VOLUME 26 NUMBER 4 DECEMBER 2024

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of Genocide Research

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cjgr20

Micro-Analysis of Victim-Survivors' Stories: Nuancing the Dynamics and Complexities of Sexual Violence During the Genocide Against the Tutsi

Judith Herrmann-Rafferty

To cite this article: Judith Herrmann-Rafferty (28 Feb 2025): Micro-Analysis of Victim-Survivors' Stories: Nuancing the Dynamics and Complexities of Sexual Violence During the Genocide Against the Tutsi, Journal of Genocide Research, DOI: 10.1080/14623528.2025.2470509

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2025.2470509

Published online: 28 Feb 2025.

JOURNAL OF GENOCIDE RESEARCH
https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2025.2470509

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Micro-Analysis of Victim-Survivors' Stories: Nuancing the Dynamics and Complexities of Sexual Violence During the Genocide Against the Tutsi

Judith Herrmann-Rafferty

Cairns Institute, James Cook University, Cairns, Australia

ABSTRACT

The year 2024 marked the thirtieth anniversary of the Genocide against the Tutsi. The genocide was characterized by widespread and brutal use of sexual violence, resulting in long-lasting and multifaceted effects on victim-survivors and their communities. While the representation of sexual violence in Rwandan public discourse has often been limited, advocacy groups and researchers have documented numerous testimonies to ensure the full scope of such violence is acknowledged. Despite these efforts, many relational dynamics and complexities remain underexplored. This article presents the survival stories of two victim-survivors, interviewed in Rwanda in 2015/2016. A micro-analysis of these individual narratives enhances our understanding of the genocide and its aftermath by providing nuanced insights into the prevalence and forms of sexual violence, as well as the relational dynamics that shaped victim-survivors' experiences. The micro-analysis also expands knowledge of agency and the choices made by victim-survivors during and after the genocide, as well as the profound relational harm sexual violence caused to Rwandan social networks. Furthermore, this article examines the role of apologies and forgiveness in addressing this harm and offers insights into ongoing healing needs for both victim-survivors and Rwandan society. These findings contribute to broader scholarly and policy discussions on sexual violence and its long-term consequences.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 19 August 2024
Accepted 18 February 2025

KEYWORDS
Sexual violence; genocide; Rwanda; victim-survivors; micro-analysis

Introduction

The year 2024 marked the thirtieth anniversary of the Genocide against the Tutsi. The genocide was characterized by widespread and brutal use of sexual violence, predominantly targeting Tutsi women, but also some Hutu women.[1] While Tutsi men and children also

CONTACT Judith Herrmann-Rafferty Judith.rafferty@jcu.edu.au Cairns Institute, James Cook University, Cairns, Australia www.linkedin.com/in/judith-rafferty-770a329b

[1] Binaifer Nowrojee, *Shattered Lives: Sexual Violence during the Rwandan Genocide and its Aftermath* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1996), 4.

experienced sexual violence,[2] women disproportionately endured these atrocities, and suffered unique, gender-specific consequences.[3] This article focuses on female victim-survivors,[4] using the term exclusively to refer to women who experienced sexual violence during the genocide.[5]

While large-scale patterns of sexual violence during the genocide are relatively well-documented, individual victim-survivors' experiences remain underexplored. This article presents and analyzes the survival stories of two victim-survivors to reveal overlooked dynamics and complexities, such as the multifaceted relational harm caused by sexual violence to Rwandan social networks. This micro-analysis adds important nuance to our understanding of the genocide and its profound and far-reaching impacts. These stories enrich dominant narratives and highlight ongoing healing and repair needs for victim-survivors and their communities.

Sexual violence during the genocide has had lasting psychological, physical, social, and economic repercussions for victim-survivors. It also caused multifaceted relational harm within Rwandan families and communities.[6] I use the term "relational harm" to describe the damage that sexual violence inflicted on interpersonal and communal bonds, including relationships among victim-survivors, perpetrators, and the broader community. This damage includes disrupting victim-survivors' bonds with their social networks by altering perceptions of their social or moral standing in their communities, ultimately undermining social cohesion.[7] The public nature and widespread knowledge of many acts of sexual violence led to profound stigma for victim-survivors, causing many to be ostracized by their families and communities, with ripple effects on their children and other relatives.[8] The relational harm within communities was exacerbated by the fact that many acts of sexual violence were committed by neighbours, acquaintances, or extended family members of the victims, fracturing not only pre-existing relationships between victims and perpetrators but also between their families, who often knew each other. The relational harm was intensified by particularly heinous acts of sexual violence that deviated from social norms – referred to as "atypical sexual violence."[9] These layers of harm require a deeper understanding, which

[2] Nowrojee, *Shattered Lives*; and Claire Bradford Di Caro, "Call it What it is: Genocide through Male Rape and Sexual Violence in the Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda," *Duke Journal of Comparative & International Law* 30 (2019): 57–91. https://scholarship.law.duke.edu/djcil/vol30/iss1/2.

[3] Usta Kaitesi, *Genocidal Gender and Sexual Violence* (Cambridge: Intersentia, 2014), 76.

[4] The term victim-survivor is frequently used in contemporary literature discussing justice needs of persons who experienced sexual violence. Using both "victim" and "survivor" simultaneously preserves the resilience of survivors and the indignation of victims, see Mary P. Koss, "Restorative Justice for Acquaintance Rape and Misdemeanor Sex Crimes," in *Restorative Justice and Violence Against Women*, ed. James Ptacek (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 218–38, 219.

[5] While I acknowledge the suffering of male victim-survivors and the need for further research into their experiences, including their perspectives would exceed the scope of this article. For more on this topic, see Bradford Di Caro, "Call It"; and Sandesh Sivakumaran, "Sexual Violence Against Men in Armed Conflict," *European Journal of International Law* 18, no. 2 (2007): 253–76. https://doi.org/10.1093/ejil/chm013.

[6] Nicole Fox, "'Oh, Did the Women Suffer, They Suffered So Much': Impacts of Gender-Based Violence on Kinship Networks in Rwanda," *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 37, no. 2 (2011): 279–305. http://www.jstor.org.elibrary.jcu.edu.au/stable/23028814.

[7] Sarah Clark Miller, "Moral Injury and Relational Harm: Analyzing Rape in Darfur," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 40 (2009): 504–23. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9833.2009.01468.x.

[8] Judith Rafferty, "'I Wanted Them to be Punished or at Least Ask us for Forgiveness': Justice Interests of Female Victim-Survivors of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and Their Experiences with *Gacaca*," *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 12, no. 3 (2018): 95–118. https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.12.3.1556; and Judith Rafferty, "Analysing the Justice Needs of Rwandan Female Victim-Survivors of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and Their Experiences with the *Gacaca* Courts" (doctoral thesis, James Cook University, 2021), https://researchonline.jcu.edu.au/68930/.

[9] Masengesho Kamuzinzi, "Understanding the Innermost Nature of Genocidal Rape: A Community-Based Approach," *Rwanda Journal* 4, no. 1 (2017): 62–86. The break with social norms through perpetration of sexual violence is also

this article seeks to provide through the nuanced exploration of individual experiences of sexual violence during the genocide and its aftermath.

Despite the profound and far-reaching damage that sexual violence caused, its representation in Rwandan public discourse on the genocide has been complex and often insufficient.[10] Individual experiences of sexual violence have been largely absent from Rwandan commemoration and memorialization efforts over the past two decades.[11] In addition, while public sources acknowledge the large-scale use of sexual violence as a weapon of war and terror,[12] they often lack detailed accounts of victim-survivors. This underrepresentation stems from various factors, including victim-survivors' preference to leave the past behind and remain silent,[13] as well as fear of stigma, reprisals, and retraumatization.[14] Cultural taboos, underreporting of sexual violence, and low prosecution rates in forums such as the ICRT and *gacaca* courts have further limited the integration of these experiences in Rwandan genocide narratives.[15]

Over the past three decades, advocacy groups and researchers have collected and shared numerous testimonies from courageous victim-survivors to ensure that the full scope of sexual violence during the genocide is documented.[16] Despite these contributions, research has faced limitations. Burnet identifies a sampling bias in studies focused on victim-survivors who were members of an association,[17] and highlights the scarcity of accounts that deviate from dominant narratives portraying sexual violence as involving Hutu perpetrators raping Tutsi victims by physical force.[18] Addressing these gaps requires exploring a broader range of experiences and using methodologies that mitigate sampling bias to deepen our understanding of the genocide and its aftermath.

Drawing on the work of other researchers,[19] I share and analyze the survival stories of two individual victim-survivors, referred to by the pseudonyms Catherine and Louise, based on

discussed in Jennie E. Burnet, "Rape as a Weapon of Genocide: Gender, Patriarchy, and Sexual Violence in the Rwandan Genocide," *Anthropology Faculty Publications* 13 (2015): 1–31. https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/anthro_facpub/13.

[10] Burnet, "Rape as a Weapon"; and Caroline Williamson, "Breaking the Silence: Rwandan Women Survivors Give Testimony and Find a Voice," *E-International Relations*, 27 April 2014, https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/48732 (accessed 11 February 2025).

[11] Johanna Mannergren Selimovic, "Gender, Narrative and Affect: Top-Down Politics of Commemoration in Post-Genocide Rwanda," *Memory Studies* 13, no. 2 (2020): 131–45. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698017730869; Nicole Fox, *After Genocide: Memory and Reconciliation in Rwanda* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2021); and Jennie E. Burnet, *Genocide Lives in Us: Women, Memory and Silence in Rwanda* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Pres, 2012). For a discussion on how survivors are included in smaller more local memorials see Stephanie Wolfe, Omar Ndizeye, and Annamarie DeBeer, "Survivor Agency in the Post-Genocide Memorialisation Process in Rwanda," in this issue.

[12] Rebecca L. Haffajee, "Prosecuting Crimes of Rape and Sexual Violence at the ICTR: The Application of Joint Criminal Enterprise Theory," *Harvard Journal of Law & Gender* 29 (2006): 201–21; and Nowrojee, *Shattered Lives*.

[13] Susanne Buckley-Zistel, "Remembering to Forget: Chosen Amnesia as a Strategy for Local Coexistence in Post-Genocide Rwanda." *Africa (Pre-2011)* 76, no. 2 (2006): 131–50. https://elibrary.jcu.edu.au/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/remembering-forget-chosen-amnesia-as-strategy/docview/213652773/se-2.

[14] Williamson, "Breaking the Silence"; and Jennie E. Burnet, *Genocide Lives in Us*; and Rafferty, "Analysing the Justice Needs."

[15] Williamson, "Breaking the Silence"; Burnet, *Genocide Lives in Us*; and Rafferty, "Analysing the Justice Needs."

[16] Most of these testimonies have been de-identified before being shared publicly to protect the identities of the victim-survivors.

[17] Burnet, "Rape as a Weapon."

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.; and Nicola Palmer, "Re-Examining Resistance in Post-Genocide Rwanda," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 8, no. 2 (2014): 231–45. https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2014.891716; and Regine Uwibereyeho King, "Healing the Wounds of Genocide Rape: The Experiences of Two Women in Rwanda," in *Gender and Peacebuilding: All Hands Required*, ed. Maureen P. Flaherty (Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2015): 35–51.

interviews conducted in Rwanda in 2015/2016.[20] This micro-analysis illuminates overlooked dynamics of sexual violence and its consequences, adding nuances that dominant narratives may obscure. To increase the visibility of Louise's and Catherine's stories, I present them as coherent narratives following this introduction.[21] I then analyze and discuss how these narratives can deepen our understanding of the genocide and its consequences, as well as contribute to scholarly and policy discussions on sexual and gender-based violence.[22]

Using a Sensitive Methodology to Collect and Share Victim-survivors' Stories

In this article, I share findings from semi-structured interviews conducted in 2015/2016 with twenty-three Rwandan female victim-survivors, focusing generally on my research while providing detailed accounts of the survival stories of Louise and Catherine. Collecting and sharing survival stories of victim-survivors poses practical, methodological, and ethical challenges.[23] Transparency about methodology is crucial to address potential sampling biases and ensure that findings can be meaningfully contextualized and shared,[24] which is why I detail certain aspects of my research in this section.

I travelled to Rwanda in mid-2015 to establish relationships with professionals who worked in the field of sexual violence, including Emilienne Mukansoro, a psychotherapist who ran support groups specifically for women who had suffered sexual violence during the genocide.[25] These professionals helped me locate and invite victim-survivors to participate in my research when I returned to Rwanda in December 2015. I spent approximately two months meeting potential participants, introducing myself and my research, and conducting my interviews.[26] Most participants, including Catherine and Louise, lived in rural areas in the Southern Province at the time of the interview, and relied on farming as their only income.[27] All participants had suffered sexual violence during the genocide and had their case(s) tried by one of Rwanda's local community courts, called *gacaca*. These courts were established post-genocide by the Rwandan government to try genocide-related crimes between 2002 and 2012.[28] While cases of sexual

[20] Ethics approval for this research was obtained from the James Cook University Human Research Ethics Committee, Australia, approval number H6218.

[21] I explain the rationale behind this approach in more detail at the end of the next section.

[22] Nicole Fox and Judith Rafferty, "Sexual Violence after Genocide," *Research Brief, International Association of Genocide Scholars* (December 2023), https://genocidescholars.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Sexual-Violance-Policy-Brief.pdf; and Elizabeth Jean Wood, "Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and the Policy Implications of Recent Research," *International Review of the Red Cross* 96 (2014): 457–78. doi:10.1017/S1816383115000077.

[23] Judith Herrmann, "Experiences, Challenges, and Lessons Learned—Interviewing Rwandan Survivors of Sexual Violence," *Griffith Journal of Law and Human Dignity* 5, no. 1 (2017): 165–88.

[24] This point and other methodological and ethical considerations that apply to this research are also discussed in Nicole Fox et al., "Lessons from the Field: Experts Weigh in on Years of Conducting Fieldwork in Post Atrocity Zones," in this issue.

[25] Most of these groups were started after the closure of the *gacaca* courts. They included victim-survivors who had participated in *gacaca* trying cases of sexual violence as well as those who had not. For more information on Emilienne's support groups, see Laure Broulard, "Emilienne Mukansoro, Pionnière de la Thérapie de Groupe au Rwanda," *Le Monde Afrique*, 17 October 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2022/10/17/emilienne-mukansoro-pionniere-de-la-therapie-de-groupe-au-Rwanda_6146189_3212.html (accessed 11 February 2025).

[26] Details of how I met participants and build rapport are discussed in Herrmann, "Experiences, Challenges, and Lessons."

[27] Only one participant lived and worked in Kigali City and reported a regular monthly income.

[28] Judith Herrmann, "A Critical Analysis of the Transitional Justice Measures Incorporated by Rwandan *Gacaca* and Their Effectiveness," *James Cook University Law Review* 19 (2012): 90–112. https://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdoc/au/journals/JCULawRw/2012/5.html; and Hollie Nyseth Brehm, Christopher Uggen, and Jean-Damascène Gasanabo,

violence were initially tried by Rwanda's ordinary courts, around 7,000 cases of sexual violence were transferred to *gacaca* in 2008 and tried predominantly between 2008 and 2009.[29]

Participants were recruited through invitation by the professionals who knew the victim-survivors personally, as well as through passive snowball sampling. Using these two methods, my research methodology mitigated, to some extent, the sampling bias favouring members of an association,[30] as discussed earlier in this article. Thirteen of my participants, including Louise, formed part of the support groups run by Emilienne. The other ten, including Catherine, were not yet a member of one of these groups or of any other association at the time of the interview and were brought in by other interviewees.[31]

A sampling bias in my research derives, however, from the involvement of my participants in *gacaca* courts trying sexual violence. Based on *gacaca* law,[32] only those crimes of sexual violence that were committed as part of the genocide between 1 October 1990 and 31 December 1994 were dealt with by *gacaca*, excluding other experiences of sexual violence not covered by the *gacaca* mandate. That said, the experiences of sexual violence discussed by my participants went beyond the "ethnic/racial dyads of Tutsi-victim and Hutu-perpetrator" noted by Burnet.[33] Two of my participants identified as Hutu, married to a Tutsi husband at the time of the genocide. Furthermore, many participants, including Louise, also spoke about sexual violence committed by perpetrators who they did not report at *gacaca*. Reasons for this non-reporting varied. In some cases, perpetrators were unknown to the participants, or the violence fell outside the *gacaca* mandate (e.g. sexual violence committed in refugee camps). Some victim-survivors deliberately chose not to report, as reflected in Louise's story. The meaning of such choices is explored later in this article.

Another sampling bias in my research stems from the small proportion of victim-survivors who had reported their perpetrators and had them tried by *gacaca*. As previously noted, less than 7,000 cases of sexual violence were referred for trial to the *gacaca* courts. This is a stark contrast to the estimated minimum total of 354,440 women raped during the genocide.[34] Many interview participants noted that they took part in their *gacaca* trial because they had felt strongly about exposing their perpetrators and/or sharing their survival story.[35] While the participants' views do not represent all Rwandan victim-survivors, especially those without *gacaca* trials, they offer valuable

"Genocide, Justice, and Rwanda's *Gacaca* Courts," *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 30, no. 3 (2014): 333–52. http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1043986214536660.

[29] Emily Amick, "Trying International Crimes on Local Lawns: The Adjudication of Genocide Sexual Violence Crimes in Rwanda's *Gacaca* Courts," *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law* 20, no. 2 (2011): 1–97. link.gale.com/apps/doc/A269338508/AONE?u=james_cook&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=43943edb.

[30] Burnet, "Rape as a Weapon."

[31] Sampling through associations and/or support groups facilitates referral to existing support in the instance of re-traumatization of participants. Interviewing victim-survivors who were not a member of an association required me to identify additional suitable support services, which I discuss in detail in Herrmann, "Experiences, Challenges, and Lessons."

[32] Republic of Rwanda, *Organic Law N° 16/2004*, 19 June 2004, p. 1; Kaitesi, *Genocidal Gender*, 68.

[33] Burnet, "Rape as a Weapon," 1.

[34] Catrien Bijleveld, Aafke Morssinkhof, and Alette Smeulers, "Counting the Countless: Rape Victimization during the Rwandan Genocide," *International Criminal Justice Review* 19, no. 2 (2009): 208–24, 220. https://doi.org/10.1177/1057567709335391.

[35] Rafferty, "I Wanted Them to Be Punished."

insights into the benefits and challenges of sharing survival stories with a broader audience.

During my interviews, I was assisted by a female Kinyarwanda-English interpreter with a degree in clinical psychology and public health, as well as experience in conducting research with vulnerable groups in Rwanda.[36] Her qualifications and skills helped me address many methodological, ethical, and practical challenges associated with my research, including the need for confidentiality and safety, building rapport, and referring participants to accessible services.[37] My interviews focused on exploring the participants' motivations and hopes when raising their cases at *gacaca*, as well as their experiences with the courts. While I did not ask any direct questions about their experience of sexual violence, all participants shared information about their victimization at some stage during the interview. Many participants, including Louise and Catherine, expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to share their stories with me during their interview. It allowed personal catharsis, validation, and empowerment, without fear of social repercussions, and assured them their experiences would reach a broader audience.[38] These reactions highlight why interviewing individuals with such difficult life experiences can be valuable for them, despite concerns about retraumatization and privacy, provided the research methodology is thorough and the researcher is genuinely interested in their story.

Catherine's and Louise's Survival Stories

To recount Catherine's and Louise's survival stories, I have constructed two narratives, connecting various pieces of information they provided during our interview about their experiences and survival during the genocide. This way of sharing my interview data is in line with a storytelling approach as described by Uwibereyeho King.[39] This approach derives its value as a method of communication because it "allows a researcher to enter into conversations with the narratives of the participants as they engage in interpreting and making sense of their experiences."[40] It is important to note that the narratives presented are based on information gathered in a single interview with each victim-survivor. The challenges of conducting research with vulnerable individuals who suffered trauma and are at risk of retraumatization, as well as the complexities of working in another language with the help of an interpreter, limited opportunities to investigate certain topics in depth. This was necessary to prioritize the safety and well-being of the participant but meant that I was unable to obtain certain details, and due to interviewing each participant only once, follow-up data was not included in my study design.

[36] Each interview took approximately 1.5 h and was recorded on an audio recording device. The Kinyarwanda questions and responses were later transcribed and translated by a Kinyarwanda-English translator, and I used these English transcripts to code the interviews.

[37] How I addressed these, and other methodological, practical, and ethical challenges is discussed in detail in Herrmann, "Experiences, Challenges, and Lessons."

[38] The latter has also been found by other researchers, see Anne-Marie De Brouwer and Sandra Ka Hon Chu, *The Men Who Killed Me: Rwandan Survivors of Sexual Violence* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2009); and Fox, *After Genocide*.

[39] Uwibereyeho King, "Healing the Wounds," 39. I do not feel that my research methodology supports using the term "life history" to refer to my participants' survival stories, as for example used in Palmer, "Re-examining Resistance."

[40] Ibid. Uwibereyeho King's work is in line with much of the other articles in this volume, which aim to elevate the voices of those that have been marginalized in the past decade for several reasons including gender, access to power, state violence, and trauma.

Louise's Story

Louise was twenty-three years old at the time of the genocide.[41] Prior to the genocide, in 1993, Louise was engaged and about to marry her fiancé when violence erupted in the area where they lived together. "There was a lot of persecution and killings going on there, so I never got to marry and live with my fiancé." Louise was pregnant with her fiancé's child and decided to return to her hometown to escape the violence in the area where she lived with him. "I had to come back home while I was pregnant and leave him while he was being hunted and sometimes imprisoned." Louise delivered her baby towards the end of 1993. A few months later, in April 1994, she learned that her fiancé had been killed.

At that time, the genocidal violence also arrived on the hill where Louise was born. One day, Louise, her family, and other community members were chased out of their houses and separated into groups by the *Interahamwe*. "They said that they would keep the women, rape them and then kill them later," Louise remembered. "We were raped because we were exposed out there. That is how the rape started. They would find us abandoned on the street. I was walking alongside my sister-in-law at that time. I think she was the first to be raped." Louise was raped by three people at three separate times. "I did not know how to feel about it because I could see other people being raped as well. They raped me and I was carrying my baby on my back." Louise learned that her sister had been taken away alongside other women from her community. "We got to terms with the fact that we were going to die," she reflected. However, Louise did not die, at least not physically. Her neighbour, with whom she had gone to school, "rescued" Louise after she was raped by another man. "This man," Louise explained about her neighbour, "was their leader and he came and forbid them to rape me. When he rescued me, there were some animals that belonged to my family, and he took them and brought me to his house to live there."

Her neighbour played an active and leading role in the *Interahamwe*. According to Louise, he committed multiple crimes during the genocide, including the killing of many people. "He did so many bad things that everyone could see. He was leading the attacks of the murderers and his dad also participated in attacks that slaughtered cows. They would spend their days running after people and killing them." Louise recounted that she "was lucky" that her perpetrator had got married at the time of the genocide. When he brought Louise to his house, Louise approached his wife for help, and she "forbid him" to rape Louise. "She would tell him 'Can't you see how she is? Why don't you let her die in peace?'"

One day, people from Louise's hometown came to her neighbour's house, searching for Louise to kill her. Her neighbour, who had been hiding her until then, asked Louise to leave. "I will never forget the time when he came to me and said to me 'Look, things have gotten worse. I do not want you to die in front of me, so please find somewhere else to go,'" she recalled. "God helped me, and I was able to find a young man to take me with him." While this young man was hiding Louise in his house, he also raped her on one occasion. "I later thought about it and thought it was because we were living in a tiny house with one bedroom, and we slept on the same bed, and he

[41] Louise, interview by Judith Rafferty, 18 December 2015.

was always holding me tight so that they [those people who were out to kill Louise] would not see me," Louise reflected. "He apologized to me right away and said he was sorry for what he had done." The young man did not rape Louise again.

Louise's long-time neighbour, who had previously hidden her in his house, eventually found her in the house of the young man and raped her on the spot. "I did not feel anything because I was dead inside," Louise remembered. She later found out that her rape was common knowledge because it had happened in public. "The entire region knew about the rape, because everyone was watching us." Louise was worried that her neighbour had infected her with HIV, but fortunately, she was not. Louise raised her case against her neighbour at *gacaca* during the courts' "information gathering" stage.[42] Louise's case was tried several years later, presumably between 2008 and 2009, when most cases of sexual violence were dealt with by *gacaca*.[43] While her neighbour had fled the country, he was found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment in absentia. Louise did not report the young man who had hidden her in his house, even though he had raped her.[44]

Besides being raped, Louise lost most of her family during the genocide. "I was left with my mother and a few of her grandchildren that people hid for us. Those grandchildren are now grownups and some of them are married. Things after the genocide were not that great because some of those kids did not get along with us but others did. I was the one left in charge of them alongside my mother." Louise's life after the genocide has been difficult. She gave birth to another four children. "I don't know if it was because of being traumatized or what, I ignore how I gave birth to four more children because all four of them were born to different fathers." Louise has been raising her children on her own, along with two other children who were left in her care. Besides the burden of being the sole carer for seven children, Louise has been suffering from a health condition that affects her ability to engage in cultivating the small piece of land that her mother left her. With farming being Louise's only source of income, she has been struggling to pay her children's school fees and has been living in poverty.

Catherine's Story

At the time of the genocide, Catherine was twenty-nine years old and married with four children, including one young baby.[45] When the violence erupted in the area where Catherine was living with her family, she went to hide at her sister's house, together with her baby. "When I got there, my brother-in-law did not seem to be so happy about me being there," Catherine remembered. Her brother-in-law was an active member of the *Interahamwe* militia. The next morning, he brought a group of men over to his house and all of them, including her own brother-in-law, raped Catherine. Catherine knew at least some of her perpetrators. "These people who hurt me were friends of ours and we had offered them some cattle as presents."

[42] This stage occurred predominantly between 2005 and 2006.
[43] Neither Louise, Catherine, nor any other participant, provided exact dates for events relating to the *gacaca* courts. Cases of sexual violence were officially allocated to *gacaca* in mi-2008, and most cases were tried between 2008 and 2009. However, some cases of sexual violence were tried before this period.
[44] Louise's decision to not report the young man is discussed in more detail later in this article.
[45] Catherine, interview by Judith Rafferty, 28 December 2015.

Every day, the men came to the house to rape Catherine, including during daytime and nighttime. The whole time, Catherine also had to care for her young baby. Her brother-in-law also continued to rape her. "Since I was living in his home, there was no way I could escape him. He would come and rape me during the daylight and there was nothing I could do about it. He told me that instead of killing me, I should let them continue to rape me." Catherine's sister was at the house the entire time. "She was so powerless and tormented over her husband's actions."

One day, her sister suggested to Catherine that they should find a way to escape her husband and run away. Catherine and her sister left the house in the middle of the night, carrying the baby, and walked all night to reach another place. "I was in really bad shape at that time. I was so weak. Can you imagine having five people gang-rape you every day? It had taken a toll on me." Catherine, her sister, and her baby sought refuge with a relative who had a house in the area to which they had fled. A few days later, Catherine heard that the *Inkotanyi*[46] had invaded the region, even though she did not know where exactly they were. "We spent a few days looking for them, but we could not find them." Catherine and her family finally met the *Inkotanyi* when they took over a nearby town. "That was the time we actually got some peace." Catherine was very unwell and weak when the violence stopped around her. "I even went to the hospital to get treated but no one would care about me. I remained that way until the genocide was completely over."

Supported by her sister, Catherine raised her case of sexual violence against five of her perpetrators during *gacaca*'s general trial stage, which started at national level in mid-2006. During her trial, all her perpetrators were sentenced to life imprisonment. Four of them had fled to the Democratic Republic of Congo but were sentenced in absentia. One perpetrator was present at the trial. "He was already in prison for killing people and he did not deny anything. He confessed to everything we were accusing him of and just said that he did not do it alone." Catherine was re-traumatized when she heard her perpetrator's confession. "I did not want to look him in the eyes," she recalled. "What they did to us was terrible. There were some women who died because of it … There were some women who would have a banana tree inserted inside their vagina." Her perpetrator confessed all accusations laid against him, "They brought him back to prison and I was looking away the entire time," Catherine remembered. The jury adjourned the trial and resumed another day to announce his sentence of life imprisonment.

A few years after *gacaca* concluded, Catherine found out that one of her perpetrators had infected her with HIV. She was profoundly affected by this news. "The one thing that deeply upset me was finding out that I have HIV. I thought I was going to die. I did not think I had two years to live. Five years have gone by since I learned it." While Catherine was left as a widow, all her four children survived the genocide and were still alive at the time of our interview in late 2015. As a single mother, Catherine has been struggling to provide for her family. She does not have any regular income. "Even though I have children, I get upset by thinking that I cannot do anything for them. It is so hard for me to make ends meet at home." Despite all these challenges, two of Catherine's children have gone to university, while the other two were attending school. "That is the one thing that makes me happy after the tragedy I have lived."

[46] Name given by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) to its soldiers; literally, "the tough fighters."

Both Catherine's and Louise's experiences, like those of many other victim-survivors, highlight not only the immediate brutality of sexual violence during the genocide but also its long-term physical, psychological, social, and economic consequences. Yet, their stories also reveal remarkable resilience, demonstrating how each of them navigated immense hardships. While each victim-survivor's experience is unique, examining individual narratives like Louise's and Catherine's deepens our understanding of the genocide and its multifaceted impacts, as well as the pathways to empowerment and healing – an exploration that remains the focus of the rest of this article.

Nuancing Dynamics and Complexities of Sexual Violence During the Genocide

Several features of sexual violence during the genocide have been relatively well documented, including its prevalence, the strategic use of many acts of sexual violence,[47] the involvement of thousands of ordinary citizens as perpetrators, and the often pre-existing relationships between victims and perpetrators. Nevertheless, micro-analyses of individual narratives enhance our comprehension of these dynamics and reveal lesser-explored aspects, such as the use and impact of atypical sexual violence. The following sections examine key features of sexual violence during the genocide enriched by insights from Louise's and Catherine's survival stories. This analysis deepens our understanding of the genocide's impact on victim-survivors, their families, and communities, with a focus on relational harm to Rwandan social networks.

Unveiling the Scale and Repetition of Sexual Violence During the Genocide

The exact number of those who suffered sexual violence during the genocide will never be known. Scholars who have focused on percentages rather than total figures and who consider only victim who physically survived the genocide, estimate that around ninety per cent of Tutsi women and girls were raped.[48] As for total numbers, it has been calculated that at a minimum, 354,440 were raped during the genocide,[49] as noted earlier in this article. While these total estimates can help determine how many women may require support, they do not say much in terms of individual experience and the severity of the consequences suffered. The stories of Catherine and Louise, as well as of the other interview participants, provide more nuance and complexity to the number of women raped during the genocide. Nearly all participants, including Catherine and Louise, were raped multiple times throughout the genocide. Many were gang-raped, raped by individual perpetrators on separate occasions, and/or raped repeatedly by the same perpetrator over the course of the genocide. Some were kept in sexual slavery to be raped repeatedly by their captors and their captors' acquaintances, a fate shared by both Louise and Catherine. At least two participants were kept in houses set aside specifically to hold captive women to be raped daily throughout the genocide.

[47] International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), *The Prosecutor v. Jean-Paul Akayesu (Appeal Judgment)*, ICTR-96-4-A, 1 June 2001, art. 731-4.

[48] Patricia A. Weitsman, "The Politics of Identity and Sexual Violence: A Review of Bosnia and Rwanda," *Human Rights Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (2008): 561–78. http://www.jstor.org.elibrary.jcu.edu.au/stable/20072859; Nowrojee, *Shattered Lives*; and Lisa Sharlach, "Gender and Genocide in Rwanda: Women as Agents and Objects of Genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research* 1, no. 3 (1 November 1999): 387–99. https://doi.org/10.1080/14623529908413968.

[49] Bijleveld, Morssinkhof, and Smeulers, "Counting the Countless," 220.

The twenty-three participants mentioned more than 110 perpetrators, which means that, on average, each participant was violated by approximately five perpetrators. The total number of perpetrators is in fact much higher, since I did not include any figures where the participants were unable to note specific numbers but referred to "a gang of perpetrators," "some perpetrators," or "a group of soldiers." Furthermore, many participants were raped multiple times by the same perpetrator(s), as discussed in the stories of both Louise and Catherine, increasing the average number of acts of sexual violence experienced beyond the number of perpetrators. This repetition likely intensified the suffering of victim-survivors. As Catherine had noted, having five people gang-rape her daily during the genocide significantly affected her health, necessitating ongoing medical, psychological, psychosocial, and economic support. A more detailed understanding of the magnitude of sexual violence and the profound physical and psychological harms caused by gang rape or repeated sexual violence – often overlooked when focusing solely on the overall prevalence – is critical to determining the type and scope of interventions required to aid victim-survivors in addressing the consequences.

Differentiating the Varied Forms of Sexual Violence During the Genocide

Sexual violence was committed during the genocide for various reasons and purposes, including as an integral part of the genocidal plan,[50] and because the chaotic conditions at the time permitted these acts to be committed with impunity.[51] I discuss these different forms of sexual violence below, referring to both Louise's and Catherine's stories as well as to the experiences of other interview participants. Many acts of sexual violence during the genocide were strategically and systematically committed to destroy the Tutsi as a group, including through physical and psychological injuries, deliberate HIV infection, enforced pregnancies, destruction of family cohesion, and the public raping of hundreds of thousands of women.[52] These acts are frequently referred to as genocidal sexual violence.[53] While the distinction between genocidal sexual violence and other forms of conflict-related sexual violence has been debated,[54] the fear of being destroyed by or in combination with sexual violence was shared by many participants, including Louise and Catherine. Many of the participants seemed aware that they had been targeted for characteristics that they could not change, namely their gender and their ethnicity. Being Tutsi, or affiliated to Tutsi through marriage, and being a woman posed an omnipresent possibility of being raped throughout the genocide.

[50] Catherine MacKinnon, *Are Women Human? And Other International Dialogues* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); and Robin May Schott, "'What is the Sex *Doing* in the Genocide?' A Feminist Philosophical Response," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 22, no. 4 (2015): 397–411.

[51] Burnet, "Rape as a Weapon"; Kamuzinzi, "Understanding"; and Christopher W. Mullins, "'We are Going to Rape you and Taste Tutsi Women': Rape during the 1994 Rwandan Genocide," *The British Journal of Criminology* 49, no. 6 (2009): 719–35. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azp040.

[52] Françoise Nduwimana, *The Right to Survive: Sexual Violence, Women and HIV/AIDS* (Montreal: International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development, December 2004); Paula Donovan, "Rape and HIV/AIDS in Rwanda," *The Lancet* 360, no. 1 (2002); AVEGA-Agahozo, *Survey on Violence against Women in Rwanda* (Kigali: AVEGA, 1999), 13; and Kaitesi, *Genocidal Gender*.

[53] Kaitesi, *Genocidal Gender*, 68; and Mullins, "We are Going to Rape."

[54] Myriam Denov, Laura Eramian and Meaghan C. Shevell, "'You Feel Like You Belong Nowhere': Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and Social Identity in Post-Genocide Rwanda," *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 14, no. 1 (2020): 40–59. https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.14.1.1663.

Sexual violence, as previously noted, was not only used to destroy, but also to terrorise Tutsi women and their families,[55] a goal that was achieved considering the experience of the interview participants. Many participants explained in their stories that they came very close to dying and Louise even noted that she and other women around her had "come to terms with it."[56] The high risk of being killed, raped and killed, or raped and left to die slowly, including through stigma and/or HIV infection – as happened to Catherine and was feared by Louise _ likely added to the trauma of victim-survivors, demonstrated by the "very deep … mental sufferings" noted in a report by AVEGA.[57] The trauma of some victim-survivors was so severe that it could not be predicted whether these women would ever be able to recover.[58] The severity and profoundness of physical and psychological sufferings caused by genocidal sexual violence underscore the critical need for sustained medical and psychological support.

Not all acts of sexual violence committed during the genocide were strategic and systematic with the intent to destroy, as noted earlier in this section. The term opportunistic rape has been used to denote those rapes that were committed as "a product of the widespread chaos and disorganization of the ongoing genocide,"[59] but that were neither controlled nor organized like the genocidal rapes.[60] Kamuzinzi defines these rapes as also lacking political hatred that underpinned many of the genocidal rapes.[61] Purely opportunistic acts were discussed to a much lesser degree than genocidal sexual violence by the interview participants,[62] which is consistent with other research.[63] Only one of Louise's perpetrators, the young man who had been hiding her in his house, seems to neatly fit the criteria of opportunistic rape, which is confirmed in Louise's own reflections of why the man had raped her.[64]

Some cases of sexual violence committed during the genocide were characterized by a blend of opportunistic and genocidal elements, as suggested by Mullins.[65] Similarly, Burnet notes that members of various militia and military groups, including the *Interahamwe* and the Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR), also committed sexual violence because the chaotic conditions at the time had allowed this with impunity.[66] My research findings align with these observations, revealing that the lines between genocidal and opportunistic rape were frequently blurry. For example, seeing that Catherine's brother-in-law was an active member of the *Interahamwe* militia, it is likely that he would have shared genocide ideology. Nevertheless, he took advantage of the fact that Catherine was trapped in his house during the genocide, allowing him and his acquaintances to rape her whenever they felt like it.[67] As Catherine recalled, he even

[55] Haffajee, "Prosecuting Crimes of Rape"; Nowrojee, *Shattered Lives*; and Burnet, "Rape as a Weapon."
[56] Louise, interview.
[57] AVEGA-Agahozo, *Survey on Violence*, 26. AVEGA is the acronym for the *Association des Veuves du Génocide* (Association of Widows of the Genocide of April 1994).
[58] Ibid.
[59] Mullins, "We are Going to Rape."
[60] Ibid., 726.
[61] Kamuzinzi, "Understanding."
[62] Rafferty, "Analysing the Justice Needs."
[63] Kamuzinzi, "Understanding"; and Mullins, "We are Going to Rape."
[64] See Louise's story for further detail.
[65] Mullins, "We are Going to Rape."
[66] Burnet, "Rape as a Weapon," 10.
[67] Catherine, interview. Crucial power struggles of masculine identity, which have often genocidal affect but different intent, were also performed in the genocide. While I am aware of these struggles, discussing them would go beyond the scope of this article.

told her that they would not kill but continue to rape her. Her story illustrates the complex overlap between genocidal and opportunistic motives for sexual violence, necessitating nuanced understandings, for example, in developing criminal justice responses to such crimes.[68]

Unpacking the Complex and Varied Nature of Victim-Survivors' Choices

Catherine's and Louise's stories also contribute to our understanding of "choiceless decisions" in the context of conflict-related sexual violence, referring to situations where an individual can only choose between several terrible options.[69] For instance, Louise was raped by two men who she noted had "rescued" her, and staying with these men seemed a better choice than staying "outside," risking rape and death by others. A question posed by Burnet aptly applies to both Catherine's and Louise's experiences: "If the only other option is death, is it really a choice at all?"[70] Understanding the phenomenon of choiceless decisions is crucial, especially given the complex aftermath of the genocide. Many victim-survivors were unfairly perceived as "having slept with the enemy," a point raised by several interview participants. In settings like Rwanda, rape was commonly understood to involve physical force and coercion.[71] However, Louise's account of being raped by a young man who "had taken her in" illustrates a variation of sexual violence that deviates from this understanding.[72] While hiding in his house, they slept on the same bed, and he held her so tightly that those searching to kill Louise would not see her. Although we can only speculate based on Louise's limited information, this context appears to have allowed the man to rape her without notable physical violence. Louise's story thus contributes new insights to macro theories of conflict-related sexual violence by illustrating how such violence can manifest in ways that deviate from traditional understandings, particularly in contexts shaped by choiceless decisions and survival strategies – a point also noted by Burnet.[73]

Nevertheless, Louise's and Catherine's stories also highlight some less obvious opportunities for choices, agency, and empowerment in the aftermath of the genocide. Both Louise and Catherine, as well as most other participants had made the decisions to report at least some of their perpetrators. Some did so in support of their families and/or communities, as was the case for Catherine, and others against the wishes of their families, who would have preferred these experiences to remain hidden. As Louise's story reveals, she chose not to report the young man who had raped her in his house.[74] Under the 2004 *gacaca* law and its later amendments, the decision to report a perpetrator at *gacaca* rested with the victim-survivors.[75] Being empowered to decide which perpetrators to report addressed one important justice need of victim-survivors:

[68] For example, showing that sexual violence was committed with a specific intent, referred to here as genocide sexual violence, is important for the prosecution of mass sexual violence, as well as for the determination of guilt and responsibility. See for example ICTR, *Prosecutor v. Akayesu*, art. 688.
[69] Burnet, "Rape as a Weapon," quoting Begoña Aretxaga, *Shattering Silence: Women, Nationalism, and Political Subjectivity in Northern Ireland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).
[70] Burnet, "Rape as a Weapon," 9.
[71] Burnet, "Rape as a Weapon."
[72] Louise, interview.
[73] Burnet, "Rape as a Weapon."
[74] The reasons for this decision are discussed in more detail later in this article.
[75] *Organic Law N° 16/2004*, art. 38; *Organic Law N° 13/2008*, art. 6.

participation.[76] Meeting such justice needs has been found to contribute to victim-survivors' healing, including in the research with Louise and Catherine.[77]

Uncovering the Layers of Relational Harm Caused by Sexual Violence During the Genocide

Perpetrators of sexual violence included thousands of "ordinary citizens" who had no criminal background and who were not politicized prior to the genocide.[78] Many targeted victims they knew, including their neighbours, acquaintances, and extended family members. Kamuzinzi highlights as a striking characteristic of these acts that many perpetrators did not show any concern or embarrassment when identified by their victims.[79] Additionally, Kamuzinzi emphasizes the atypical nature of many acts of sexual violence committed during the genocide.[80] Earlier in this article, I described atypical sexual violence as acts that stood out for their particularly heinous and socially transgressive nature. Beyond the individual physical and psychological damage caused to victim-survivors, such violence destroyed social networks by defying normal and humanly acceptable behaviour.[81] Drawing on the work of Rwandan psychologist Simon Gasibirege, Kamuzinzi notes:

> Being able to guiltlessly rape old women, children, neighbors, acquaintances and friends is a consequence of a total dismissal of societal norms, making sense of normality, togetherness and humanity inside the community.[82]

The concept of atypical sexual violence has received less attention in the literature on the genocide than for example sexual violence committed with the intent to destroy. However, the concept can help to better understand the psychological and relational damage caused by sexual violence. Examples of atypical sexual violence include the rape of a mature-aged women by her son's schoolmates, the rape of women in front of their children, raping women with banana leaves and other objects resulting in sexual mutilation, as well as instances where perpetrators, having assured their victims of support and protection, instead raped them while hiding them in their compounds.[83] All these examples and more were discussed by the participants. As we learned earlier, Catherine was held in her brother-in-law's house to be raped daily, including by her own brother-in-law and in the presence of his wife, who was also Catherine's sister. As another example, Louise was both "rescued" and raped by her long-term neighbour and former schoolmate, who had also just been married.

The micro-analysis of stories like Louise's and Catherine's increases our understanding of how the use of atypical sexual violence and the perpetration of sexual violence by perpetrators who knew their victims affected the Rwandan society well beyond the immediate victims and perpetrators, extending to their families and social networks. As noted

[76] Rafferty, "Analysing the Justice Needs."
[77] Ibid.
[78] Kamuzinzi, "Understanding."
[79] Ibid., 77.
[80] Kamuzinzi, "Understanding."
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid., 69.
[83] Ibid., 72–3.

earlier, sexual violence was frequently committed in front of the victims' families and communities, traumatizing both victim-survivors and onlookers. At least one of Catherine's and Louise's perpetrators, as previously noted, were married at the time of the genocide. Witnessing or finding out about their husbands raping another woman is likely to have impacted the wives of perpetrators, an under-researched area requiring further attention to better understand their needs for healing. Other family members of perpetrators, such as parents, siblings, and potentially even children, would have all been affected by the violence in different ways. For example, Catherine explained about the perpetrator who participated in her trial, that his mother came to her house one day to tell her that her son was in prison for hurting not just Catherine but many others. "She wanted to know if I could forgive him."[84]

Catherine's family connection to her perpetrator's wife – her sister – reveals the intricate web of damaged relationships within extended families caused by sexual violence during the genocide. Catherine's description of her brother-in-law as an active member of the *Interahamwe* militia indicates that he was Hutu, while her sister would have shared Catherine's Tutsi identity. Individuals in ethnically mixed relationships, like Catherine's sister, faced unique challenges during and after the genocide. In numerous cases, Hutu in-laws raped or killed another family member's spouse, children, or other relatives, as was the case for Catherine, causing lasting trauma and destroying family networks.[85] As noted in Catherine's story earlier, her sister was "tormented over her husband's actions," alluding to harm caused to the relationship between the sister and her husband.

Hutu spouses of Tutsi also faced vulnerability and pressure to align with their ethnic identity, frequently leading to the abandonment or harm of Tutsi family members.[86] After the genocide, many individuals in mixed marriages felt rejected by both their biological and in-law families due to choices made during that period.[87] Some relationships were further strained by decisions of individuals to report or testify against their own spouses or in-laws at *gacaca*.[88] Catherine revealed that her sister had supported her to report her brother-in-law at *gacaca* – presumably a precarious decision for her sister, with potential ripple effects on the family, especially if children were involved (though this information was not provided). Catherine's story illustrates the far-reaching and profound impact of sexual violence during the genocide on family relationships, highlighting the need for holistic interventions that not only address the individual needs of victim-survivors but also the broader harm inflicted on family and communal networks.

Addressing Relational Harm Through Apologies and Forgiveness

Louise's story not only provides detail of how Rwandan communities were affected by sexual violence during the genocide, but also offers hope for addressing and ameliorating some of the resulting damage. While the perpetrator who Louise reported at *gacaca*, her long-term neighbour and schoolmate, had fled Rwanda, his parents and some other

[84] Catherine, interview.
[85] Judith Herrmann-Rafferty et al., "From Tradition and Transition to Transformation: Restorative Justice in Post-Genocide Rwanda," in *International Encyclopaedia on Restorative Justice* (Vol. Africa) (manuscript under review), eds. Kerry Clamp et al. (The Hague: De Gruyter Brill, forthcoming).
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid.

family members remained living next door to Louise.[89] The father had also participated in the genocide and had been sentenced to time in prison by a *gacaca* court. While he was serving his sentence, Louise approached the mother one day. "I thought that it would not be healthy for me to stay angry at them because it was going to create some animosity amongst us, so I went to talk to them so that I could get it off my chest. Because I was left with no family, because all my family members were killed, I felt it in my heart to approach them so that I could continue to live next to them with my children," Louise explained. "I was lucky that they received me with open arms.". The mother asked Louise for forgiveness for her son's actions. "She told me that we were neighbours in the first place and that she was sorry for everything. She told me that she also could not fathom how things happened … [and] that she was also suffering the consequences because their family was scattered, the son had fled and she did not know where he was, the father was in prison and she had to bring him food every day, and all the consequences were weighing on the mother's head. That was the end of the animosity, and we now live as neighbours and have no issues amongst us." When the father was released from prison, Louise also approached him. "Because I wanted to get it off my chest, I went to him and we talked about it," she recalled. "They asked me to forgive them because they had given birth to a murderer and they could not do anything about it," Louise explained.

Louise's story illuminates the many ways in which perpetrators' families were impacted. Her perpetrator's parents seemed to struggle with guilt and helplessness over their son's actions. Notably, her perpetrator's family had not apologized during *gacaca,* but only afterwards when Louise initiated the conversation. "They were afraid to say anything in front of *gacaca*," Louise recalled. This example highlights the limitations of *gacaca* in facilitating apologies and forgiveness during trials, even though the courts played a crucial role in revealing people's involvement in the genocide and holding perpetrators accountable, laying a foundation for healing and reconciliation, at least in Louise's case.[90] "Before *gacaca*, I never approached those people. When we went to *gacaca*, they were stripped naked, and the secrets were revealed," she explained.

While both Louise and Catherine were asked for forgiveness by their perpetrators' mothers, and Louise emphasized the positive relationship she had with her perpetrator's parents after she approached them, such experiences were exceptions rather than the norm. Most participants described severely damaged relationships with their perpetrators' families, marked by ongoing harassment.[91] In addition to being shamed for their experiences of sexual violence, some victim-survivors who reported their perpetrators at *gacaca* faced additional blame from the perpetrators' families, who accused them of causing their relatives' imprisonment. These profoundly strained relationships between victim-survivors and perpetrators' families highlight the need for targeted interventions aimed at fostering understanding, addressing grievances, and facilitating community-level reconciliation.

[89] Louise, interview.
[90] For a more in-depth analysis of *gacaca's* contributions to healing and reconciliation, as well as its limitations see Rafferty, "Analysing the Justice Needs."
[91] Ibid.

The Meaning of Apologies from Perpetrators and Forgiveness by Victim-survivors

Both Louise's and Catherine's stories also add nuance to our understanding of the meaning of apologies from perpetrators and forgiveness by victim-survivors following sexual violence during genocide. Louise decided not to report the young man who had raped her in his house. "He begged me to forgive him," Louise explained. "He is always humble towards me, and he always comes to see me when I am sick. If my children have a problem, he comes to comfort me however he can. He always tells me that he cannot forget the things that happened during the genocide because they hurt him so much. He disappointed himself for hurting someone who had come to him for help."

In contrast, the neighbour whom Louise reported at *gacaca* had fled the country and was sentenced to life imprisonment in absentia. Louise explained she would also forgive him should he ever return to Rwanda. "If he came to me and apologized, I would also forgive him because I have already forgiven his family." However, Louise emphasized that this exchange of apology and forgiveness would not substitute the need for formal punishment. "You forgive him, but he still must go to prison and pay for his crime. However, he should live with the truth that you have forgiven him." Similarly, Catherine expressed a willingness to forgive her perpetrators if they were to apologize. "I tried to overlook the pain I was living with and decided that if they came to me to ask for forgiveness, I would forgive them." Unlike Louise, Catherine suggested that an apology might justify modifying the life sentence of the one perpetrator who participated in his trial and was serving his sentence. "I feel like if he was willing to come and ask me for forgiveness, I would ask them to release him."

Interviews with other participants further highlighted the diversity of victim-survivors' perspectives on apologies and forgiveness.[92] Nevertheless, Catherine's and Louise's stories provide valuable insights into individual experiences, emphasizing the importance of perpetrators' apologies for both personal and communal healing. Their experiences may also inform future transitional justice initiatives and highlight the potential value of facilitating meetings between perpetrators and victim-survivors, even now, 30 years after the genocide. Such meetings could enable apologies and the granting of forgiveness, where desired, in cases where *gacaca* was unable to facilitate this exchange, as occurred for both Catherine and Louise.

Challenges and Opportunities to Share Individual Stories of Sexual Violence

Individual stories of victim-survivors like Louise and Catherine add important detail to our understanding of the genocide and its consequences and help identify persisting personal and communal needs for healing. Nevertheless, such stories are frequently missing from the narratives shared in the yearly commemoration events and at many public memorial sites in Rwanda.[93] For example, Fox notes that, with few exceptions, Rwandan memorial sites do not address sexual violence in their tours and exhibits, leaving the stories of victim-survivors marginalized. Similarly, Selimovic found that

[92] The participants' perspectives on perpetrator responsibility by way of apologies, as well as on punishment are discussed in detail in Rafferty, "I Wanted Them to Be Punished."
[93] Mannergren Selimovic, "Gender, Narrative and Affect"; and Fox, *After Genocide*.

display boards at memorial sites she visited reference violence against women and rape as part of the genocidal warfare but do not mention detailed personal experiences of sexual violence.[94] She points out the gap that results from highlighting rape as an emblematic image of the genocide's horror, serving as an emotional trigger for visitors, while on the other hand leaving out stories of individual victim-survivors.[95]

Reasons for the underrepresentation of information about sexual violence and absence of individual stories in Rwandan memorialization and commemoration are multifaceted. Research indicates that the incorporation of women's voices into narratives and collective memories of mass atrocities remains restricted.[96] This phenomenon also extends to post-genocide Rwanda. Women participated in the genocide in several ways, including as victim-survivors, as rescuers, and as perpetrators,[97] and all these stories are frequently underrepresented in Rwandan public discourse. Whether stories of sexual violence are shared at memorial sites frequently depends on the decision of those who are in control of memorialization efforts.[98] Research has found that experiences of sexual violence are often considered too shameful, hopeless, and potentially too traumatizing for others to hear and are therefore not shared in public spaces, including at memorial sites and during commemoration events.[99] At least some of these concerns are justified and require attention. For instance, Rwandan commemoration staff have had to consider the impact of testimonies of sexual violence on the audience, as they risked triggering trauma responses needing medical care. In some past years, there was insufficient psychological and medical support available at some commemoration events. In more recent years, however, care and mental health have improved during commemorations.[100]

The sensitive nature of sexual violence presents significant challenges for victim-survivors personally to share their experiences. Despite some notable exceptions,[101] many victim-survivors are reluctant to be identified or testify publicly due to fears of retraumatization, reprisal, and stigma, along with the complex social, psychological, and economic repercussions.[102] Additionally, a perceived lack of understanding and acknowledgment from their communities further discourages them from speaking at public events, such as annual commemorations, limiting their access to such platforms.

There are ways to address the tension between the need for confidentiality for victim-survivors and sharing experiences of victim-survivors publicly to raise awareness of the

[94] Mannergren Selimovic, "Gender, Narrative and Affect."
[95] Ibid.
[96] Anneliese M. Schenk-Day, "Rwandan Genocide, 30 Years on: Omitting Women's Memories Encourage Incomplete Understanding of Violence," *The Conversation*, 5 April 2024, https://theconversation.com/rwandan-genocide-30-years-on-omitting-womens-memories-encourages-incomplete-understanding-of-violence-224630 (accessed 11 February 2025); and Nicole Fox, "Memory in Interaction: Gender-Based Violence, Genocide, and Commemoration," *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 45, no. 1 (2019): 123–48.
[97] Elisabeth Jean Wood, "Variation in Sexual Violence during War," *Politics & Society* 34, no. 3 (2006): 307–42. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329206290426, 325; Nicole Hogg, "Women's Participation in the Rwandan Genocide: Mothers or Monsters?" *International Review of the Red Cross* 92, no. 877 (2010): 69–102; and Sara E. Brown, *Gender and the Genocide in Rwanda: Women as Rescuers and Perpetrators* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018).
[98] Mannergren Selimovic, "Gender, Narrative and Affect."
[99] Ibid.; and Fox, *After Genocide*.
[100] Fox, *After Genocide.*
[101] Williamson, "Breaking the Silence." See also the victims-survivors in De Brouwer and Chu, *Men Who Killed*.
[102] Fox and Rafferty, "Sexual Violence after Genocide"; and Donatilla Mukamana and Anthony Collins, "Rape Survivors of the Rwandan Genocide," *International Journal of Critical Psychology* 17 (2006): 140–66. Experiences of retraumatization, reprisal, and stigma are discussed in detail in Rafferty, "Analysing the Justice Needs."

issue. For example, stories like those shared by Louise and Catherine can be gathered safely by researchers and/or trusted professionals, ensuring confidentiality for each victim-survivor, and then disseminated with pseudonyms across all national memorials. This integration would contribute to Rwanda's collective memory, empowering victim-survivors by giving them agency in producing their stories and having them shared widely, while also protecting their identities.

Conclusion

In this article, I shared the survival stories of two victim-survivors, Louise and Catherine, as well as some of the consequences suffered by them, their families, and communities. Individual victim-survivors' stories hold immense value because they bring a human dimension to our understanding and leave an impact that no statistical figures could ever achieve. While Catherine's and Louise's accounts are not representative of all experiences of sexual violence during the genocide, they provide critical insights that enrich our comprehension of the genocide and its aftermath. These narratives enrich macro theories of genocidal sexual violence and can guide future transitional justice initiatives addressing such atrocities. Additionally, stories like those of Louise and Catherine, when combined with overall figures and broader analyses of sexual violence during the genocide, create a more detailed picture of the harm caused to victim-survivors and the community at large. This understanding enables service providers, government agencies, NGOs, and others to identify persisting individual and communal needs for healing.

Louise's and Catherine's experiences illustrate the enduring suffering caused by prolonged victimization and the phenomenon of choiceless decisions during the genocide. Such decisions do not reflect a true choice but rather a survival tactic, pursued in anticipation of further violence and death. This reality is not unique to the Rwandan genocide but affects many victim-survivors, both in conflict and even in non-conflict settings. Although these complexities are discussed in scholarship, they are often not fully understood by affected communities, leading to the unjust blaming of victim-survivors. Educating communities on these dynamics could help reduce stigma and blame, fostering a more empathetic understanding of victim-survivors' experiences.

Louise's and Catherine's stories also highlight the profound relational harm caused by sexual violence, particularly when the violence was atypical in nature and when it involved pre-existing relationships between victims, perpetrators, and their families. Both Louise and Catherine were raped by individuals they knew as neighbours, schoolmates, and extended family members. Their experiences demonstrate the wide-ranging impact of sexual violence not only on victim-survivors, but also on their families and on their perpetrators' families. These harms were further compounded in ethnically mixed families, as illustrated by Catherine's sister's experience. Thirty years later, relational harm continues to affect Rwandan families and communities, necessitating sustained efforts for healing and repair. Such efforts must involve the entire community and focus on addressing the violation of societal norms, rather than shaming or blaming victim-survivors.

Both Louise and Catherine were asked for forgiveness by their perpetrators' mothers, highlighting not only the profound and multifaceted impact of the genocide on women but also their pivotal role in reckoning with its legacy and addressing its many harms.

Nevertheless, these instances of apologies were exceptions in the research. Most participants reported strained relationships with perpetrators' families and the broader community, underscoring the need for targeted interventions that engage the entire community. Additionally, Louise's and Catherine's remarkable willingness to forgive their perpetrators, should they apologize, underscore the potential of facilitated meetings between victim-survivors and their perpetrators – even 30 years after the genocide. These encounters could offer opportunities for apology and forgiveness, if desired, in cases where *gacaca* was unable to foster such exchanges.

The far-reaching damage caused by sexual violence may warrant greater prominence of the topic of sexual violence and its consequences in Rwandan public discourse on the genocide, including at commemoration events and at memorial sites. A cyclical issue lies in the lack of victim-survivors' stories in commemorative events within Rwandan communities, which hinders efforts to combat sexual violence-related stigma and its effects, further preventing many victim-survivors from wanting to share their experiences publicly. Researchers and advocates could play a vital role in collecting and sharing these stories, using pseudonyms where necessary, to ensure that victim-survivors' individual experiences are preserved and acknowledged within national and local memorials.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Judith Herrmann-Rafferty is a distinguished "pracademic" with 15 years of experience in conflict resolution practice, training, and research in Australia and internationally. She is a nationally accredited mediator and conflict coach in Australia, also trained in group facilitation and restorative justice conferencing. Judith's research focuses on qualitative studies with vulnerable populations in conflict and post-conflict settings, particularly in Rwanda and the Central African Republic. Her PhD examined the justice needs and experiences of victim-survivors of conflict-related sexual violence within Rwanda's post-genocide *gacaca* courts. Judith has made significant contributions to the fields of conflict and genocide studies, as well as research on justice for victim-survivors of sexual violence, through her publications and presentations at numerous international conferences. As a former Senior Lecturer and Director of the postgraduate Conflict Management and Resolution programme at James Cook University, Judith played a key role in curriculum development and training in conflict studies. She now continues to influence the field as a Senior Trainer for the Conflict Management Academy, where she delivers advanced training across diverse professional sectors.

ORCID

Judith Herrmann-Rafferty http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2794-7790