

## SEVOTA'S PSYCHOSOCIAL APPROACH

### IMPACTING THE IDENTITY OF CHILDREN BORN OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE DURING THE RWANDAN GENOCIDE



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## INTRODUCTION

The following document was written by Godeliève Mukasarasi, social worker, founder and coordinator of SEVOTA<sup>1</sup>—which translates as Solidarity for the Development of Widows and Orphans to Promote Self-Sufficiency and Livelihoods—a Rwandan organization promoting personal growth and development for women survivors, widows, and children born of sexual violence. SEVOTA actively contributes to improve the social, cultural and economic circumstances of survivors and orphans following the Rwandan genocide (1994). The organization’s main goal is to promote peacebuilding, reconciliation, and human rights for survivors and children born amidst armed conflicts. SEVOTA members work to reduce poverty and mobilize survivors and orphans to promote peacebuilding; active non-violence; the prevention and resolution of conflicts; as well as to revive Rwandan positive values based on solidarity, collaboration and children’s education.

The organization also aims to improve the autonomy, resilience and personal growth of children born of sexual violence; to fight against illiteracy and a lack of education; to encourage environmental protection activities; and to promote psychological and physical well-being by teaching acupuncture and movement therapy techniques. SEVOTA organizes activities promoting mutual support and collaboration between women survivors, traumatized children and victims of violence. These activities foster a sense of solidarity, compassion, dignity. They target women victim of sexual violence, children born of rape, vulnerable households comprising widows and orphans, as well as members of affected communities.

The organization refers to victims of rape as “survivors” and uses the designation “capable youth” to describe children born of rape. “Capable youth” in kinyarwanda: *Urubyiruko rushoboye*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.peaceinsight.org/conflicts/rwanda/peacebuilding-organisations/sevota/>.

highlights the potential of teens and young adults to foster growth and self-esteem based on positive traits, thus actively deconstructing a generalized focus on the nature of their origin. An approach that values positive denomination fights prejudice and redefine negative stigmas too often associated with victims of violence during armed conflicts such as the Rwandan genocide.

SEVOTA intervenes within affected communities with strategies fostering partnership by planning and supporting groups that actively engage in reparative justice measures or advocacy. SEVOTA's members, together with members of the community, hold forums to educate affected communities and disseminate information on the consequences of sexual violence. These measures foster communication and active participation among community members and increases participation in redress movements for transitional justice programs. Interventions also facilitate the social integration of survivors and children born of sexual violence in the current post-genocide context. SEVOTA is committed to reinforcing local psychosocial competences that foster peacemaking in the Great Lakes region (East Africa).

The socio-economic reintegration of survivors, their children, or orphans who have become the head of families living in poverty, through specific programs and follow-up measures, is essential to the success of reparation efforts to support victims of the genocide. Through the “Réseau des Femmes pour la paix” (*Urunana*), SEVOTA monitors the psychosocial journey of widows who survived the genocide perpetrated against Tutsis. The organization promotes self-healing through personal expression in a collective cultural space to ease the consequences of trauma. SEVOTA also monitors the journey of forced marriage survivors through the program “*Ndi Umunyarwanda*”. This program supports married women whose households have been affected by or dissolved during the genocide, to foster unity and reconciliation by creating spaces of exchange on peacebuilding and personal development.



Image 1: Kigali, 2016.

## SEVOTA'S APPROACH IN THE FIELD

The Rwandan genocide (1994) was characterized by immense brutality. In addition to diverse forms of sexual violence and torture endured by the Tutsis, the systematic rape of approximately 250,000 to 500,000 women and young girls has scarred the country. The atrocities of the genocide have permeated the Rwandan social memory, and have left their mark on international imaginaries. Women were raped in front of their husbands, parents, brothers and sisters, and sometimes even their children. They were often tortured, mutilated, deliberately infected with HIV, forced into sexual slavery and/or marriage. Due to such circumstances, survivors are in dire need of multiple forms of medical and psychological support. A holistic approach to treatment is necessary and can lead to rehabilitation of survivors on both physical and psychological fronts.

Systematic rape was established as a strategy to destroy the Tutsis as an ethnic group and

resulted in numerous unwanted pregnancies. Women who have been systematically raped by different groups of militiamen and/or *Interahamwe* suffered from one or many forced pregnancies, and even as of today, still ignore the identity of their children's father. In Rwandan society, these children are called "child from a bad memory" (enfant du mauvais souvenir), "dumb or stupid child" (enfant bête), "child from the bush" (enfant de la brousse), "child of the unknown" (enfant de l'inconnu), "child of coincidence" (enfant du hasard), "child of hatred" (enfant de la haine), or "gift of misfortune" (enfant du malheur). In the eyes of local communities, these children embody a past filled with destructive violence that aimed to annihilate the Tutsi community. The genocide and its children remain taboo subjects in Rwandan society. SEVOTA's approach aims to break the silence between survivor mothers and their children, and more broadly, the silence surrounding those issues in Rwanda.

SEVOTA has worked for years with numerous affected communities, more specifically with mothers participating in the *Abiyubaka* forum. One of the psychosocial measures designed to support children born of rape is nature excursions. SEVOTA offers children a choice between two types of thematic excursions fostering either therapeutic benefits or a sense of empowerment. The goal of these activities is to create a sense of well-being for affected youth through the healing of traumatic wounds, and by adopting strategies which break the ongoing cycle of violence. This therapeutic approach also aims to inspire children and help them build a positive self-image, in order for them to better accept the circumstances of their birth. Collective excursions constitute a safe space for participants where they are free to collectively share their experiences, issues and hopes for the future. They can access mutual forms of support and reach self-acceptance. Before the implementation of the excursion program, SEVOTA regularly intervened during an annual festival for survivors and their children. Gatherings were planned for one or two days to encourage



participants and their children to partake in training and empowerment sessions. These sessions were often organized as hikes or excursions with beautiful sceneries to inspire serenity and a sense of well-being among participants. During those excursions, counsellors assisted participants in accepting their wounds, coming to term with daily forms of hardship, and most importantly, themselves. Excursions helped children become more resilient by allowing them to learn about their history and the nature of their conception, to understand their emotions and needs, while cultivating hope for a better life. They emerged out of the excursions motivated and ready to put efforts into durable solutions for a better future. SEVOTA supports survivors so that they can realize their full potential and gain perspective when it comes to alternative life opportunities. The organization also implemented a second program for women survivors and their husbands. Individual sessions are prepared for husbands, together with couple therapy to encourage peaceful cohabitation in affected households. This program also aims to improve the relationship of children born of sexual violence and their father (accused “génocidaire”).



Image 2: Kigali, 2016.

## **PSYCHOSOCIAL PROBLEMS OF CHILDREN BORN OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND SURVIVORS**

Children born of sexual violence are often raised in environments fostering child victimization. They experience emotional difficulties vis-à-vis the origin of their conception; more specifically because they feel that they were not wanted. Many young children were victimized and neglected, and many have experienced familial and social rejection from a very young age. They grew up feeling that no one cared for their urgent needs. When conflicts arose, these young children were, more often than not, made the scapegoat for household issues. They became responsible for all forms of misery, and as a result, suffered at the hands of their siblings and other relatives.

In some instances, children inherited rights and property of a deceased relative. They felt overwhelmed or crumbled under the weight of such responsibilities. For example, Sabin a young boy inherited a field following the passing of his grandmother. He was put in charge of diverse familial tasks such as repairing the family pen and overseeing the family's plantations.

Furthermore, in many cases, these children became a source of comfort for their grieving mother. They grew up with the burden of impossible existential tasks. They were robbed of a childhood as they had to become emotionally mature at a young age to carry on family duties or to take care of their mothers. They also grew up without knowing their father. Indeed, when children attempt to learn more about their origin, they expose themselves to diverse forms of physical and verbal violence. As physical violence incites silence, they are often hushed and promptly told to "shut up". The vast majority of those children grew up assuming an identity associated with the maternal household, which is quite unusual in the Rwandan cultural context. However, when they later came to know of the circumstance of their birth, they felt shame due to the fact that their biological father tortured members of their maternal family.

Following the genocide, some of the women survivors got married. Given that some already had a child born of rape, the relationship between the child and the husband more often than not caused conflicts within the household. When the couple had children “of their own” later on, the husband sometimes demanded that his wife’s child left the house. Conflicts between the husband and the child also negatively impacted the relationship with their mother. Conflicts between the child and the husband are frequent given Rwandan patriarchal norms. The child often challenges the authority of the husband and fails to show respect. Children growing up in such conditions came to resent their mother and accused her of not loving them as much as their husband and their other children. These particular conflictual situations in diverse households negatively impact children born of sexual violence. Children born of sexual violence tend to be more ‘disobedient’ when compared to other children in the family. They also demanded answers regarding their origin and identity by throwing fits and suffering post-traumatic crises. All these emotional complexities rendered familial life difficult to manage for the parents as well as all other members of the family.



Image 3: Kigali, 2016.



## KEY ELEMENTS OF THE PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

First, spirituality, prayer and faith proved to be a great source of strength for traumatized individuals in Rwanda. Victims of extreme violence during times of war or a genocide often lose faith in humanity and need to turn to different forms of spirituality in order to overcome obstacles. Faith offers comfort transcending human atrocity. Therefore, prayer and spiritual reflexive exercises are part of the methodology used during the *Abiyubaka* forum and youth excursions. SEVOTA makes sure to include all the religious denominations of participants.

Second, SEVOTA's educational training promotes awareness and is based on a participatory approach as opposed to a theoretical and hierarchical approach often resulting in the alienation of participants. FAMA – which stands for Facts, Associations, Meaning and Action – is a participatory method employed during educational sessions to encourage voluntary participation and group dialogue. Through raised awareness, participants gain agency of their own lives and are able to overcome the stigmatized label of 'victim'.

During youth excursions, the FAMA method is observed accordingly with a **code** such as a drawing, a photo, a story or a role-playing game depicting a certain reality, or a situation inspired by the participants' daily lives. The facilitator then poses a series of four questions that go as follow:

- **F (facts):** *“What do you see in the drawing/role-playing game/photo? How do think the characters of this drawing/role-playing game/photo feel?”* These open-ended questions establish physical and emotional “facts” of the code.
- **A (association):** *“Have you ever experienced something akin to what the characters on the drawing/role-playing game/photo? How do you feel when seeing this drawing/role-playing game/photo?”* These questions help to create associations between emotions of the code and the emotions and experiences of the participants. Participants learn how to trust others through the process of sharing personal experiences.

- **M (meaning):** Those questions assist participants in finding deeper meaning within the drawing/role-playing game/photo, such as values, principles and practices. For example, a drawing showing children in relation to children's rights could raise questions such as: *"How could we improve the living situation of children through children's rights?"* or *"How can we contribute, as mothers, to improve the living situation of children?"*
- **A (actions):** Those final questions initiate concrete strategies based on the discussions and conclusions from the exercise. As an example: *"What strategies or actions can we take to improve the living conditions of children in our communities? Can you suggest two new activities that we could implement, or think of two attitudes we could adopt following our discussion?"*

A second method applied during the thematic youth excursions and therapeutic itineraries are the sharing of ideas and past experiences in groups of two, or in small groups that take the form of short plenaries. Groups are often organized accordingly with age, locality, etc. Participants learn to open up to others during conversations. The counsellors noted that exchanges between children initiated important changes in terms of personal growth and self-healing for survivors. This method therefore became one of SEVOTA's main logical intervention. The sharing process in small groups provides a safe space where it is possible for participants to be heard as well as to listen.

The action of sharing and concurrently breaking silence around those issues become a source of healing and reconciliation for participants. Each session is planned around those group exercises with different themes introduced through the conversation by a facilitator. Thereafter, participants share the topic of their small group discussion with the entire group and the facilitator. Again, this broader discussion takes the form of a plenary.

The facilitator poses the questions and assist in pooling answers, testimonies, comments and conclusions among the audience. During those sessions, women participants are encouraged to share specific experiences in front of the group. This can help other women to open up at a later

time and ensure self-care and management. It initiates reflections and relational changes between women, children and the broader community. Participants also realize to which degrees different experiences can vary among survivors, which promotes collective empowerment within the group.

SEVOTA puts forward creative and recreational exercises as therapeutic methods for healing and reconciliation. Trauma is particularly noticeable in the body of individuals having endured diverse forms of physical and psychological tortures and violence. During those traumatic events, the body automatically registers those specific experiences through cerebral, hormonal and chemical reactions. Those natural physiological processes aim to preserve the life of the individual enduring traumatic violence. For this reason, during the *Abiyubaka* forum, in addition to using methods encouraging verbal sharing such as individual counseling and group therapy, counselors also use techniques that aim to re-energize the participants' body by physically releasing accumulated post-traumatic stress.

Addressing trauma by attending to the body is a gentle approach to treating post-traumatic disorders, since it avoids triggers such as painful memories, which tend to manifest when using therapeutic techniques relying on verbal sharing of past experiences. Furthermore, by freeing energy blocked in specific parts of the body due to physical trauma, survivors also experience mental release and learn how to personally remedy to their suffering. For these reasons, counselors end all sessions with physical exercise to revitalize participants' bodies by releasing blocked energies, as well as worries related to complex issues and daily accumulated stress.

We use different methods such as the Trauma Tapping Technique (TTT) developed and disseminated by the Swedish organisation *Peaceful Heart Network* among numerous countries afflicted by diverse crises. The TTT method allows participants to release psychological tension, fatigue and stress. This exercise helps participants relax and appeases all members of the family

while reinforcing relationships within the household. It also alleviates symptoms of anxiety, anguish, phobias, irritability, aggressivity, sadness, depression, hyper-sensitivity, memory loss, difficulty concentrating, flashbacks, feelings of isolation and uselessness, and lack of self-confidence. It also dissociates the body and the mind through a form of emotional anesthesia. TTT relieves head and stomach aches as well as other types of bodily discomfort, hypertension, palpitations, difficulty breathing, enuresis, eczema, skin problems, muscle tension, weakness and constant fatigue. SEVOTA also uses the **Capacitar** approach, which consists of simple acupressure techniques and body movements fostering a sense of well-being. Furthermore, the organization plans personal development activities and sport games, traditional dance sessions and disco-dancing. These activities allow participants to feel better in their bodies, heart and soul. They go back home relaxed and revitalized, which usually entails positive emotional impacts in their daily life.



Image 4: Kigali, 2016.



## EFFECTS ON WOMEN AND CHILDREN

Intervention with children entails preliminary work with their mother. The first behavioral change noted following a series of therapeutic meetings between women is the ability to open up to others through the action of sharing, more specifically in groups of two. This newfound openness affects the relationship between mothers and their children. Mothers explained that they felt less lonely after sharing their mutual experiences of sexual violence during armed conflicts with other mothers. They now understand that others may have suffered more harm or in different ways. They see how other survivors were able to overcome pain and took steps towards healing. By sharing experiences with other women, survivors cultivate self-esteem and a newfound sense of dignity. They recover the ability to lead a positive existence while standing strong and tall.

They can also initiate a journey towards relational change with their children. They gain confidence and are able to share stories and life experiences with their children, more specifically on their origin. Cordiality is also established between the members of the household. Some women felt liberated after asking their children for forgiveness. They explained feeling relieved and this new sense of dignity informed the attitude they adopt towards their children. By building self-esteem, they started to see their children under a different light and accept them the same way they would other children. These changes in mothers set the pace for affected youth on their therapeutic journey, starting from the first attendance to forums organized for mothers. Children greatly appreciate the efforts put into the themes of youth excursions, such as *mother survivor's testimony*, *Alain de Bosnie's film*, *the palm tree story*, *the resilience suitcase* (le témoignage d'une mère survivante; le film d'Alain de Bosnie; l'histoire du palmier; et la valise de résilience). Children attending these excursions show increased autonomy and psychological stability. They themselves noticed improved academic performance and a better relationship with their mother.

They felt uplifted after forgiving their mother, and experienced relief through the process of sharing life histories with other children who had similar experiences. They made friends and began to organize emotional and recreational activities with their families, while collectively aiding vulnerable elderly women. This introspective journey allowed children to discover that there is more to life than pain and stigma, thus fostering inner power and improving self-esteem as well as overall confidence. It gave them courage to undertake small projects to generate revenue, which is essential to improving their social and economic conditions.



Image 5: Kigali, 2016.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, the empowerment excursions organized by SEVOTA for women survivors and their children teach participants about self-care and how to better take charge of their own lives. They thrive and learn more about diverse social practices essential for maintaining harmonious

relationships with others and the broader community. They also learn to collectively put into practice different self-healing techniques to alleviate the repercussion of trauma on their mind and body. During the annual festival, participants and their children reunite and create safe spaces to discuss human and women's rights, children's rights, as well as ways to prevent and fight against violence. They also learn about peacemaking through prevention and management of conflicts. These practices result in a tighter knitted community. Together with the intervention of counsellors, festivals and events increase participation in the fight against violence and incite community members to reach out to political decision-makers. It gives women survivors and their children the opportunity to learn more about each other and to discuss the challenges they and their children face on a daily basis. This appeases the children's anxieties and reduces bad behaviour occurrences. Children also learn to build relationships and develop an aptitude for dialogue, which in time, allows them to better perform academically. Although most women and their children demonstrate a general improvement in terms of physical and psychological ailments, there still remains a myriad of challenges linked to their social standing, which threatens their stability and mental health. The rejection of certain children born of sexual violence by their family and the community at large continues to impact the relationship between mothers and children. Therefore, the physical and mental health of survivors and their children remain fragile. They require immense individual and collective support on their journey towards self-healing and reconciliation.

## ANNEXE

Please find below a compilation of positive comments and feedback from the children after participating in the excursions organized by SEVOTA.

Positive comments vis-à-vis SEVOTA	Positives influence in daily life
- Learn more about self, overcame isolation, life took a better turn, supported while in school and as of today, feels constantly guided towards a better way of life.	- Graduated from high school, actualized human vital strength ( <i>kwiyakira</i> ), learn assurance and self-confidence.
- I learned more about myself and what I can become, I was relieved ( <i>nkomera</i> ).	- I am physically healthy and am experience positivity. I was able to grow and know who I am (where I came from) without hurting.
- I found brothers and sisters in my peers, I learned how to live in peace with other members of society, learned how to regain dignity ( <i>kwigira muri byose</i> ).	- Graduated from high school, actualized human vital strength ( <i>kwiyakira</i> ), learn assurance and self-confidence
- The fog on my heart was lifted and I flourished (became empowered) together with the others. I also was encouraged to attend university. The current follow-up is diverse and very useful.	- I feel comfortable and empowered.
- It helped give a sense to my life, through understanding and learning.	- Learned how to adopt a positive mindset to live a positive life.
- It helped my mother and I, we were welcomed in sharing our problems to find relevant solutions.	- Allowed me to pursue my studies, especially in a context where it is not accessible to so many due to different challenges.



- Our thoughts were rehabilitated, especially vis-à-vis the healing of traumas linked to the 1994 genocide. I keep on improving myself through my studies. We are taught to stay positive and envision the future.	- Being myself, adopting good behaviors such as avoiding sexual abuse and recreational drugs.
- Healing wounds, studying, explore and know about the city of Kigali, make new friends, share my story, become empowered and promote myself positively.	- Assurance and self-promotion.
- Learned about who I am and how to guide my life by having objectives and live accordingly with my life purpose.	- Became able to work collectively and build teamwork while before it was impossible (for me). Become empowered with the others and share experiences fostering self-help while fighting anxieties experienced on a daily basis. Become open to a better future that I need to build for myself.
- Meet other children who have the same problems as me, the same origin and the same story, and develop solidarity. I feel supported in my studies. I was lucky enough to study, which could help me pose concrete actions (for a better future). I currently study in a university.	- I opened up. Now I feel worthy and I am confident.

Cover photo: @ SEVOTA, 2019.