

“I cannot live with the son of those who killed my family”

Domestic violence in the aftermath of conflict-related sexual violence

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On the t-shirt:
Peace, love, unity, dignity,
rights and development
Let's have ours

The Research

My doctoral research examined kinship in the aftermath of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. It focused on how young people conceived in genocidal rape made sense of their place in family relations and what their social worlds looked like, 25 to 27 years after the genocide.

The topic of this poster presentation, domestic violence in the present day which erupts due to past conflict-related sexual violence, was an important research finding. My research, like that of others, primarily included young people and their mothers - also for ethical reasons. Yet, stepfathers played a significant role in shaping young people's childhood experiences.

Methodology

The research consisted of 30 months of ethnographic fieldwork, from January 2019 to July 2021. The research was conducted in close collaboration with two NGOs - The Survivors Fund and SEVOTA - that organised youth camps to bring young people together to share experiences and connect. I attended and observed these youth camps, as well as other NGO community-based activities, and invited young people to participate in the research and volunteer to be interviewed. The interviews took place at the youth camps or a location of young people's choice. A total of 32 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with young people and 7 interviews with their mothers. Over the years, I stayed in touch with young people and visited them at their homes, their universities, and I was invited to meet their families.

Ethics

Ethical considerations were critical. Measures to protect research participants, their families and myself went beyond the use of consent forms and counselling support – they became everyday practices. Young people's conception was often not openly known to their communities and their association with me as a researcher could potentially raise questions. I consistently reflected on what I said and did not say, to whom, what I said where and who would see me – any connections between myself and participants had to be carefully considered. **These everyday concerns gave me a small glimpse into the lengths young people and their mothers go to so as to protect themselves and their children from others knowing about the rapes and the circumstances of a child's conception.**

Eric's Story

*Not his real name

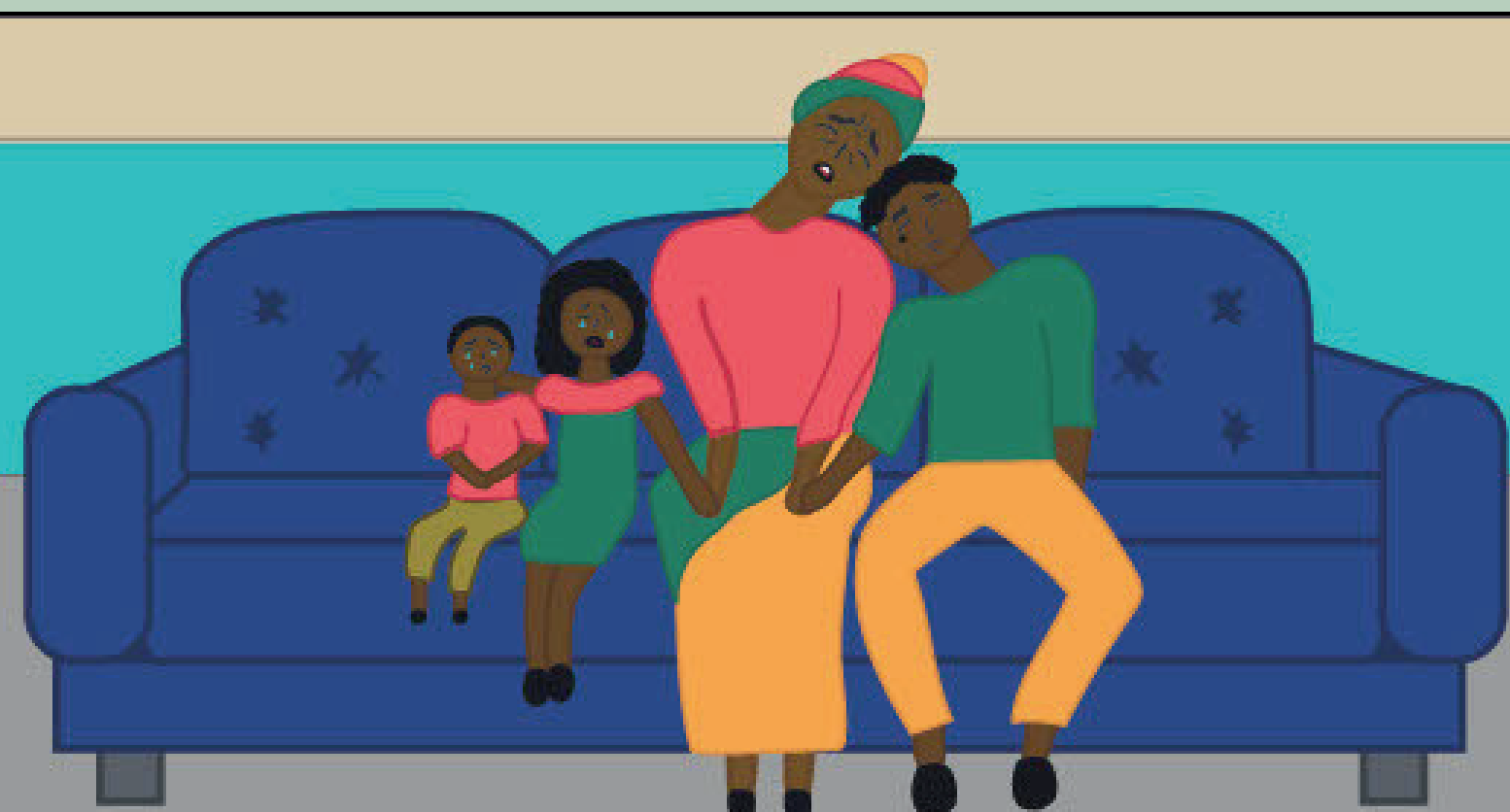
22 years after the Genocide Against the Tutsi

In 2016, Eric was a 21-year old young man who was conceived in rape during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi.

He lived with his mother, her husband, and their two children; his younger siblings. Eric's mother told him about his conception a few years ago with support from NGOs. She did not tell anyone else.

During the yearly genocide commemoration period in April, Eric was invited to an event together with other young people conceived in genocidal rape. The event was publicly broadcasted, and Eric's stepfather found out about Eric's origin as he watched TV.

Almost the entire family of Eric's stepfather was killed during the genocide, and now he saw Eric as the son of killers. He became violent towards Eric's mother, and moved out of the home. His children grew up without their father.



Findings

Knowledge of violence appears in young people's worlds in shadowed ways. Mothers shield their children from knowledge of violence until guided to “disclose” in NGO-supported processes. Yet other people in their networks are less circumspect. Children grow up being called “bad names” such as “children of killers” by their extended family, neighbours and other children. My research reveals that young people live with fragmented knowledge and piece together their ancestry as much from what is not said as from what they are told. This is also true for their siblings and stepfathers. Many mothers of young people conceived in rape were married after the genocide and did not tell their husbands about the rape, although some were married prior to the genocide and continued their lives with their knowing husbands. Often the children conceived in rape were treated differently to their siblings. While stepfathers were physically and psychologically abusive to their children, they faced stigma and rejection from their families and communities too, and much is unknown about their perceptions and experiences of parenting a child of rape.

What Eric's Story Tells Us

- Eric's story illustrates **continuities of violence**, where sexual violence during the genocide spills over into physical domestic violence 22 years later.
- The story shows how mothers **carefully keep secrets** to protect the stability of the family home, sealing off knowledge of past violence. The story also shows the dangers of (others) breaking this seal.
- Children conceived in CRSV are often perceived as their perpetrator fathers.
- It reveals the **temporalities** of genocidal memories; how a past genocide is part of the present day.
- Eric's younger **siblings** were left growing up without their father, indicating the impact of conflict-related sexual violence on future family members, and children who are not often the subjects of studies, programmes or policies.
- The story illustrates that Eric's mother received counselling, but his stepfather did not have such support. It shows the importance of **mental health support for men** in post-conflict settings.
- Although not explicitly, Eric and his mother's **care for each other**. She sees him as *her* son and protected him by keeping his status as “conceived in rape” unknown. He also protects his mother.

Recommendations

- Invest in supporting children conceived in CRSV, their families and communities.
- Work towards the prevention of family violence, domestic violence and IPV by considering the continuity of violence in post-conflict settings.
- Work towards reducing rape-related stigma in all various contexts and settings.
- Use a holistic and family-centred approach to post-conflict psychosocial support.
- Engage men and boys in MHPSS & GBV programming.
- Carefully manage disclosure process of persons being “conceived in rape” and protect people's privacy and anonymity.
- Conduct further research into the lived experiences of fathers and stepfathers of children conceived in CRSV.

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Publications

Loning, L. (2023). The aftermath of gendered violence: Kinship and affect in post-genocide Rwanda. *Critique of Anthropology*, 43(4), 444-460.

Loning, L. (2023). Beyond “Born of War”: Children, Youth and Young Adults Conceived in Rape. *Global Journal of Medicine & Public Health, Special Issue, Sexual Violence in Fragile Settings: Practice, Policies and Research*, July 2023.

