



# Beyond "Born of War": Children, youth and young adults conceived in sexual violence

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## ABSTRACT

Children and youth conceived in sexual violence have increasingly become part of research on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV), but largely remain an invisible group within responses to sexual violence and psychosocial support programming. This article details insights into the lived experiences of youth conceived in sexual violence and questions the language through which they are viewed. Research findings are based on 30 months of ethnographic research that explored the social worlds and family relations of young people conceived in rape during the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. The research took place from January 2019 to July 2021 and was conducted in close collaboration with NGOs that organised youth camps to bring young people together to share experiences and connect. By looking at support programmes such as these, ideas around 'disclosure' of young people's conception as well as ethical considerations within research and practice are discussed. In highlighting a survivor-centred approach, this article calls for a re-thinking of the language used globally to perceive children "born of war". It argues that current discourses centre a violent conception rather than the person or the child. Ultimately, this article invites a conversation on how children conceived in violence should safely and ethically be included in psychosocial support and sexual violence response programmes, while being seen as an individual being in the present instead of "symbols" or "legacies" of violence.

*"I love a mirror, when you break it, you see so much of you. You will see yourself in pieces. You can perceive the pieces as mistakes, when you look at those, you see a hundred images of yourself – those are the scars. So why do we go in front of a broken mirror? If you don't look at the broken pieces but take one, even if it's small, you will see yourself clearly." – Claudine<sup>i</sup>*

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## INTRODUCTION

An estimated 25,000 children were conceived through genocidal rape during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda.<sup>1</sup> Claudine, in my interview with her in 2020, gave her example of seeing herself in a broken

mirror, many different pieces, scars in her reflection. In this article, I argue that we as scholars and humanitarians see these different pieces too, and in doing so, forget to pick up the one piece that allows us

<sup>i</sup>All names are pseudonyms and locations, professions or other identifiers have been changed. As Rwanda is a very small country and people are easily identified, in writing about this research the use of pseudonyms is critical but insufficient. I have changed all identifying aspects of individual narratives, or not used those that would possibly expose the identity of participants. Particularly when writing about conception through rape, it is essential to assume that those close to research participants do not know about their conception and revealing this knowledge in any writing is extremely harmful and dangerous. Written informed consent was provided by participants, agreeing to the protection of their anonymity and privacy.

to see children and young people conceived in sexual violence as persons looking back at us. Studies have shown that we clearly see the different characteristics that shape their lived experiences; a haunting past, socio-economic adversity, intergenerational trauma, and a difficult sense of identity and belonging.<sup>2-7</sup> Yet, discourse around these children, young people and young adults, seem to eclipse their individuality and present being. We refer to them as “born of war”, “war babies” or “born of rape”, terminology that centres violence rather than the person or the child.

This article draws on extensive ethnographic research in Rwanda, where I worked closely with young people and their families. These relationships indeed developed in a broken-mirror landscape, but they allowed me to look at a few pieces deeply, including my assumptions and interpretations. The young adults, in their early twenties, who were the subjects of this research were trying to find their different ways in life, just as I found ways in this research. I learned to see them for their determination, resourcefulness, and commitment as sons, daughters, siblings, parents, and friends rather than for a violent past associated with them or the complex environment they grew up in – an important distinction.

This article elaborates on this distinction as I present nuances around the process of ‘disclosure’ of young people’s conception, ethical considerations in research and practice, the importance of acknowledging women’s choices in pregnancy and birthing, and young people’s agency in moving beyond labels tying them to a violent past. Thus, this article calls for increased participation of a largely invisible group of children and youth in sexual violence response and psychosocial support programming in (post-) conflict contexts.

### **Children Conceived in Conflict-Related Sexual Violence**

It is estimated that tens of thousands of children have been born as a result of mass rape or sexual exploitation during times of war and conflict “whether as an accidental by-product or strategic campaign of

violence.”<sup>8</sup> Sexual violence has always been part of conflict and warfare, resulting in children being conceived in rape. Yet, it was only during the Bosnian war in the early 1990s, that the children conceived in rape first became subjects of human rights discourse. As a group, these children came to symbolise a kind of atrocity that was seen as unprecedented in scope and brutality.<sup>9</sup> In the former Yugoslavia, rape and forced impregnation were used systematically and deliberately against women and the nations they were assumed to represent. Research on this topic has been conducted in a variety of contexts including the First and Second World War,<sup>10</sup> Bangladesh,<sup>11,12</sup> Peru,<sup>13,14</sup> Sudan,<sup>15</sup> Cambodia,<sup>16</sup> Sierra Leone,<sup>17</sup> Uganda,<sup>18-21</sup> Nigeria<sup>22</sup> and Iraq.<sup>23</sup>

Language and terminologies are significant shapers of how we understand phenomena. A large body of work on “children born of war” comes from the field of politics and international relations.<sup>8,9,24</sup> Human rights discourses refer to “war babies” as symbols of conflict or secondary-victims of violence and speak in terms of children’s rights – or lack thereof. An example of this use of language is that researchers argue that to a ‘receptor group’, children conceived by enemy soldiers in war are symbolic of the war atrocities.<sup>24-26</sup> This suggests that communities re-imagine the aggression in the children. In Rwanda, they were called “devil’s children;”<sup>27</sup> in Kosovo, “children of shame;”<sup>28</sup> in East Timor, “children of the enemy;”<sup>29</sup> in Nicaragua, “monster babies.”<sup>30</sup> However, whereas in some situations the children were seen as constant reminders of suffering to their mothers and communities, research has also shown that this rejection of children is not uniform.<sup>31,32</sup> In Goma, The Democratic Republic of Congo, Helen Liebling et al.<sup>32</sup> found that while children were a reminder of bad memories, women’s conflicting feelings towards their children stemmed from the pressures of caring for a child in a socio-economically adverse situation, rather than the child itself. Odeth Kantengwa<sup>31</sup> finds that in Rwanda, even though mothers of children conceived in rape face stigma and isolation, motherhood is “the major reason for living after genocide”.

Kimberly Theidon refers to children in Peru as “living legacies of sexual violence.”<sup>13</sup> Donna Seto emphasises that these children can be seen as reminders of the past, or as an opportunity for communities to reinvent themselves.<sup>8</sup> Sara Kahn and Myriam Denov found that in Rwanda, youth believe that they have a central role to play in post-genocide reconciliation. A young person in their study said: “Society should consider us [children born of genocidal rape] as a symbol of reconciliation.”<sup>33</sup> Siobhán McEnvoy-Levy argues that such children symbolise the political tension that the victimised and perpetrator community embody.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, rather than considering these children to represent only one side of the conflict – that of the perpetrator – these children can also offer a way to reconcile community, and even national differences. Thus, “children born of war” are not “enemies or friends, but both.”<sup>34</sup> I ask – can they be neither?

### A Survivor-Centred Approach

In 2019, the UN Security Council adopted a new resolution on the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda that “recognises the need for a survivor-centred approach in responding to sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict situations.”<sup>35</sup> Resolution 2467 also recognised “women and girls who become pregnant as a result of sexual violence in armed conflict, including those who choose to become mothers [and recognises] harms often faced by those women, girls and their children born as result of sexual violence in conflict, including economic and social marginalisation, physical and psychological injury, statelessness, discrimination, and lack of access to reparation.”<sup>35</sup> While the language in the resolution is clear, including the phrase “children born as a result of sexual violence in conflict”, this language has been transformed into terminology that, I argue, is at odds with a survivor-centred approach. For example, in her

important analysis of a survivor-centred approach to sexual violence, Janine Natalya Clark states that Resolution 2467 has noted “its recognition of ‘children born of war’ as a particular victim group.”<sup>36</sup> While the intention behind the words corresponds to the resolution, there is a distinct difference between speaking of “children born as a result of sexual violence” or “children born of war”. The term “born of war” is the accepted and frequently used term to describe children conceived through rape, hence using “born of war” would speak to its intended audience.<sup>2</sup> Alessia Rodríguez Di Eugenio and Erin Baines<sup>37</sup> argue that the term “children born of war” is “wholly insufficient to capture the varying experiences and diversity of identities of persons whom we usher under this category” and note that “the category infantilises such persons”.<sup>3</sup> They also state: “We also recognise that the lack of language in which to frame their experiences also contributes to their invisibility.”<sup>37</sup> I build on these insights by using a survivor-centred approach<sup>4</sup> to reflect on data from Rwanda.

While I recognise the difficulties in positioning children conceived in rape within political frameworks around war-affected children, war crimes, conflict-related sexual violence, and justice, given that no first-hand act of violence has been committed against them,<sup>34,38</sup> in this article, children and young people conceived in rape are considered survivors. Rodrigues Di Eugenio and Baines<sup>37</sup> conceptualise a survivor-centred approach beyond individual victimisation through considerations of structural and cultural violence:

*A survivor-centred approach, as we conceptualise it here, moves beyond individual victimisation due to an act of overt or direct violence (such as rape), to*

<sup>2</sup> This is not intended as any criticism towards Janine Clark’s work. I solely mean to emphasise the accepted terminology and discourses relating to children “born of war”, which is not attributed to a single or group of authors.

<sup>3</sup> In this article, I refer to the research participants as young people. At the time of research, they were 24 to 27 years old, and some would identify as young adults rather than “youth”. I am aware that writing about them as “young people” risks infantilising them and I discuss the nuances of my choice in the “ethical considerations” subsection under Methodology.

<sup>4</sup> By discussing language in this article, I recognise the complexities of terminology, which includes nuances relating to a “survivor-centred approach”. Some prefer a “person-centred approach” as feelings of survivors’ are not uniform in being referred to as survivors vis-à-vis victims or being labelled either way. An alternative would also be a “survival-centred approach” centering the process rather than the person. This discussion is beyond the scope of this article, but important to mention.



*recognise the ways war violence shapes and divides communities, blurs victim and perpetrator categories and generates structural (the result of intersecting institutions that diminish and limit one's life chances and choices) and cultural violence (social stories that legitimate and normalise structural violence, displacing responsibility onto the targeted group, in this case, 'child born of war'). Together, structural and cultural violence are often described as invisible violence, felt but not seen by persons denied opportunities by it. Furthermore, we understand the word survivor in this study as a reference to the accretive harm children 'born of war' experience throughout their lifetime and as related to socially endured harms due to mass or political violence, but also as a term that recognises their agency to respond to and reimagine a future without harm.*

A survivor-centred approach emphasises principles of dignity and respect and prioritises the needs and wishes of a survivor without discrimination.<sup>39</sup> I argue that "born of war" discourses are potentially harmful to the dignity of children conceived in rape, as well as their mothers because they emphasise violence over the agency of the living. When we speak of "children born of war", how do we think about those women "who choose to become mothers" as specified in the UN Resolution? Are children born from war or from their mothers?

## METHODOLOGY

### Design and Setting

This study was conducted over 30 months of fieldwork, between January 2019 and July 2021.<sup>5</sup> Due to the sensitivity of this topic and significant ethical considerations, fieldwork was conducted in close collaboration with partner organisations that provide young people and their mothers with psychosocial support.<sup>6</sup> Through these organisations I gained access to young people conceived in genocidal rape, and subsequently, their families. This approach was

chosen deliberately. Many young people in Rwanda do not know the history of their conception and consequently were not included in this research, to prevent the risk of compromising people's interpersonal relationships. A holistic ethnographic approach was used through participant observation in organisations, in-depth interviews and visits to participants and their families. I lived in Kigali and visited the research participants where they lived. Families in this research did not necessarily live together as young people attended universities in different places or worked away from their hometowns. Therefore, on occasion the study provided an opportunity for family members to visit each other with me.

### Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with 32 young people conceived in genocidal rape and 7 of their mothers. After meeting young people for interviews, I stayed in touch with them and visited them in their homes, with their families, at university, or at a location of their choice. We saw each other multiple times over the years. During these visits, I saw their lives take shape, while in the interviews we explored their experiences of growing up. This allowed for a comprehensive understanding of their difficulties, transformations, and growth, as well as their own reflections on their childhood and youth.

Interviews were conducted in Kinyarwanda with the support of my translator, Christian Ngombwa. My own comprehension of Kinyarwanda allowed me to pick up on nuances in answers and specific wording to describe experiences and I was able to comfort participants and build rapport with them in their own language. Christian was born shortly after the genocide and is the same age as the research participants. This allowed for a comfortable dynamic with participants in which he could translate and explain answers in the context of being young adults in Rwanda. His gender may have influenced certain

<sup>5</sup> Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I left Rwanda for six months in 2020, but fieldwork continued remotely.

<sup>6</sup> I do not name the organisations I worked with, as association with these organisations can present risks to the privacy and anonymity of young people and their mothers.



answers being withheld or changed, or for people to decide not to be interviewed. My own gender may have too. Importantly, Christian being a young adult in Rwanda meant there was a risk of him and research participants crossing paths socially. Some participants told us that if they would meet Christian outside of the research setting, they would pretend they did not know him. Christian always leaves the decision with participants to approach him or not, being aware of his ethical responsibilities towards protecting participants and himself.<sup>7</sup>

I recruited mothers from a group counselling session where I introduced the research and consent forms. I emphasised that my research was about their present lives, their families, social worlds and relationship with their children, not about their lived experiences during the genocide. The questions reflected this. During these interviews, Carine Ingabire, a female translator, supported me. A counsellor, who the women have known intimately for many years, spoke to them after each interview to ensure their well-being.<sup>8</sup>

Interviews were semi-structured with twenty prepared questions. The first and last questions were always “how are you feeling?”. In most cases, responses to the third question “can you tell us about your family” would instigate specific follow-up questions, for example, if young people were married or a parent, or if they knew their biological father or his family. The first section of questions asked about their family and social worlds, the second section was about their childhood. The third section of questions was about their experience with finding out about their conception. These questions would be adjusted when young people knew about their conception without having had a specific conversation with their mother; they grew up with their biological father’s family or in tight-knit communities where this information was distilled as a child comes to ‘know’ the world. The final section included questions

directed towards positive experiences, such as “what are you most proud of?” and “what are your wishes for your future?”. The final question was: “There are many children and young people conceived like you in the world. Do you have any advice for those children in other places?”. Answers to some of these questions are presented in this article.

### Participants and Youth Camps

Many children and youth conceived in rape have not been told about their conception and were automatically excluded from this research. Asking questions in communities has the potential to disrupt relations that are often carefully controlled by mothers, to protect children from learning about their conception. If a woman came to be married after the genocide, she might also have concealed this information from her husband or other children. Approaching women or children directly would be a real danger to safety in homes and communities.

In their study on young people’s experience with disclosure – the process of learning about one’s conception – Hogwood et al. (5 p560) found that “young people described the value of knowing and meeting others in the same situation to discuss and share problems, helping to normalise the situation and provide them with strength to manage the disclosure”. For young people to connect with others in a similar social position, NGOs organised youth camps where young people conceived in genocidal rape were brought together. The young people invited to these camps are the children of mothers who were part of a counselling programme aimed at supporting mothers with disclosing their children’s conception to them, hence counsellors knew that the young invitees had been told about their conception. Youth camps were attended by approximately thirty young people and lasted four days. The camps consist of a programme with guest speakers and workshops around resilience and self-acceptance, games and

<sup>7</sup> Christian’s ethical responsibilities were outlined in his contract, but they were also part of our regular debriefs. The protection of participant’s privacy was a continuous practice reflected in everyday decisions we made together – where to meet people, where to do interviews and where not to do interviews, what to ask or say depending on who was present, who

would see us, what people’s possible perception of us was and its implications for research participants, amongst many others. Christian often advised me on these considerations given the cultural context.

<sup>8</sup> Counsellors were also available to speak to young people after their interviews with us, either in person or on the phone.

sports, business and entrepreneurship workshops, and small groups encounter sessions for sharing experiences. Multiple young people told me that their free time in the evenings was most valuable to them, where they shared rooms with others and spent time talking at night.

The youth camps were the place where I met most young people who became research participants. At the camps, Christian read out the consent form and we asked who would be willing to participate in an interview. In the first instance, only 6 of the 30 youth requested an interview. At the second camp, 12 out of 30 young people volunteered. It is important to note that most young people did not want to be interviewed. Therefore, the sample of research participants is not representative of the entire population of children conceived in genocidal rape in Rwanda. All research participants were supported by an organisation and lived experiences might be different for those who are not.

On multiple occasions in daily life when I met people in Rwanda and they heard about my research, they said "I believe my niece was born from rape"<sup>9</sup> or "a young man in my home village is born from rape" or "a woman I work with has a child born from rape, but the child does not know". The numerous occasions that people told me this made me wonder about the experiences I did not – and could not – hear about. Thus, the findings of this research need to be understood within its wider context and as a very small sample of experiences.

### Ethical Considerations

The research was approved through the University of Cape Town and the Rwanda National Ethics Committees. Risk mitigation measures were put in place to protect the research participants and their communities, as well as myself. These measures consist of methodological concerns but became everyday practices. Everyday ethical practices

included consistent reflections on what to say and what not to say, where and to whom, who I was meeting where, who would see me and with whom, where I kept my notes, books and if I would take photos on my phone or not – any connections between myself and participants were an enormous responsibility. This gave me a small glimpse into the lengths young people and their mothers go to in their everyday lives to protect themselves and their children from others knowing about their conception.

Besides everyday considerations about ethics, responsibility also lies in writing about lives that are not my own, particularly as a white European woman conducting research on the African continent. In conducting research of this nature, there is a real danger of reinforcing representations of "Africa as a Dark Continent."<sup>40</sup> Caroline Williamson Sinalo refers to a "narrative of ethnocentrism which sees Africa as a troubled, indescribable, unknowable place in which sexual violence is inevitable and can only be prevented by Western civilization."<sup>41</sup> In highlighting reconstruction and survival, it is important to find a delicate balance between acknowledging young people's painful experiences growing up and representing their lived experiences as young adults who move away from being seen as "conceived in rape" as they live lives away from their hometowns and start families of their own. Experiences they recounted of their childhood, including emotional and physical abuse, extreme loneliness and for some, suicide attempts, must be recognised as themes in the lives of young people conceived in rape to better support them and advocate for their rights. Yet, common themes also include a fierce determination to care for their mothers, successful careers and land ownership (despite the difficulty in acquiring land without a paternal lineage). In showing all sides of young people's lives in the present, our language in referring to them through connotations to the past, will transform.

<sup>9</sup> I use the term "born from rape" here because that is the wording that was used in Rwanda; either "born of rape" in English, or "yavutse ku ngufu" in Kinyarwanda.



## Young People vs Young Adults

I choose to refer to the young adults in this article as young people. It is critical to recognise that despite the common appellation of ‘children born of ...’, the young people in this study were aged between 24 and 27 years at the time of research. That is to say, they are young adults. In Rwanda, unmarried youth are usually referred to as *urubyiruko*, “young people” in Kinyarwanda. Organisations referred to young people conceived in rape as *urubyiruko rwavutse ku ngufu*. In the four years that have passed between the start of the research and this writing, some young people married and started their own families. They would now not be considered youth in Rwandan society while those still unmarried continue to be considered *urubyiruko*. That is, nomenclature rests more on social roles than chronological age. Considering the widespread continued use of “children born of...” without considering the actual stages in life of these persons, I believe it is important to make these careful distinctions.

## Data Analysis

The data are derived from ethnographic fieldnotes and interview transcriptions. After consent, interviews were recorded. I transcribed the youth interviews and interviews with mothers were transcribed by Carine. I took extensive interview notes around specific phrasing, body language and silences. I used descriptive analysis of fieldnotes, interview notes and transcripts to identify themes and patterns. Throughout the research, as part of what Karen O’Reilly<sup>42</sup> calls “grounded theory in practice”, I created integrative memos to clarify and link analytic themes and categories. After fieldwork was completed, I used NVivo qualitative analysis software to organise and code the data, to establish themes and categories from the integrative memos. My fieldnotes consisted of descriptive notes and reflexive notes. Descriptive notes detailed experiences and observations.<sup>43</sup> Reflexive notes held my personal thoughts and feelings about these experiences as well as questions

shaped by observations. Some of these questions are explored in this article.

## FINDINGS

### Challenging Preconceptions

I first visited Rwanda in 2017, to assess the feasibility of my doctoral research. I met with organisations active in the field to ask whether the research would be valuable and whether they would be able to support it by providing safe access to families. A careful literature review had informed my perception of young people as “vulnerable”, “hidden”, “forgotten” and “traumatised” and I had developed a careful methodological approach to offset risk. An organisation I hoped to work with invited me to see them working at one of their youth camps. I was nervous but excited to test whether the research would be seen as valuable by young people.<sup>10</sup> The camp, hosted in a school, consisted of about twenty people in their early to mid-twenties and the camp facilitators. I introduced myself in Kinyarwanda and, switching to English, explained that my research aimed to understand their lives with their families so as to inform how to better support them. Some nodded their head in agreement. When I asked them if they had any questions for me, a young, trendily-dressed man, raised his hand and asked: “Are you married?”. We all laughed. I felt relieved.

That single question changed my perception that I was standing in front of a group of “vulnerable” and “traumatised” young people to standing in front of a group of 23-year-olds.

It was the little moments like these, that became big data points, as is common in ethnographic research. This experience showed me as much about the young people as it did about myself. It was a moment where I almost let my concerns for ethics, fears of the unknown and representations of “children born of war” that fed these fears, allow me to place my concerns above the participation of young people in

<sup>10</sup> Part of my nervousness stemmed from feeling inadequately prepared to meet with young people directly as it was an opportunity that arose unexpectedly. I had ethical and methodological safeguarding measures in place, but had not yet applied for my research permit. The organisation

assured me that no ethical clearance was required at this time, as this was an initial exploratory meeting under their supervision. I believe that even if I did have my research permit at that time, I would still have been nervous and felt adequately prepared due to my views solely based on literature.

my exploration of the feasibility of this research – research about them. I wanted to ask them what they thought about the research, and I almost had not. My ethical concerns were valid, but my fears were unfounded.

I include this excerpt from my fieldwork because I believe many humanitarians, psychosocial support service providers and programme managers may face similar dilemmas. It might be easier choosing not to involve children and young people that are considered vulnerable and at risk, but not allowing them to participate in decision-making, research and programmes that concern them is an even greater risk – it allows perceptions about them to remain unchallenged.

### Disclosure

I found that mothers worked every day to create barriers between their past and their children's present, protecting their children from living with painful knowledge. Yet, young people grew up asking questions about their biological father and asked why they were treated differently from other children. Sometimes, as Glorieuse Uwizeye et al.<sup>6</sup> found, despite mothers' best efforts, some young people became aware of their birth origins as "their mother might get angry with her child and tell them that they look like their father-perpetrator, or a neighbour might disclose who their father was". My research found the exact same. The Survivors Fund in Rwanda made similar findings as well:

*Mothers expressed feeling overwhelmed at how to manage adolescent behaviour, communicate with their son or daughter, and answer questions about who their father is. Such questions became additionally important as their children applied for a national ID at 18 years old, where mother's and father's names are required. Furthermore, some young people are considering marriage and encountering land inheritance, both of which rely heavily on the identity of the father and the father's family. Many have also experienced community*

*gossip and rumours and sensed that they were treated differently from their siblings.<sup>5</sup>*

A group of mothers who attended counselling group sessions with the Survivors Fund and expressed these concerns, asked for "help in disclosing to their child the circumstances of their birth."<sup>5</sup> Thus, The Survivors Fund created a 'disclosure programme' where mothers are counselled through the process. This involves having a conversation with their children about the circumstances of their conception. Evidence collected by The Survivors Fund suggests that disclosure led to an improved relationship between mothers and their children as the children came to understand their mother's reactions.<sup>5</sup> In my research, young people expressed similar feelings of understanding towards their mothers. Some emphasised their mother's bravery for living with her genocide memories, some expressed feeling thankful for being alive (as their mother could have chosen an abortion) and others said they now understood why their mother would cry or get angry when they asked about their biological father. Some young people said they stopped asking because they did not want to upset their mother, anticipating her reaction but not understanding the reasons for it.

A range of studies have shown that disclosure can be a starting point for young people's construction of positive identities.<sup>5,31,44,45</sup> However, this is not straightforward. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Erjavec and Volčič<sup>45,46</sup> explored how young girls conceived in rape viewed themselves. 17 out of the 19 young girls interviewed used metaphors like "cancer" and "shooting target" to describe themselves, while two girls said they were "warriors for peace" and wanted to use their story of origin for positive change.<sup>45,46</sup> The majority of girls felt immense pain when talking about the moment they found out about their conception and refer to it as "the most traumatic event of their lives."<sup>46</sup> Therefore, the disclosure process requires caution and careful guidance, to avoid it being a "traumatic event."<sup>46</sup> Odeth Kantangwa emphasises this caution:



*Disclosure without preparation was reported to be challenging to mothers. In cases where something would provoke disclosure, the end result would be hard to manage. School registration was reported to be one of the provoking factors that led some mothers to disclose unprepared. The mothers who did so as forced by circumstances said it was difficult to deal with the negative consequences of disclosure.<sup>32</sup>*

It is worth noting that it is often encounters with the state that precipitate the conditions under which disclosure becomes necessary. In my research, I found that some mothers had anticipated these encounters with the state and prior to school registration told their children to write down the name of their own fathers or brothers to circumvent questions.

Disclosure processes require caution, as does the way in which 'disclosure' is thought about. For children and young people conceived in rape in research or support programmes, a "certainty" of disclosure is required, generally meaning a conversation with their mothers. However, in Rwanda, some young people have grown up with their biological father's family in the same village and have always "known" without any conversation. Cedric, for example, told me that his mother had never discussed her experience during the genocide or disclosed the conditions of his conception; he had 'just known'. Cedric's mother confirmed that they never spoke about it and repeated his assertion: she did not have to, he has always known. Cedric could not identify a specific event which generated this knowledge; it was just his reality growing up. Clara Han beautifully describes this tacit knowledge in "Seeing Like a Child"<sup>47</sup> where she describes how family memories of violence are embedded in everyday life and normalised.

We must therefore be careful about imagining 'disclosure' as an event in time – a conversation – with a distinct "before" and "after", despite the emphasis on 'disclosure' in programmes of support. Knowledge about genocide is transmitted in various ways, not always through 'disclosure' per se. Woolner, Denov

and Kahn<sup>48</sup> also found that the roots of "knowing" were transmitted through communities:

*"Truth-telling" was often complicated by the fact that family or community members had already insinuated to children through insults and name-calling that they were born from the genocide, as "bastards" or born of "killers." Indeed, for many mothers, "truth-telling" was not merely a matter of disclosing the child's true origins but rather finding the courage to share a complete and honest account of their own painful experiences leading up to conception. The shame experienced by mothers and stigma imposed upon them by community mores influenced a mother's decision to discuss this information with their child.*

In my research, one of the main themes of young people's childhood was the experiences with name calling in their neighbourhoods and at school. Some young people did not want to speak about this topic and were emotional when mentioning that children in the school yard called them "bad names" (*amazina mabi*); they described it as one of their worst childhood memories. In many instances, when young people would come home to ask their mothers why other children would call them "a child of killers", their mothers, and at times other family members, would create elaborate explanations to avert their children from having to live with knowledge that would hurt them. Yet, most mothers eventually told their children about their conception after attending the 'disclosure programme'.

Woolner et al. also note that some mothers chose not to have a 'disclosure conversation' with their children so as not to further disrupt their children's lives, stating "In this way, a mother's silence could be seen as a strategy to protect her child from additional hardship and emotional distress"<sup>48</sup>

I too encountered a mother who had chosen not to tell their child, even though he was part of this research. She had told counsellors that she had 'disclosed' and the young man was invited to a camp, where, hearing



stories of others and recognising his own in them, he realised the circumstances of his conception. Although he told us that his mother still considered him “too young” to be living with this painful knowledge, his experience of finding out at the camp was a positive one because he immediately had a support system and knew he was not alone in his experiences.

In designing programmes to support mothers and their children, it is important to recognise that not all mothers need to “find the courage” to disclose, but some consciously choose not to, even after having been given the tools and support to do so.

### **Beyond “Conceived in Rape”**

Young people explained that they aimed to be perceived as something other than “a child conceived in rape”. As they graduated from university, found jobs in cities away from the places they grew up in, or became parents, they frequently moved to spaces where their familial circumstances were not known, which enabled them to be seen for who they are and what they achieved, or where the status they attained outweighs their connection to a violent past. Their thoughts on the advice they would offer to others conceived similarly repeatedly showed the importance of their own goals and the possibilities of transformation. Grace, for example, said: *“Work hard and become successful. No one can say bad things about you when you make it and when you take care of your family”*. Fidele said:

*A life of sadness is not easy. If God allows you to be born, do something good with your life. It will clean the bad things you went through. Don't give up on school, work hard and become someone of importance in this life and do great things. When you do good things, society will see that someone born this way is doing something good for society. You will feel less bad.*

Most advice included the building of self-confidence and self-acceptance, working hard and not giving up on oneself. Joseph, who had been very quiet and soft-

spoken during his interview suddenly started speaking louder when he answered this question. He spoke and gestured passionately, saying: *“Don't be afraid of anything, of course the past will be there, but think about the future. Have hope and work hard.”*

Answers were often thoughtful and practical. Alphonse advised:

*Even if you are born with this history, it is not the end of your life. Tomorrow will be better. Try to meet others like you, even if no one knows who the others are, speak out and find opportunities to know they are there. Search for information on where they gather and plan your next steps. You have the responsibility for your own life. You are not the only one in the world like you.*

The question about their hopes for the future elicited answers that showed how much young people think about how they are perceived by others, not always in a negative light. Felix and Chantal gave almost identical answers: *“I wish to be a role model, someone people look up to”* (Felix) and *“I wish to be an example for others and inspire them, regardless of my [financial] level of living.”* (Chantal).

When asked what they were most proud of, many spoke of their self-reliance and hard work, studies, and graduation. Others answered that they were proud of their mothers, for giving birth to them and “standing up” for them. Faustin said he was most proud of the strength with which he faced the difficult journey he called his life: *“I have gone from being that child to becoming this person.”*

## **DISCUSSION**

### **“Children Born of War” Discourses**

Scholars such as Charli Carpenter and Donna Seto have called for children conceived in wartime rape to be placed on global human rights agendas and through their advocacy efforts, global discourses have brought attention to “forgotten children born of war.”<sup>9</sup> In recent years, further research has been conducted on children conceived in rape and children and young people are increasingly involved as active

subjects in research about them. With this progress, it is important to re-evaluate the discourses that were initially created to provoke global policy. As I built close personal relationships and friendships with young people in Rwanda, I became uncomfortable with reading about them as “children born of war” or “war babies”. Besides the sensationalising tone – which was perhaps necessary in the early 2000s to generate global advocacy – calling children “born of war” precludes them from being seen for who they really are. It plays into ideas of them as merely political agents, symbols of suffering or of reconciliation. Why can they not just be children? Children are born from their mothers. Humans are born from humans, not from events. Linking the birth of a person, a human being, to a violent past event, creates a basis for seeing them as representations of this violence.

In Rwanda, I asked Mariya, a young woman conceived in rape, what she was most proud of in her life. She answered: *“I think I am a trustworthy person, I work hard to be independent, and people see me as a good person”*. Do we, through our discourses, see her in that light? We see Mariya for a past event she seemingly cannot escape even as she “works hard to be independent”. In the context of her interview, she meant that she works to be financially independent from her mother and her mother’s husband, but in doing so, she also becomes less dependent on how she was seen growing up – a child of rape. Now, she says, people see her as a good person. Yet, in the advocacy mode of speech, her hard work or character are not seen.

Re-thinking the discourses used to refer to children conceived in rape is not solely important with respect to them, but because local organisations and community groups supporting these children and their mothers create “social worlds out of global words.”<sup>49</sup> Global advocacy for children’s rights results in local communities using rights discourse and terminologies, shaping the understandings and support given to recipients and ultimately affecting their daily lives. In Rwanda, the youth camps and workshops play a role in how young people see

themselves and their place in society. Young people’s experiences are directly influenced not only by globalised terminologies, but ideas about what they are – symbols, representations, memories, legacies –; that is, anything but a person. In Rwanda, young people have access to the internet and study social studies, sociology and political science, they can easily come across academic work written about them, referring to them as “war babies”. I have not heard about this happening over the years of this research, but I wonder what they would say. We cannot speak about them as if they will never read or hear our words.

### From “Born of Rape” to “Conceived in Rape”

Having discussed the problematic nature of “born of war” discourses, it is important to also evaluate the terminology around being “born of rape”. In Rwanda, children conceived in genocidal rape were called “enfants mauvais souvenirs” (children of bad memories). That is, they were represented as memories rather than human beings. Additionally, in Kinyarwanda, young people conceived in rape are referred to as “born of rape” (*yavutse ku ngufu*). While respecting local terms and including these in the analysis, these terms can be seen as rooted in patrilineal structures related to women’s roles in giving birth as well as the adoption of international discourses around genocide, sexual violence and children “born of rape”. I propose to use the term ‘conception’ rather than ‘birth’. The terminology “born of rape” assumes that the act of rape is still present in birth. While the effects of rape are still present and the birthing process can regenerate traumatising experiences, there is a distinction to be made between the act of rape and conception, and the act of birthing. Some women chose to have abortions and not give birth, whereas others chose to keep their babies or were unable to make different decisions.<sup>27,50</sup> Many of the mothers in my research had actively chosen to give birth to their children, resisting pressures from their families, even when taken to hospital for an abortion. Therefore, many of the children conceived from rape were born through maternal choice. The phrase “born of rape” bypasses



this choice. The Kinyarwanda term *kuvuka ku ngufu* (to be born of rape) stems from the verb *gufata ku ngufu* (rape) which literally translates to “to take by force” (*ku ngufu* means *by force*) and therefore *kuvuka ku ngufu* translates as “to be born by force”. Some children were conceived by force, but born because women resisted the attempt to force them to undergo abortions. Of course, having made the choice to have their children does not imply that raising the child was less difficult. They worked hard to protect them from family members who did not accept them, or abused them. They also worked hard to protect them from hurt through knowing about their conception, and generally went to great lengths to shield their children from harm.

Literature written about mothers of children conceived from conflict-related sexual violence often highlights the ambivalent mother-child relationship<sup>31,48</sup> and represents these children as “living reminders of suffering.”<sup>27</sup> This creates the assumption that these children might be unwanted due to being perceived as symbols or representations of the past rather than human beings born from other human beings. My research challenges the assumption that all children conceived in rape are unwanted. My findings reiterate literature that shows how some mothers have found survival and meaning in motherhood in their lives after the genocide.<sup>31,51</sup> For example, Martin separated his conception from his birth, saying:

*We were conceived with no love because of the rape, but we were born with love. Some women chose an abortion or committed suicide, but the mothers that carried us for nine months and breastfed us, that is love.*

UN Resolution 2467 recognises “women and girls who become pregnant as a result of sexual violence in armed conflict, including those who choose to become mothers.”<sup>35</sup> The language we use should reflect this choice. Therefore, I suggest that scholars, policy makers and service providers in places facing conflict-related or genocidal sexual violence, should

not assume that women would choose abortions if this option were available, and should question existing ways of thinking about the children yet to be born, as they are more than manifestations of violence.

### Collective Identities and Participation

An additional risk inherent in the use of terminologies such as “born of war”, “born of rape” and also “conceived in rape” is viewing people in purely categorical terms. A continued conversation is required about how we represent and illustrate people with vastly different lived experiences, with only the circumstances of their conception in common. Labelling them as a “group” does not always reconcile how they see themselves. Claudine, in her interview, spoke of “those children” when she answered questions about her life as having been “conceived in rape”, distancing herself from “the group” as she does not view her own lived reality as common with others’. In the research, I asked young people to share ‘their story’ but the story they told me, their life story, did not always centre around being conceived in rape. That is, their conception does not necessarily characterise their lives. Writing about them as a group isolates them from their peers – their age mates – which is something they identified as very painful while growing up.

Hogwood et al. discuss that after the process of disclosure, young people “now had the power and agency to do something about it and could construct a narrative that makes sense of their experience and connect with others in a similar social position.”<sup>5</sup> My research confirms this: young people told me that at the youth camps they came to know they are not alone, or that they had found their only friends at the camp. However, there is a fine line between the benefits and risks associated with bringing young people together. Whereas “being together” shows pathways to healing, there is a risk of furthering stigma by being seen as a “group”. Indeed, an organisation supporting children conceived in rape in Bosnia and Herzegovina decided to discontinue their group programmes as they found it increased



stigmatisation of children and young people in those groups. Ethical considerations need to be weighed differently in different contexts, ultimately finding a context-appropriate balance between protection and participation. UNICEF's Youth Participation Protocol outlines participation as follows:

*Participation ensures the right of young people (individually or collectively) to form and express their views and influence matters that concern them directly and indirectly. Participation is about being informed, engaged, and having an influence on decisions and matters that affect one's life – in private and public spheres, in the home, in alternative care settings, at school, in the workplace, in the community, in social media, in broader governance processes, and in programmes.<sup>52</sup>*

In 2017, Denov and Lakor included young people conceived in rape directly in their research as co-researchers.<sup>3</sup> Steps are being taken to increasingly involve young people as individuals and collectives. It is our responsibility to hear them, without imposing labels onto them.

## CONCLUSIONS

Alen Muhic, co-founder of the Forgotten Children of War Association in Bosnia and Herzegovina spoke at the UN in New York: "We are called by various names that are often inhumane and stigmatizing."<sup>53</sup> This article has explored ways in which scholars and humanitarians can start to think about children, young people and adults conceived in rape, in the first instance by making language used less "inhumane and stigmatising". In doing so, increasing visibility of young people and their mother's agency and narrative about themselves. As I have shown, some of the key terms in contemporary humanitarian discourse such as "children born of war", and "children born of rape" as well as ideas about 'disclosure' may be useful at one moment in a life cycle but may undermine young people's strategies to live beyond the circumstances of their conception. Faustin saying "I have gone from being that child to becoming this person" shows that life is not static, an unchanging connotation to one's

conception is at odds with the dynamic nature of living. Following Claudine's beautiful example of a mirror, we can start by picking up the single pieces. We see the different pieces of a broken mirror, the war and rape around the rough edges, but we have to continue to strive towards seeing the individual, the survivor. Then, we can work towards using a survivor-centred approach; an approach in which we see the individual lived experiences of children and young people, invite them to share them with us, so that we speak with them rather than about them. Ethical considerations discussed in this article are an invitation to organisations to assess contexts where they can accommodate "the right of survivors to decide what help is best for them and who should know about what happened."<sup>39</sup> It is an invitation to explore safe pathways for young people to know about their conception and then be brought together to participate in programmes and advocacy efforts. My apprehension to meet with young people in 2017 showed how "born of war" discourses and its associations can misrepresent our understanding of young people's agency and capacity to advocate for themselves and others like them, pre-framing them as non-agentive and representing them in categorical terms. I ask that we look beyond the scars, the "symbols" and "legacies", pick up individual pieces of the mirror, and let the reflections speak to us. As I have shown, young people have ideas about their lives to which we should pay attention.

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Ethical clearance was obtained from the Rwanda National Ethics Committee (RNEC) with numbers

029/RNEC/2019 and 025/RNEC/2020. Statements of Informed Consent were obtained from all participants in this research. Prior to interviews, we read the detailed consent forms out loud, discussed questions and clarifications, we emphasised their rights including the right to withdraw at any time. The form included phone numbers of RNEC, NGO counsellors, the researcher and translator. All participants signed the form and were provided with a copy. The Informed Consent forms were reviewed and cleared by RNEC.

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