained I was depressed. I was not eating nor sleeping. I was a real mad person. The work of lay-counselling helped me to get some revenue and feed my children. The training provided by Ibuka in partnership with Kanyarwanda also taught us how to control ourselves during the gacaca court sessions.

In 2010 I joined sociotherapy where we listened to each other and came out of loneliness. I first joined a group in which women and men, Hutus and Tutsis participated. About a year later I joined a group with women who had experienced rape like me. During the sessions I had had with my counsellor at AVEGA, I had told her about my rape. I did so because I was sick, not because I wanted to talk about it. With the women in the second sociotherapy group I shared my rape experiences in the tenth session. The group helped me by caring for me. However, back home I regretted that I had exposed myself to the public. Nevertheless I continued participating in all sessions. As a result I started feeling better. Some of my symptoms, such as hating myself and my children, gradually disappeared. Now I love my children, four of my own and two orphans (children of one of my brothers) I adopted. Before, I did not care for them as a mother. When I now see a person, I consider him or her as a human being. I can sleep easily. I am able to plan for what I will do the next day. When I have money, I invest that money in farming. I also bought doors for my house which I did not have before. I am now healthy. I sometimes ask for a loan. I know how to manage it and how to repay it. Sitting with other women gave me hope for the future. From sociotherapy I learned that when you live in grief and anger it can destroy you, others forget about you and your children lack proper food. In my heart I forgave those who wronged me.

Sociotherapy helped me to put down my grief and have a good relationship with others. Before I joined sociotherapy, I could not greet any Hutu. I was afraid of all Hutu and avoided them. I could not receive any of them in my house. I was sad and always angry. In the first sociotherapy group I met a man who had joined in the killing of my relatives and killed one

\textsuperscript{5} The Rwandan Government Fund for Genocide Survivors.
\textsuperscript{6} Gacaca is the name for the community justice courts that have been the centrepiece of Rwanda’s justice and reconciliation programme.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibuka (the word means ‘remember’) is an umbrella organization of genocide survivors associations. Kanyarwanda is an NGO that delivers counselling, health, education, legal assistance and business development assistance to genocide survivors and their relatives.
of my children. He had been imprisoned after admitting his crimes and was later released. It was through sociotherapy that I started to understand that he also suffered, particularly due to the loss of his child who was killed in Congo and because of the guilt he felt about the crimes he had committed. It must have been the bad government who had put something in him that caused his criminal behaviour. I learned to forgive him and started to exchange food with him. He later died because of psychosis generated by ongoing allegations against him in the gacaca court.

Sociotherapy made me feel strong. I love my children. I now have a value in front of people. My intelligence came back in time. Before, I could lose my belongings wherever. Sociotherapy helped me to join a group of people with the same problems. Now, I am fine. Thank God, I have no AIDS. I control myself. I will not go back anymore to my previous state of mind. I have hope for the future. My sickness has lessened. I sleep well. I wake up in the morning while before I was used to getting up at one o’clock in the night. I communicate with my children. I organise everything at home. I now experience my neighbours as being alive, whereas before it was as if they did not exist. I came out of isolation. I like sociotherapy because it operates step by step.8 Through its steps, everybody can find the step that may heal the problems she or he suffers from. Sociotherapy helped me to speak out about the rape in a big group. I can now aid my children traumatized by the genocide by using the steps of sociotherapy. I realized that they were healed because they became able to speak out. My youngest daughter, who was born in the swamp and was always fearful and felt insecure without me being near, is now doing much better.

The added value of sociotherapy for me is that I now feel secure. Because of getting out of loneliness, I became a member of a number of small associations in which every member contributes some amount of money. After a certain time we share the total amount we have. These small associations facilitated me in reducing poverty in my home and to feed my children. When I compare sociotherapy to other kinds of psychosocial healing I benefited from, I realize that these other healing programs are complementary to sociotherapy. Before, we as survivors were in bad health. We were like waste. While other trainings took us out of the dustbin, sociotherapy helped us women who were raped to meet each other and feel better because of that. Another difference with previous trainings is that in those trainings we primarily focused on ourselves while through sociotherapy we also started to focus on better care for our families.

Regarding the effect of gacaca for me, I was happy to find the remains of the dead bodies of my family members. But the men who raped me have not been brought to gacaca in order to be judged. Because other women with rape experiences whom I accompanied to the gacaca courts did not receive any positive results from it, I decided to not testify against the rapists. Instead of getting the justice the women needed, the public started to gossip openly about them. The rights of the women were not met. Instead they exposed themselves to the public for nothing. In gacaca rapists used to ask the victim of rape to bring witnesses of the rape. Where can I find those witnesses? Could I bring my children who observed everything during the genocide, and ask them to repeat face to face whatever those rapists did? Furthermore, the few women who did talk about their rape in gacaca did not benefit from any positive result. What gacaca has done is to release the rapists instead of imprisoning them. We did not want to expose ourselves to the public for nothing. I was disappointed by the judges of gacaca who

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8 While using the word ‘steps’ Illuminéé refers the phases safety, trust, care, respect, new rules and memories a sociotherapy group is guided through by its facilitators in the fifteen week period in which the weekly group meetings take place.
were appointed as such because they were supposed to have integrity. Instead they accepted bribes and released perpetrators. In addition, the truth has been told partly and gacaca did not finish all trials it should judge. I wish that gacaca would finish all trials related to the genocide and that all survivors will be refunded for their looted properties and destroyed houses.

I advise other women who experienced rape to build good relationships with people who live around them and to be courageous in whatever they do. I encourage them to talk about their problems to people close to them, because that will help them to recover. These women have to respect themselves instead of being taken over by their problems. They have to fight against being colonized by the consequences of their bad experiences. It is not good to be a prostitute or a drug user because of one’s problems. I say that because when you become a prostitute, you get HIV/AIDS and you lose your value in society. Soon you pass away while you should be taking care of your children, if you have any. I encourage all women to take part in small associations in order to reduce their poverty. I ask those women who have vocational skills and those who are qualified in any kind of job or work to train others. For those who are less experienced, I advise them to approach those who are more qualified and learn from them.

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