

Opinions

Remembering Dafroza Gauthier: A life dedicated to justice

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With the passing of Dafroza Mukarumongi Gauthier, Rwanda has lost a steadfast daughter, survivors have lost a devoted advocate, and the cause of justice has lost a woman of remarkable courage. To her husband, Alain Gauthier, their children and their wider family, I extend my deepest condolences.

Dafroza's life reminds us that the struggle against genocide does not end when the killing stops. It continues in the search for the missing, the preservation of testimony, the rebuilding of shattered lives and the pursuit of those responsible. Together, Dafroza and Alain devoted decades to ensuring that people suspected of participating in the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi could be brought before the courts in France.

Their work challenged a deeply troubling reality: while survivors struggled with irreversible loss, some individuals accused of involvement in the genocide had established new lives abroad. Distance, professional



Dafroza Gauthier received the Igihango medal from President Paul Kagame on November 18, 2017 for her outstanding contribution to Rwanda.

standing and the passage of time could make their past increasingly difficult to confront. For the bereaved, knowing that a suspect lived undisturbed in another country added another burden to grief.

Dafroza and Alain refused to let that become an accepted conclusion.

In November 2001, they founded the Collectif des parties civiles pour le Rwanda, the CPRC, to help bring genocide suspects living in France before French courts. Through this organisation, they gave practical meaning to the obligation to investigate genocide and establish individual criminal responsibility.

The task demanded extraordinary persistence. They travelled to Rwanda, listened to survivors and other witnesses, gathered information and helped build files for judicial proceedings. Behind those files were people returning to the most painful moments of their lives, sometimes after years of waiting to be heard.

Much of this labour took place beyond public attention. It required careful listening, repeated journeys, documentary scrutiny and the stamina to follow proceedings through long periods of uncertainty. Their contribution lay in helping testimony reach the institutions responsible for examining evidence and delivering justice.

France's first trial concerning the genocide took place only in 2014, twenty years after the killings. That interval conveys something of the patience their mission demanded—and of the suffering endured by those awaiting accountability.

Time weighs heavily on such cases. Witnesses grow older and die. Memories become harder to recover. Suspects may die before their responsibility can be determined. Each unnecessary delay risks closing an avenue to justice permanently.

Dafroza understood the human meaning of that urgency. Members of her own family had been murdered during the genocide.

Her commitment grew from a loss she carried throughout her life, yet it reached far beyond her own family. She helped create space for other survivors to be heard and for their suffering to receive judicial attention.

We should remember her as an advocate whose contribution deserves recognition in its own right. Returning repeatedly to the evidence of an atrocity that destroyed one's family requires immense strength. Continuing that work for others requires generosity as well as resolve.

In honouring Dafroza, we also honour the partnership she built with Alain. Together, they brought Rwandan memory and French civic responsibility into a shared pursuit of accountability. Their example demonstrated the value of citizens who take seriously the principles their institutions profess and commit themselves to seeing those principles applied.

Alain now bears a loss that public recognition cannot ease. Before anything else, he is a husband mourning his wife. Our gratitude must be accompanied by compassion for him and their family, and by respect for their grief.

Their work also leaves a clear responsibility for France and Europe more broadly. Countries where genocide suspects reside must provide the resources and cooperation necessary for credible investigations and timely proceedings. Survivors and voluntary organisations should not have to carry so much of the burden of sustaining cases concerning crimes of this magnitude.

The most meaningful tribute to Dafroza will therefore be the continuation of the work

she helped build: supporting survivors, preserving testimony, confronting genocide denial and pursuing outstanding cases with diligence and respect for due process.

For Rwanda, remembrance carries a responsibility to the dead and to the living. Justice affirms that the lives destroyed mattered, that survivors deserve to be heard, and that crossing a border does not erase criminal responsibility.

Dafroza Mukarumongi Gauthier devoted much of her life to securing that affirmation.

Alongside Alain, she helped keep open the possibility of justice when delay and indifference threatened to extinguish it.

May she rest in peace. May Alain and their family find comfort in the enduring gratitude of those they have served. We honour her memory by carrying her commitment forward.

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