

To the HIV-positive rape victims of 1994, children are a source of joy - and torment

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Olive Uwera did not survive Rwanda's 1994 genocide. The young Tutsi woman is still alive, almost eight years on, but her daughter is a constant reminder of the interahamwe Hutu militiamen who gang-raped her, butchered her father and destroyed her mother's mind. One of the rapists fathered the child; another condemned Olive to a lingering death from Aids.

"I was raped by so many interahamwe and soldiers that I lost count. I was in hospital for a year afterwards. A few months after my child was born the doctors told me I was HIV-positive," she said.

Olive, who was 24 and unmarried at the time, called her child Isimbi, which means Pearl. She says Isimbi is her only reason to fight death. "We think of the future so much. We want to live to look after our children. That is what concerns us most," she said.

In Rwanda, rape was a weapon of genocide as brutal as the machete. Tens of thousands of women were gang-raped by Hutu soldiers or members of the interahamwe militias which led the slaughter of 800,000 Tutsis and sympathetic Hutus. The international tribunal for Rwanda was the first authority to declare rape an act of genocide when directed against women because of their ethnic origin.

More than 25,000 Tutsi women have joined the survivors' organisation the Widows of the Genocide (Avega), which was launched with help from the British charity Action-Aid.

Most were reconciled to their particular corner of hell when they joined. Many of them regarded it as miracle they had survived watching their husbands murdered, and often their children too. It was also a curse. Some describe life as a

living death.

But as they began to cope with the trauma of 1994, they discovered that the murderers had left a hidden killer. Avega tested 1,200 members this year: two-thirds were found to be HIV-positive.

Aids is already claiming the lives of women who thought they had survived the genocide. Soon there will be tens of thousands of children who have lost their fathers to the machete and their mothers to Aids. Some of them are also HIV-positive, although most do not know it.

For women such as Olive the present is a struggle, the future an agonising worry about one thing: what will happen to the children?

"The impact of Aids is felt more than ever over the past two years. The widows are dying, their standard of living is going down, trauma is going up," Sylvie Barakagwira of Avega said. "They don't have the means to live, they don't have the means to send their children to school. More than anything, they worry about what will happen to their children afterwards."

Avega built the survivors' village in Kigali where Olive and Isimbi live. But even there they face torment.

"When my child goes to play with other children they say things like, 'You are interahamwe. You are born of those criminals'," Olive said. "The neighbours make remarks: 'You are

sick. You are going to die soon.' So we go to other women in the same situation, who understand us."

One of those with whom she finds solace is Jeanette Uwimana, who lives two doors away. Five of Jeanette's seven children and her husband were murdered in the genocide. The youngest of the surviving daughters is HIV-positive. Jeanette has adopted two orphaned children.

"Not all my children are mine. Only mine know the problem," she said. "When I wanted to tell the other children I have HIV, mine told me not to because of the shame. I haven't told the children about the youngest having HIV. It's difficult to tell a child of 16 that her young sister is affected by Aids. I try to be normal but I cry far from my children."

Finding homes for the orphaned children is a problem. Many of the women lost their extended family in the genocide. Some look to other widows to take them in, but with the death rate among the women accelerating, leaving an ever shrinking number of widows to care for a growing body of orphans.

Many survivors lack the resources to look after other children, and those who are willing to help tend to shy away from orphans they suspect of having HIV. Women who have seen their own children murdered are understandably reluctant to take on the trauma of watching another child die

slowly.

Olive's mother is still alive, but unable to look after Isimbi. "My father was murdered and my mother lost her mind in the genocide," Olive said. "She asks me why I am weak. I tell her it is from the rape. She doesn't know I have HIV."

Claire Muhinyuza saw her two children murdered. She was gang-raped and left for dead after her left arm was hacked off with a machete. After the genocide she took in an orphan boy, Emmanuel, now 11. Then she found she was HIV-positive.

"Thinking of the future weakens us so much," she said. "We have children we can't be sure what will happen to. We can't help them. It makes us weak to think about it." Claire is

so poor that breakfast for Emmanuel consists of hot water run through a sieve containing the bones of the previous night's meal.

Occasionally, as the women contemplate the fate of their children, they retreat into dark humour. Olive nudges Jeanette and says: "I will leave you my child."

"How do you know I won't die first?" Jeanette replies. They both turn, smiling, to Claire: "Look at us. Who looks as if they will die first?"

Claire declines to answer.

But there is one thing Olive does not want to know about the future - whether Isimbi is also HIV-positive.

"I fear to take her for testing. If I find she is sick, what can I do for her? It is better not to know."