

# Frozen Emotions: Women's experience of violence and trauma in El Salvador; Kenya and Rwanda

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In the last two decades, many countries in sub-Saharan Africa – including our own – have experienced war and conflict, with the devastating consequences of loss of life, economic destruction and legacies of bitterness and lingering grief that continue to distort social life. But as societies emerging from conflict try to come to terms with their pasts, the way in which gender inequality is amplified by war and violence is often overlooked, and the fact that men and women experience violence in radically different ways forgotten. The failure of societies emerging from war to recognise "frozen emotions" and other consequences for women and girls who have survived violence is yet another index of gender inequality.

In this report on "Trauma and change: a gender perspective", a seminar hosted by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, in Johannesburg on 23 April 1998, Polly Dewhirst extracts women's common experiences of violence and trauma in El Salvador, Kenya and Rwanda. Initiatives in these countries to bring together survivors to rebuild their lives are part of the emerging international movement against gender inequality.

## Voices from the Battlefields

"I have been left with the burden of taking care of six grandchildren, almost all of the same age – alone – because I'm a widow. My husband Frederick Maboka passed away, before the tragedy, leaving me with his children and four acres of land. But I cannot go back to our land because my title deeds were burned in the violence. Also I cannot live among all those graves. I now live at my last born's house. The children are not going to school and I have no food. But I don't worry because at least they are still alive."

"My problem with my village was not that they killed my father, but the way that they killed him. My mother was 82, an invalid in bed, and they took her and another old woman, also an invalid, and to humiliate them they took them and left them with the pile of bodies including my father and all of the people who were there. They just left them there to die, under the rain or the sun, and children came and stoned them."

Two harrowing statements from the seminar "Trauma and change: a gender perspective", which explored the impact of violence on women living in four countries that have witnessed high levels of social and political conflict. On the panel of speakers were Tecla Wanjala, a victim support worker in Kenya, Ester Mujawayo, from the AVEGA (Association of Widows of the April Genocide) victim support group in Rwanda, Henrietta Shannon from the Peace Centre in El Salvador and Marie McNiece from Women against Violence (WAVE) Trauma Centre in Northern Ireland. This report gives an overview of women's common experiences in three of the countries – El Salvador, Kenya and Rwanda – which include experiences of violence itself as well as the associated ongoing trauma. It concludes with a brief look at some of the ways in which women there are attempting to deal with their pain.

## The Context

Each panellist contextualised the violence against women by giving a brief history of the conflict in the countries in which each of them worked.

## The Legacy of El Salvador's Civil War

In January 1992, the Chipulapeac Peace Accords were signed which brought to an end a bloody 12-year armed conflict between the El Salvador government and the country's liberation movement, the Faribundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). In this war, according to official records 75,000 people were killed, but unofficial sources put the number closer to 100,000. Another 10,000 people "disappeared" and half a million fled to refugee camps in the neighbouring countries of Honduras, Panama and Nicaragua. Another half a million emigrated to the United States of America (USA) and Canada.

## Ethnic Cleansing in Kenya

The conflict in Kenya began in 1989 in the form of ethnic clashes. Daniel Arap Moi's autocratic government was under widespread pressure to concede to multi-party elections and is believed to have instigated the clashes in an attempt to divert the pressure and enforce majimboism, the term used to describe a "federal system". Majimboism forced Kenyans from ethnic groups who have traditionally not supported Moi to return to their areas of origin, allowing Moi to consolidate his support in particular regions. It amounted to a policy of ethnic cleansing. According to Amnesty International, by 1995 approximately 1,500 people had been killed in these clashes and at least another 300,000 internally displaced. These clashes continue, although less frequently than in the past.

## Genocide in Rwanda

Rwanda has been marred by ethnic conflict between Tutsis and Hutus since ethnic identities were exploited and institutionalised by Belgian colonial rulers before and

during the 1959 struggle for Rwandan independence. In 1959, 1963 and 1973, the Hutu-dominated government orchestrated a series of attacks on the Tutsi minority, killing thousands and sending hundreds of thousands more into exile in neighbouring countries. The most recent genocide against Tutsis, in 1994, followed the death of moderate Hutu President Juvenal Habyarimana in a plane crash on April 6. A bloodbath ensued, which Habyarimana had tried to hold back. In three months, between half a million and a million Tutsis and sympathetic Hutus were massacred, until the exile-led Tutsi Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) took control of the country in July.

### Women's Experience of Violence

Though men were killed in great numbers, due in part to their perceived role as the main combatants, in no country were women spared. Although no precise statistics are available, it is known that hundreds of women in Kenya, thousands of women in El Salvador and indeed hundreds of thousands of women in Rwanda were killed. In synthesising the accounts of the panellists at the seminar, it became clear that women from all three countries were victims of similar patterns of violence.

### Familial Betrayal

A common – and chilling – dimension to the killings is that they were often committed by neighbours, friends and even family of the victims. Tecla Wanjala reported that in Kenya one young child hid and watched her father being skinned alive before he was killed – by the brother of the child's mother. Ester Mujawayo from Rwanda told how thousands were killed at roadblocks after their identity cards revealed that they were Tutsis. Most of the killing was done, not by an external army, but by neighbours, people who knew and had lived with their victims. And it was most often women who were forced to be silent witnesses to these murders. In El Salvador

**... what women experienced was having to watch family members massacred and not being able to acknowledge that they were family members because if you were watching somebody being killed by the military who was a family member and you began screaming ... they could turn around and kill you.**

Women were also forced to flee their homes, and their property – including houses and crops – was often destroyed. In Kenya, the homes of women from groups which did not support Moi's party were specifically targeted as part of the ethnic cleansing.

**If you were married from a community that was not wanted in that area, you had to lead the group that was to burn your mother-in-law's house and loot that house.**

## Children

After their homes were destroyed, women fled to safer places. Forced not only to run and hide, they also had to protect their children. Wanjala reported that in Kenya, in the act of fleeing some women fell on their children and killed them, or forced them to run until they were out of breath and died. In El Salvador some women had to make excruciatingly painful decisions about their children.

**There were a number of cases where women were forced to kill their children, babies who were crying. If they were allowed to continue crying the military might find a group of say 20 or 50 people, so it was a case of either "kill this baby" or kill 50 people.**

If women and children did make it to safety, often it was to overcrowded camps where privacy and food were scarce.

## Sexual Violence

Women's reluctance to talk about the sexual violence that was reported in all three conflicts makes analysing the scope and patterns of this type of violence difficult. In Rwanda, according to Mujawayo

**... rape was systematic: rape by Hutu gangs, rape by soldiers, and worst of all the rape to humiliate you even more – they used guns, or sticks, because you were not humiliated enough if it was just men who raped you.**

Not all women were raped by enemy groups. In El Salvador women soldiers were raped by their male comrades. Even though within the FMLN military code the death penalty can be imposed against rapists, this did not necessarily help the survivors of rape themselves.

**In reality it was often a catch-22 in that when there was rape, if it was your commander who raped you – this man who was this amazing revolutionary and who was your hero – how could you tell anybody if you knew he might be given the death penalty?**

## Girls

Like women, girls were killed in El Salvador, Rwanda and Kenya and made up a large proportion of those forced to watch others die. Many girls were forced to watch the

murder of their parents and then – children themselves – had to assume responsibility for their younger siblings. Sometimes girls were also forced to commit or aid in killings. In Rwanda, children used dogs to find fugitives hiding in their neighbourhoods. Girls, the most vulnerable group, were also raped. In El Salvador

**... there were mothers who sent their little girls into the ranks of the FMLN knowing they could be raped, but thinking that being raped by an FMLN member certainly was better than being raped by some one in the military.**

And they were sexually exploited in other ways. In Kenya, many young girls were forced into prostitution or early marriages as a consequence of the violence so that they could contribute to family living expenses. And it was clear that the plight of girls did not end with the signing of peace accords. They remained the primary victims of the post-conflict era, as – unlike their brothers – they were most often the first to be denied both school and food in extremely impoverished families. Girls' dual trauma – experienced in terms of both their gender and their age – is often not documented or understood.

### The Consequences of Trauma

Women experienced psychological and physical symptoms of trauma as varied and at times as numerous as the acts of violence themselves. Many of the symptoms were shared by women in all three countries.

### Frozen Emotions

Henrietta Shannon gave a clinical overview of the psychological consequences of El Salvadorian women's exposure to trauma. One of the primary symptoms was a "freezing" of the emotions: survivors' disassociation from or storing away of the intense pain and grief they suffered during extended periods of violent conflict. Tecla Wanjala from Kenya and Ester Mujawayo from Rwanda agreed that this "freezing" had happened to women in their countries as well. One of the causes was that in all three countries victims were seldom able to express their grief for fear of risking their lives. Mujawayo said

**This has been very traumatic – to have nowhere to show your sadness, nowhere to cry, nowhere to find yourself because you've been running ... and you can't show that you know the person who has been killed, you just have to keep going, keep going.**

And for many women this emotional environment did not change when the conflict ended. As Mujawayo explained

**When it was finished and now you had time to cry, time to explode, there is nowhere space to do so. You are no longer hiding physically but you have to hide all your emotions and you have to show nothing.**

The main reasons for this continued need to hide or freeze emotions were governments' lack of acknowledgement of the conflict, the fact that many survivors continued to live with the neighbours, friends and family members who had perpetrated violence against them, and the continued violence itself. In Kenya, not only did the government deny the violence had occurred, but also the country is still continually threatened by inter-ethnic clashes. In El Salvador, although there has been a truth commission, the former government and military have failed to acknowledge their roles in human rights violations and were able to say publicly that they were proud of what they did. And although the world has acknowledged the genocide in Rwanda, Mujawayo says that many survivors still feel hunted and wary because perpetrators fear that the survivors – as witnesses – will send them to court and perhaps to their executions.

#### The Absence of Rituals

Another factor which contributed to the freezing of emotions was an inability to grieve through the ritual formality of a funeral or traditional burial. Wanjala explained that in Kenyan culture men traditionally buried bodies at the family home. During the clashes this tradition was disrupted and often women, not men, had to sneak out at night to secretly – and single-handedly – bury their dead family members. The trauma was intensified when women had to bury their children in camps far from their homes. Mujawayo testified to the difficulty of not being able to bury bodies at all. For many Rwandan women the normal grieving ritual

**... has not been done because we have never buried them. When you are lucky and they tell you where the bodies are, it is really a big party because then you can bury them, you can have a proper burial, and then you can come to terms with the deaths.**

Shannon explained that many El Salvadorian women were not allowed to practise the traditional Catholic burials they would choose, although recently many of the bodies of massacre victims have been exhumed and can now be buried in this way.

#### Guilt

In Kenya and El Salvador, women carried overwhelming guilt for the deaths of their children during the conflicts. In Kenya, Wanjala reported that those women whose children had died while they were fleeing feel that they are murderers. El Salvadorian women who were forced to kill their children, were similarly traumatised. Shannon

reported that there are many women who just say: "I will never have another child. I survived and that's good, but I'm not bringing up any more children." These feelings were compounded when widows impoverished by the conflict found themselves unable to provide for their children or send them to school when it was over. And feelings of guilt were not only about children. Shannon explained that some of the most common types of trauma were more general feelings of guilt at having survived and the guilt of not having been able to do something, at the time of the violence.

### Anger and Mistrust

Shannon said that in El Salvador, even after the war was over

**... the joy of peace was often marked by profound grief, and within the relief lingered anger, resentments and hatred which had built up over the years of war and conflict.**

These feelings were intensified by the fact that many survivors continued to live close to the very people who had perpetrated violent acts against them and their families. Mujawayo explained that it has also traumatised a lot of people to live in such mistrust.

### Rape-related Trauma

The specific trauma of survivors of rape was the most hidden and took especially long to unearth and come to terms with. In Kenya, reported Wanjala

**... some children, young girls, were raped, and it took us a year when we started talking to them to realise that they were even affected by venereal diseases – something they are so closed about they don't want to talk about it.**

Mujawayo told of the many Rwandan women

**... who have been raped and who have never talked about it because of the shame and the guilt. You don't talk about it, even if you have been bleeding since 1994.**

Considering the pressure of dealing with the effects of these compounded traumas it was not surprising to hear Mujawayo say that many Rwandan survivors felt as if they were going mad.

"Merry-go-rounds": Survival strategies

In the face of such overwhelming violence and trauma, it is encouraging to know that women survivors have come together to share their stories, to support each other, to explore ways of dealing with their pain and to rebuild their lives. In Kenya, a group of social workers, teachers and nurses began holding prayer meetings for women affected by the clashes. Through these meetings, women learned how other women were traumatised and began to explore indigenous methods of counselling and healing. Out of this has evolved what Wanjala calls a "merry-go-round" comprised of women who have carved out a space for healing for themselves and other women.

AVEGA in Rwanda started in a similar way. According to Mujawayo

**... it was just purely informal, purely support, so that you don't go mad. We touch each other, and feel we are still alive, and then you start to think where you are living and you start to share your home, and you start to share a bit of food, and you start to share clothes, and gradually we have started to organise to make these informal groups the more structured organisation which is now AVEGA.**

AVEGA has become involved in developing income-generating projects for women and lobbies on such issues as new houses for displaced survivors.

Voluntary work and the "merry-go-round" are critical in the virtual absence of formal, state-funded professional services for victims of trauma in El Salvador, Kenya and Rwanda. The speakers at the seminar all emphasised the importance of sharing survival strategies as a way to empower women affected by violence.

Henrietta Shannon closed her presentation by saying that her experience with El Salvadorian women is that their strength, their endurance and their example have shown "what it means to be human under circumstances which are so far from human". And Ester Mujawayo from Rwanda concluded

**Those who have not been able to take our bodies can't take our humanity. And I think this, I am convinced that it is possible, because I have seen it, and I saw it every day, and this is what is keeping us alive and fighting.**

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