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# Storytelling as Self-Empowerment: A Case Study of AVEGA Beneficiaries in Post-Genocide Rwanda

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*SIT Study Abroad*

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Storytelling as Self-Empowerment: A Case Study of AVEGA Beneficiaries in Post-Genocide

Rwanda<sup>1</sup>

By Lauren Garretson

May 2015

## **ABSTRACT**

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<sup>1</sup> Officially the Republic of Rwanda, but will be referred to throughout this paper as Rwanda.

This project is an assessment of the effectiveness of storytelling as a mechanism of self-empowerment in the context of post-genocide Rwanda. It concentrates on the effects of the storytelling that is done by female survivors of the 1994 genocide within one Rwandan organization, AVEGA Agahozo.<sup>2</sup> The research project aim is to understand how these women in contemporary Rwanda try to counter their oppression through the stories they tell others about themselves and reclaim agency over their own lives. I examine the possibilities for, and limitations of, storytelling as a means of self-empowerment for these women to counter the unjust circumstances they still face in the aftermath of 1994. Using interviews along with secondary research, this study concludes that these women of AVEGA were able to use storytelling as an effective means of self-empowerment in certain respects. However, I contend that storytelling's effectiveness in this case is partially due to circumstantial factors that should be considered when examining other instances of storytelling as a means of empowerment in post-conflict contexts.

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<sup>2</sup> AVEGA serves mostly widowed genocide survivors, although it also caters to some elderly male survivors and orphans.

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**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

**AVEGA:** Association des Veuves du Génocide (Association of the Widows of the Genocide)

**ISP:** Independent Study Project

**PTSD:** Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

**SIT:** School of International Training

**TRC:** (South African) Truth and Reconciliation Commission

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## **CHAPTER I: GENERAL INFORMATION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

The 1994 Genocide against the Tutsis<sup>3</sup> in Rwanda left a number of women damaged and oppressed in various ways. These women suffered all sorts of horrors from rape, serious injuries, to a myriad of other forms of trauma. In the years following the genocide many female survivors have struggled to reclaim agency over their own lives due to severe psychological damage from the trauma. This project is a case study of female beneficiaries of AVEGA Agahozo, an organization that provides various resources and services to genocide widows. This study analyzes the effects of storytelling on these women's ability to reclaim agency over their own lives in the wake of oppression in its most destructive form: genocide.

### *1.1 Research Problem*

One of the problems with peacebuilding and transitional justice efforts is that they frequently fail to fully or properly attend to the unique needs of traditionally marginalized groups or at-risk groups, who are typically children (especially orphans), the mentally and physically disabled, the impoverished, and women, among others. Because women in post-conflict societies, such as post-genocide Rwanda, have been traditionally oppressed, they face extra challenges in reclaiming agency over their lives and empowering themselves in the wake of mass violence. For instance, after the 1994 genocide, many women were left widowed in a society where the man of each household was traditionally given the responsibility for providing for the family. A large number of female survivors faced additional stigmatization due to being raped, being infected with HIV, and/or suffering from mental illnesses such as PTSD. Many women who survived the genocide found themselves utterly alone, unable to work to provide for themselves and any possible remaining family members, and without means to empower themselves in the wake of the shattering violence. Continuing injustice in post-conflict societies can threaten the stability of the society in the long run.

There are theories that suggest that storytelling is not only a method of healing after trauma but also one of the mechanisms that can aid in the reclamation of agency in the aftermath of the violence survivors have experienced. That is, one of the ways that some individuals of oppressed groups attempt to fight against injustice, particularly systematic and hidden forms of

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<sup>3</sup> "The Genocide Against the Tutsis" is the official name of the genocide. The genocide will be referred to throughout the majority of this paper as the Rwandan Genocide.

injustice, is by telling stories about themselves and members of their group that contradict the dominant, negative narratives about their group. The possibilities for and limitations of storytelling on survivors' ability to heal, self-empower, and reclaim agency have been examined in many other contexts (see Cole 2010; Coundouriotis 2006; and Hackett and Rolston 2009), but this type of scholarship is lacking in the Rwandan context.

### *1.2 Research Purpose*

The purpose of this project is to assess storytelling as an empowerment mechanism in the context of post-genocide Rwanda. The study investigates the effects of the storytelling that is done by female survivors of the 1994 genocide within one Rwandan organization for genocide survivors, AVEGA Agahozo. The research project aim is to understand how these women in contemporary Rwanda try to counter any oppression or stigmatization they face through the stories they tell others about themselves and how they might reclaim agency over their own lives. That is, the goal of the project is to explore the possibilities for, and limitations of, storytelling as a means of self-empowerment for these particular women so that they can counter unjust circumstances.

Additionally, this project aims to contribute to the existing scholarship concerning marginalized and at-risk groups in post-conflict societies. It also will contribute to the literature on storytelling and its relationship to self-empowerment and agency.

### *1.3 Research Objectives*

The ultimate aim of this study is to understand how women survivors of the Rwandan genocide use storytelling in the post-genocide context as a mechanism of reclaiming agency and self-empowerment in oppressive circumstances. To achieve this aim, two objectives must be completed:

1. Analyze the impact of these women's stories on their lives in the years following the genocide and illuminate the potential empowering effects of the act of storytelling.
2. Discern what problems storytelling cannot address and/or resolve for these women in Rwanda's post-genocide context.

#### *1.4 Research Questions*

1. In what ways was storytelling used as a means of self-empowerment and reclaiming agency for the interviewed female beneficiaries of AVEGA Agahozo?
2. What were the limitations of storytelling as a means of self-empowerment and reclaiming agency for these beneficiaries?
3. What are the wider implications for theories on peacebuilding as they relate to the ways in which storytelling can and cannot help women empower themselves after mass violence?

## **CHAPTER II: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### *2.1 Scope of Study*

This study falls within the fields of gender studies, psychosocial health, and peacebuilding studies. The study's population is female genocide survivors. The sample population was selected from AVEGA Agahozo because the organization caters mostly to genocide widows and therefore has a large pool of potential respondents that fit within this study's demographic.

This study focuses specifically on the effects of those stories about these female survivors' experiences during and since the genocide. The study uses the data gathered from the interviews to ascertain whether or not there are patterns among the women's responses that indicate the successes and limitations of storytelling for empowering them. This study does not examine the effects of storytelling on the lives of other marginalized groups of survivors in post-genocide Rwanda or female genocide survivors outside of AVEGA.

### *2.2 Research Design*

The research project is a qualitative case study that uses interviews with 8 female AVEGA Agahozo beneficiaries as well as 2 AVEGA staff members who work with beneficiaries on matters concerning psychosocial health. I opted to do a case study because despite their highly limited scope, they can contribute to, complicate, or contradict existing theories. Additionally, case studies are suitable for examining a problem in an in-depth, holistic manner. AVEGA was selected as the subject of the case study based upon the makeup of its beneficiaries: the overwhelming majority of its members are widows as a result of the genocide. One-on-one interviews with the beneficiaries, as well as a joint interview with the 2 staff members, were conducted over the course of approximately one week from April 21<sup>st</sup> through April 29<sup>th</sup> 2015 at the AVEGA central regional office in Remera, Kigali, Rwanda. A translator was used for all interviews with beneficiaries.

It is an explanatory study of the ways in which storytelling can and cannot empower these women and help them reclaim agency in their lives in post-genocide Rwanda. My academic director reviewed the research design and interview questions in order to ensure quality.

### *2.3 Data Collection Techniques*

Because this research project is a case study, the majority of the respondents were sampled from a specific demographic of AVEGA Agahozo's beneficiaries. All beneficiaries selected for this study had to be female survivors of the genocide. The remaining 2 respondents of AVEGA staff members were selected based upon their positions within the organization that made them familiar with issues concerning the mental health of their beneficiaries. Beneficiary respondents were selected by AVEGA staff rather than myself, the researcher, in order to ensure that the respondents were emotionally and mentally prepared to touch upon the sensitive topic at hand. The interviews were all semi-structured with pre-written questions, although there were occasionally additional questions asked during the interview as a follow-up to a pre-written question. Most interviews were not recorded on an electronic device given that almost everyone interviewed declined being recorded, and so detailed hand-written notes were taken instead in these instances.

As part of the data collection process, several respondents chose to remain anonymous, while a handful of others gave explicit permission to have their first names used in this study. The following individuals have been given new names in order to retain their anonymity: Jacqueline, Brielle, Sydnee, Dominique, Mirage, Celine, and Pleasance. Three AVEGA beneficiaries gave permission to have their true first names used. These individuals will thus be referred to by their true names throughout this study as follows: Emerita, Odette, and Peace.

### *2.4 Ethical Values Observed*

This research project touches upon highly personal and sensitive subject matters, and thus required me to exercise care and sensitivity in speaking with subjects during the data collection process. The autonomy of each individual and their wishes were respected at all times, including refusals to sign their names on consent forms or to be recorded on an electronic device. Then respondents did not feel comfortable signing a consent form, they were allowed to give verbal consent instead.

The questions created for the interviews were carefully designed so as to avoid asking leading questions or questions that might limit or warp the responses given by the subjects. I took steps to prevent harming the subjects through various measures, such as ensuring anonymity of responses in this study (unless the respondent explicitly granted permission to use their name

in the study), not attempting to coerce individuals to give responses or particular types of responses to questions, allowing respondents to give verbal rather than written consent if they so preferred, etc. Lastly, an electronic version of this study will soon be sent to AVEGA Agahozo and I am going to request that it be available to all beneficiaries and staff members that wish to view the results of the research. This way, the study and its results are transparent for both the organization and its beneficiaries

### *2.5 Limitations of Study*

This study was limited in a few ways. First, the time period given to make contact with AVEGA Agahozo, schedule and conduct interviews, read the relevant literature to the study, and write an analysis was limited to approximately three weeks. Normally, students are given four weeks to complete their studies through SIT, but the first week of the research period was eliminated because it was the commemoration week for the Rwandan Genocide. During this time it was inappropriate to try and contact Rwandans and schedule interviews.

Because of time constraints, I opted to do a case study in order to limit the breadth of my research and make it easier to find respondents that fit within the specific demographic of this study. I was only able to conduct interviews with 10 people in total, and this is admittedly a rather small sample size of respondents. Due to the highly limited amount of time given to conduct the research, the limited number of respondents, and the limited nature of case studies more generally, it is impossible to make broader generalizations about storytelling's ability or inability to help women regain agency over their lives in post-genocide Rwanda or especially in other post-conflict scenarios. Additionally, purely qualitative case studies, given their small scope, are more likely to be influenced by researcher bias than studies that use random sampling and a larger portion of a population.

Furthermore, because all interviews with the AVEGA beneficiaries had to be translated between English and Kinyarwanda, there was the possibility that not every question or response to the questions was translated entirely accurately. Nor can it be guaranteed that certain words and their meanings were not lost in translation. Given that the two languages, English and Kinyarwanda, are very different in structure and origin, certain phrases and expressions may not have translated perfectly or even at all during the interviews. Although discretion was used in selecting a translator, and the translator was selected based on his prior relationship with

AVEGA and translating for its members, errors in translation are always possible. Due to the fact that most interviews were not recorded on an electronic device, no cross checking with another native Kinyarwanda speaker could be done.

With regards to credibility, only some people interviewed consented to being recorded on an electronic device, which can hamper the credibility of the information gathered. Many individuals in Rwanda are suspicious of items such as electronic recording devices and sometimes even written consent forms when they are discussing topics related to the genocide. I took careful, detailed notes during each interview and wrote down some exact quotes from the respondents, but of course without a recording device it is impossible to write down every word spoken. Although this hampered the reliability of the data gathered to some extent, the anonymity and the privacy of the respondents had to be respected.

## **CHAPTER III: LITERATURE REVIEW AND DEFINITION OF KEY CONCEPTS**

### *3.1 Literature Review*

There is a fair amount of academic literature concerning women in conflict and in post-conflict societies and the challenges they face. This includes the work of Musingafi, Dumbu, and Chadamoyo, which argues that viewing problems through a gendered lens can bring about new insights concerning post-conflict development and peacebuilding (2013). An assessment of how stories are used by Rwandan women survivors of the genocide could produce these types of insights and make important contributions to the literature on post-conflict development and reconstruction by identifying how women can and cannot empower themselves through storytelling. Additionally, the article states that women are almost always described as victims of conflict, which constrains their identity and limits their capacity to make decisions within the community (Musingafi, Dumbu, & Chadamoyo, 2013, p. 56-57). Thompson's 2006 review of feminist works on conflict and gender discusses gendered violence in modern conflict, and how this type of violence, particularly sexual violence, is not an accidental by-product of conflict but a tool of war used for specific ends (p. 350). In order to understand how women might be able to heal and empower themselves through storytelling, I must first understand the unique sorts of violence they experienced during the genocide and the implications of violence targeted mainly at women.

Scholarship such as that of Musingafi et al. and Thompson establishes the relevance of my own research project to the existing scholarship about women and how they can overcome their gender-specific challenges in post-conflict societies. My study provides information concerning how women in post-conflict contexts, or more specifically, post-genocide contexts, use storytelling and how the stories they tell intersect with wider gender dynamics. There is a severe lack of scholarship that addresses storytelling as an empowerment mechanism in post-genocide Rwanda. There is, however, an abundance of scholarship that examines women's empowerment and increased representation in the political sphere in Rwanda. But the possibilities for and limitations of storytelling as a tool to empower oneself have yet to be explored in great depth in this context.

There is a fair amount of literature that focuses on the nature of discourse and storytelling and how they are linked to agency. This includes Ahearn's (2001) work, which explores the complexity of agency itself and language's relationship with it and gender. Ahearn supports the

idea that agency and how people use language are tightly intertwined because language identifies agents, objects, and subjects. Some feminist theorists argue that women can reclaim a sense of agency and heal after experiencing violence through telling their own stories in their own way, or through “reclaiming” their stories (Rowland-Serdar & Schwartz-Shea 1991; Russo 2002). According to Rowland-Serdar and Schwartz-Shea in particular, when women speak or write about their experiences they can begin to “reconsider old messages of devaluation” and pave the way for new “messages,” or narratives, to form that defy previous narratives (1991, p. 613). These defied narratives are the ones that constrain female agency and identity through oppression.

Additionally, works such as Simpson’s (2007) focus on the reclamation of agency in societies transitioning after conflict. Simpson’s central contention regarding the storytelling that is done in post-conflict contexts by survivors of violence is that it must be public and part of a larger transitional process that is “founded upon the importance of language reclamation and the rediscovery of victims’ voices” (2007, p. 100). Simpson also asserts that this kind of public storytelling and reclamation of language is necessary in order to (1) ensure human rights for that society’s citizenry and (2) discover the truth about the past violence (2007, p. 89-90). Furthermore, Simpson articulates how a victim of mass violence loses the ability to create a sense of themselves through language or to talk about their horrific experiences in the aftermath (2007, p. 92). This article is much more concerned with the recovery of “truth” about the past than I am in my own research. Yet works such as Simpson’s affirm the importance of victims reclaiming language for themselves in post-conflict societies in order to reduce the risk of being marginalized yet again. Meanwhile, McKinney (2007) explores the relationship between agency, testimony, bearing witness, and victimization. The central argument in this work is that labeling someone who has suffered from widespread political violence as a mere victim while bearing witness to their testimony can actually prevent them from regaining agency after their traumatic experience. This has important implications for the differences between publicized storytelling as testimony and more private storytelling, such as that which occurs within an organization like AVEGA or in therapeutic contexts.

What Simpson mostly touches upon is a highly public kind of language reclamation, such as that which might be possible with official forums for testimony, such as the South African TRC. Articles such as Ross (2003) and Strejilevich (2006) discuss the possibilities for, and

dangers of, highly publicized testimony. In a study of the South African TRC, Ross warns not to assume an “unproblematic link between ‘voice’ and ‘dignity’ and between ‘voice’ and ‘being heard’” (2003, p. 327). Just because a survivor’s voice has been heard in a public setting does not necessarily mean that they have full agency or authorship over their testimony. Strejilevich argues testimony can become commoditized in our modern world, and is sometimes viewed as something that must serve a practical use, such as providing hard facts or certain knowledge of particular events, rather than as a means for the storyteller to process what has happened to them (2006, p. 703).

Other scholars have focused upon storytelling and reclaiming agency in the face of injustice in other post-conflict contexts apart from Rwanda, such as Northern Ireland. One article contends that groups in Northern Ireland who participate in unofficial storytelling can find solidarity in their collective resistance to injustice, but this does not necessarily mean that the government or society at large will recognize this resistance (Hackett & Rolston, 2009). These authors also argue that storytelling must be performed for an audience that is willing to listen to the stories of survivors of violence (Hackett & Rolston, 2009, p. 356-357). According to these views, although a receptive audience is more likely to be available within private spaces, these spaces do not always necessarily allow the wider society the chance to hear the survivors’ stories.

Additional scholarship concentrates on posttraumatic growth through narrative, which occurs in a private rather than public setting. Pals and McAdams (2004) argue that in order for posttraumatic growth to occur in an individual, they must create a coherent narrative, or story, that demonstrates how their sense of self has been changed in a positive way. In a similar vein, Williamson (2012) asserts that posttraumatic growth is a positive change in self-perception, and that one of the variables that can contribute to this positive change in self-perception is the process of creating a meaningful and coherent narrative, or story, out of the traumatic events, a story that demonstrates individual growth (p. 13). These authors assume that storytelling is inherently therapeutic for survivors of trauma and can contribute positively to the recreation of an agentive self in the aftermath of violence.

Conversely, works such as Cole’s (2010) and Hackett and Rolston (2009) attempt to complicate theories of storytelling that say it is a naturally therapeutic, healing, or cathartic endeavor for survivors in post-conflict contexts. Cole argues that the current literature fails to

take into account “instances where narratives function in detrimental ways,” (Cole, 2010, p. 659). Hackett and Rolston counter the majority view in the literature on storytelling in post-conflict settings as a simple solution with minimal potential for harm or repercussions for the storyteller (2009, p. 357-258). Storytelling, particularly in public spaces, may fail to benefit the storyteller and typically the act will “end up frustrating victims’ expectations,” (Hackett and Rolston, 2009, p. 365). Storytelling, according to scholars such as Cole and Hackett and Rolston, should not be thought of as *inherently* therapeutic, liberating, or empowering. For storytelling to help an individual successfully counter oppressive circumstances or reclaim agency, the right audience and the right circumstances must be present. What those circumstances are, precisely, is part of what I will explore in this study.

The goal of my own study is to contribute to the conversation about storytelling and agency by exploring these themes in the post-genocide Rwandan context. It focuses on the unique challenges women face in contemporary Rwanda in countering oppressive circumstances through their storytelling and reclaiming agency over their own lives. This project thus adds to the literature an in-depth examination of one potential mechanism for female self-empowerment after mass violence and identifies the mechanism’s strengths and weaknesses within a private setting. Sustainable peace must be an inclusive peace that attends to the unique needs of marginalized groups after trauma and ensures their security and ultimately the security of the greater society (Schick 2011). Women in many post-conflict settings, Rwanda notwithstanding, were marginalized before, during, and after the genocide. It is thus important to examine the ways in which female survivors of mass violence, such as the Rwandan Genocide, can and cannot use stories as a means of self-empowerment in unjust circumstances.

### *3.2 Definition of Key Concepts*

*Agency:* The capacity of an agent, i.e. a person or other sort of entity, to act in their environment; the ability to have authority over one’s own actions.

*Domination:* This is the result of societal institutions that do not fully allow certain groups of people to decide neither their own actions nor the conditions surrounding those actions.

*Marginalize/Marginalization:* To marginalize someone or a social group is to put and/or keep them in a powerless and/or unimportant position within their society.

*Oppression:* This is a state of being that is the result of prevalent institutional processes that keep certain social groups from learning and using certain skills in the public sphere as well as the result of social structures that keep various social groups from voicing their opinions about society in the public sphere.

*Self-Empowerment:* To be self-empowered is to derive the strength to attain and/or increase agency over oneself and their actions. It can be described as realizing one's full potential for strength or power.

*Storytelling:* The act of storytelling in this paper will refer specifically to those stories people tell about themselves to another person/other people. Storytelling is the crafting of a coherent narrative out of what individuals do or what has been done to them. It is a project of making meaning out of (1) the events that have affected an individual and (2) their actions in response to those events.

#### **CHAPTER IV: PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS, AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA**

The results of this qualitative case study are divided into the following seven sections: introduction of informants; views of the informants themselves on the importance of storytelling; transformation through storytelling; how storytelling acted as an empowerment mechanism; limitations of storytelling as an empowerment mechanism; the overall efficacy of storytelling as self-empowerment; and the conclusion and recommendations. The data is presented in this way in order to provide a roadmap for the reader which details exactly what themes are discussed in the data analysis.

“Introduction of Informants” will describe the creation and purpose of AVEGA Agahozo as well as whom the informants in this study are and the kinds of experiences they have been through due to the genocide. The “Importance of Storytelling” section will detail the ways in which the informants themselves view storytelling as impactful or important to their own lives. Next, “Transformation Through Storytelling” will analyze some of the trends among the respondents’ answers that describe how their lives have changed personally since telling their stories and use relevant scholarly literature in order to ascertain how these transformations might have occurred. “Storytelling as Self-Empowerment” will describe the ways in which storytelling can be empowering based upon how it has helped empower the AVEGA beneficiaries studied here as well as based upon relevant theories presented in scholarly literature. Conversely, “Limitations of Storytelling” will discuss the weaknesses of storytelling as an empowering mechanism and how this corresponds with, or contradicts, the literature concerning storytelling as a means of self-empowerment and reclaiming agency. Then, “Is Storytelling Empowering?” examines the possibilities for and limitations of storytelling thus far presented, as well as additionally relevant literature, and ascertains if storytelling can be considered an empowerment mechanism at all, and if so, under what circumstances. Finally, the “Conclusion and Recommendations” section will summarize the results of the case study. It will reiterate the key points of this paper. This section will provide recommendations for further avenues of study that could add to this report, as well as recommendations for how storytelling might be used in Rwanda’s continuing peacebuilding efforts. Additionally, this section will detail some recommendations for SIT’s Rwanda: Post-Genocide Restoration and Peacebuilding program for future semesters based upon the challenges and limitations I faced while conducting this research project.

#### *4.1 Introduction of Informants*

In 1995, fifty female survivors who were widowed as a result of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide against the Tutsis founded AVEGA Agahozo ("AVEGA Agahozo's Work", 2011). The non-profit organization has been working since its inception to provide resources and support mostly to genocide widows and their remaining children, although it also serves some of the elderly male survivors as well as orphans (ibid.). Given that the overwhelming majority of AVEGA's beneficiaries are widows, AVEGA made a good case study for research on the effectiveness of storytelling as an empowerment mechanism for female survivors of the Rwandan genocide.

The experiences that these women have been through were horrific and subsequently incredibly damaging to them both physically and mentally. Some widows were raped, or their daughters were raped, during the genocide and oftentimes were also consequently infected with HIV—occurrences that are, sadly, very common during times of conflict and further oppress women (Musingafi, Dumbu, Chadamoyo, 2013). Others were severely injured and left with permanent scarring and severe physical limitations that prevent them from performing physically demanding tasks or doing jobs that require physical labor. All of these widows have suffered from severe psychological trauma as a result of what they directly sustained during the genocide as well as what they witnessed happening to family members and friends. The beneficiaries who served as informants for this study have come a long way since the genocide and are now relatively emotionally, mentally, and physically stable, although they still suffer from some of the after-effects. Some of these women even serve as community leaders in post-genocide Rwanda, demonstrating their importance to Rwanda's peacebuilding process. Unfortunately, women taking on grassroots-level leadership roles after being victims of mass violence is a phenomenon that is not paid much attention (Musingafi et. al, 2013). This relegates women to the realm of the monolithic identity as "victims" rather than as survivors, leaders, strugglers, etc., which can impede their attempts to reclaim agency and empower themselves (del Zotto, 2002).

#### *4.2 Importance of Storytelling*

There was a general consensus among the beneficiaries and staff members who served as informants for this case study that storytelling is an incredibly important aspect of the healing process after the trauma the widows have endured. Both staff members and several beneficiaries

that I interviewed said that storytelling has been important to these widows' journeys of healing and self-empowerment after the genocide because the stories they have told within AVEGA have helped AVEGA staff members discern the precise problems and needs of each widow. That is, once widows told their story either to fellow AVEGA beneficiaries or staff members<sup>4</sup>, the staff were much better equipped to help the widows based upon the particular problems presented in each of their stories.

Furthermore, several of the beneficiaries described a sudden sense of freedom after they told their story of surviving the genocide to others for the first time. According to the majority of the beneficiaries interviewed, this sense of freedom was accompanied by feelings of no longer being alone, of discovering that someone or a group of people have also suffered from similar experiences and are thus able to help them carry their burdens thrust upon them by the genocide. While the views on storytelling as given by the beneficiaries and staff members were overwhelmingly positive, each respondent also shared the view that there are issues in the lives of these widows that have not and cannot be solved through sharing their stories.

#### *4.3 Transformation Through Storytelling*

For the majority of the respondents in this study, storytelling served as a cathartic process for them. One beneficiary, Brielle, described the different states of AVEGA widows before and after sharing their stories. Before telling one's story, she said that her fellow female genocide survivors felt very lonely. But sharing one's story and listening to stories told by other AVEGA widows allowed them to become comfortable and familiar with another and "feel the human spirit" (personal communication, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015). Another beneficiary, Sydnee, added to the evidence that storytelling is a highly transformative process for these survivors. In detail, she described how she moved from a state of hopelessness to a hopeful state where she felt capable of providing for herself and her family, how giving her story of surviving the genocide helped empower her to believe in herself as someone who is capable of being self-sufficient and strong, (personal communication, April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015). Additional beneficiaries described similar feelings of positive transformation, as moving from states of hopelessness to states of hopefulness and belief in themselves as capable of being self-sufficient.

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<sup>4</sup> Counselors were typically the ones the widows shared their genocide survival stories with as well as fellow AVEGA beneficiaries.

So what explains why these women felt such a major shift in their life at the moment they first shared their stories of surviving the genocide? The explanation for their feelings before the genocide is fairly straightforward: these women had just witnessed horrific acts, lost some or all of their family and friends, and survived attempts to exterminate them and fellow Tutsis completely<sup>5</sup>. We must turn to some literature on storytelling in order to better fully understand why telling one's story marked such a major transformation in these women's lives and in their senses of selves. One author argues that through the creation of a narrative in a therapeutic setting (such as the counseling that the AVEGA widows receive) about the traumatic event or events, a person can begin to recognize that what they went through was incredibly difficult and subsequently develop a narrative about overcoming this difficult period in their life (Pals & McAdams, 2004). If this recognition of the difficulty of the traumatic events is combined with a sense of personal growth since the event, such as the type of growth Sydnee and other beneficiaries described, then the individual can develop and hold onto "an enduring sense of positive self-transformation within the identity-defining life story," (Pals & McAdams, 2004, p. 66). Thus I argue that the continuous re-affirmation of this type of positive personal growth through subsequent storytelling, such as that which was performed in part by the respondents when I asked them about how their lives have changed since first telling their survival stories, could help explain why over time the women developed a sense of themselves that is sharply divided between their time before the first telling of the story and afterwards.

This type of transformation as described by the beneficiaries could also be explained by the very difficulty in articulating their survival stories in the first place and the subsequent success of finally being able to speak about their previously unspeakable experiences. Only one beneficiary I interviewed, Mirage, described telling her story for the first time as an easy task (personal communication, April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015). All seven others said that it was very difficult and often a highly emotional experience. Memories of trauma are full of discontinuities, feelings of the surreal, and oftentimes can alter a survivor's perception of time so that they feel as though the traumatic events are still happening in the present rather than left behind in the past (Strejilevich, 2006; Hackett & Rolston). I theorize that once these respondents were able to

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<sup>5</sup> It is assumed here that all of the beneficiaries interviewed for this study are Tutsi given that they and their husbands were targeted during the genocide. This cannot be verified, however, given that it is incredibly inappropriate to ask a Rwandan what their ethnicity is.

articulate, at least to some extent, the unspeakable horror that they witnessed, they were able to begin to feel as though those events were truly left behind in the past rather than feeling as though the events are still happening. As an example, Peace, among other respondents, said that telling her survival story for the first time allowed her “to keep focused on moving through life” which is indicative of the transformative power of storytelling for these women (personal communication, April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

#### *4.4 Storytelling as Self-Empowerment*

Storytelling has been the source of a few significant changes in the lives of the women interviewed for this study with regards to their ability to empower themselves. One of these changes has been that several of the informants interviewed, after sharing their survival stories with others, now have positively altered perceptions of themselves and what they are capable of doing. Take the example of Sydnee, who in her interview said that “storytelling has really empowered me and made me strong,” and added that she now, after sharing her story, feels capable of working and providing for herself and her remaining family (personal communication, April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015). Jacqueline asserted that sharing her story made people trust her to “have the responsibility” to help others within AVEGA who had been through similar experiences as her own (personal communication, April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2015). Odette elaborated more upon this point, saying that after she told her story to other AVEGA beneficiaries she began to feel more mature and more capable of helping out others who face similar problems as her. She also emphasized that her fellow beneficiaries began to see her in the same light. The result for her was the acquisition of a leadership role: “people realized that I am responsible [...] they appointed me to be a leader of other widows in my sector,” (personal communication, April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

Three other respondents echoed this same sentiment concerning responsibility. So not only did their stories of survival and becoming leaders help them to be *perceived by others* as responsible but they also perceived themselves as capable of being responsible. The emphasis in several of the informants’ interviews on the changes in others’ perception of themselves as mature and responsible demonstrates the dialogic nature of storytelling, and that it is simultaneously a collective and personal endeavor (Hackett & Rolston, 2009). Each story is

highly personal to each individual, but the act of storytelling necessarily functions between the storyteller and her audience.

One of the AVEGA staff, Celine, said that many of the widows learn about capability and self-sufficiency from each other's stories, especially those stories that counter the restrictive cultural narrative that women require strong husbands. In Celine's words, the prevailing notion is that "males are strong" and that "for females it's very hard" to raise a family on their own (personal communication, April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015). She added that genocide widows' attitudes towards this notion changed when they heard stories from other AVEGA widows about successfully raising families without husbands. Again, the dialogic nature of storytelling contributes to both the empowerment of the storyteller herself, as she reaffirms to others her capability to be strong, as well as the empowerment of the listeners who learn from the storyteller that they, too, can be self-reliant agents over their own lives. Additionally, whether or not the women are actively attempting to dismantle the sexist ideology that "strong" men are necessary to care for women and children, their stories of self-reliance inspire other women within their AVEGA community to do things that certainly counter this oppressive ideology.

For the informants interviewed, storytelling can be boiled down to serving two main functions that contribute towards efforts of self-empowerment. One is that these women use their stories about survival during and after the genocide to reaffirm to themselves and demonstrate to their audiences that they are strong and capable agents over their own lives, and that they have moved from states of passive hopelessness to hopefulness and self-reliance. According to Williamson (2012), stories about gaining or regaining control over one's life and becoming strong after feeling hopeless are examples of a "progressive narrative" which contributes positively towards one's sense of viewing themselves as agents who have control over their own lives (p. 8). All beneficiaries interviewed emphasized feelings of strength, of moving from hopelessness to hopefulness, and/or of becoming self-reliant, all of which are examples of progressive narratives. Furthermore, when widows tell stories of survival and becoming community leaders who can care for their families, they counter the oppressive dominant narrative that men are the strong ones who provide for the family. This is representative of the second self-empowering function of reclaiming agency through defying (1) the restrictive and oppressive cultural narrative that women require help from strong men and (2) the global

narrative that women during and post-conflict are passive victims rather than survivors or self-reliant agents (Musingafi et. al, 2013).<sup>6</sup>

#### *4.5 Limitations of Storytelling*

Although storytelling has thus far proven to be used in ways that empowered the AVEGA beneficiaries interviewed for this study, there are certainly limits to storytelling's usefulness as an empowerment mechanism. The first and more obvious limitation on storytelling is that it cannot empower an individual in an economic sense. Telling one's story cannot grant someone financial means or automatically empower her to know how to support herself economically. The majority of the beneficiaries emphasized that storytelling cannot grant them physical means of supporting themselves, such as a caretaker in old age (personal communication with Dominique, April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015), or the knowledge and skills to start a small business to support their family (personal communication with Mirage, April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015). Furthermore, although three of the beneficiaries and both staff members I interviewed attested to storytelling's healing effects, it cannot be considered a simple solution to serious problems with trauma, such as PTSD. One staff member, Pleasance, emphasized that "relationships with counselors, and time, are the key healers" for AVEGA's widows (personal communication, April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015). Although storytelling is part of counseling in AVEGA, it is not the only process used during counseling.

Additionally, there are different limitations to different kinds of storytelling with regards to their potential to be empowerment mechanisms. For instance, there is the unofficial process of storytelling that was performed by all of the AVEGA beneficiaries I interviewed. This type of storytelling is particularly limited by nature in the sense that it is unofficial and therefore lacks legitimacy and authority, which hampers its ability to have far-reaching effects (Hackett & Rolston, 2009). When stories are limited to a community or remain within the confines of an organization such as AVEGA, they are also limited in how much of an effect they can have on more widespread, structural injustices. Jacqueline testified to this reality when she said, "talking and sharing your story cannot help with poverty and injustice" because these issues are complex while, in her opinion, stories are simple (personal communication, April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015).

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<sup>6</sup> See also del Zotto (2002) for a detailed study on how women are portrayed as passive victims during wartime by news sources around the world.

Another kind of storytelling commonly performed in post-conflict contexts, Rwanda notwithstanding, is public testimony. One of the most studied examples of public testimony in contemporary literature is the South African TRC. Several scholars provide critiques of the process of public testimony in the TRC, ranging from Coundouriotis's (2006) assessment that testimonies were appropriated and took away authorship from those who testified, or Ross's (2003) argument that the TRC often forced testifiers to tell their stories in a formulaic way that did not always accurately reflect their individual experiences. While these stories have the potential to fight widespread injustice on a grander scale, they can also be restricted by dominant societal or government narratives and expectations of what these testimonies should be, which can actually reduce the storyteller's sense of agency and therefore halt developments toward self-empowerment on this front.

One of the beneficiaries I interviewed attested to one the dangers of publicized storytelling when she described the only instance in which she ever regretted sharing her survival story. Emerita said that after she testified at commemoration she was not only re-traumatized but also offended by commentary from a friend (personal communication, April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015). Once her story was opened up to the public space it was also opened up to criticism and insensitive public commentary, which can severely impact one's post-traumatic growth. Although this person was a friend Emerita had previously known, they gave Emerita a very negative response, something that she had never experienced while sharing her story within the safe space of AVEGA.

#### *4.6 Is Storytelling Truly Empowering?*

I argue that storytelling has the potential to be an effective mechanism for self-empowerment of marginalized groups in post-conflict contexts under the correct circumstances. In this case study, storytelling did serve as an effective mechanism of self-empowerment for the informants in a few important ways. Other scholars, such as Rowland-Serdar and Schwartz-Shea (1991), support the idea that maintaining authorship and control over the creation and telling of one's story can be a powerful empowerment tool for women.

Ideally, storytelling would be one mechanism that compliments others in oppressed groups' efforts for self-empowerment. As every beneficiary I interviewed mentioned, there are several problems that storytelling cannot solve that are related to their personal development of

self-empowerment in post-conflict Rwanda. These additional needs, such as financial empowerment, can only be attended to with alternative mechanisms to storytelling.

Additionally, it is important to remember, “narrative research has tended to retain these therapeutic assumptions of empowerment and utility in contexts characterized by suffering and trauma,” (Cole, 2010, 251). While this case study demonstrates some of the healing potential of storytelling, it is only one case study. Furthermore, the majority of the women in this study only told their stories to other AVEGA beneficiaries and staff, thereby keeping their stories largely private and out of a public, and potentially more critical, spotlight. So while storytelling has several possibilities for serving as a mechanism of self-empowerment, it also has limitations that vary depending on the circumstances surrounding the performance of the stories.

#### *4.7 Conclusion and Recommendations*

In summary, this study has demonstrated two key things about storytelling as a self-empowerment mechanism for these women in post-genocide Rwanda. First, storytelling within a safe space, such as AVEGA Agahozo, had a fair amount of potential as a means for self-empowerment in the post-genocide Rwandan context. Although this single case study cannot of course be applied broadly, it does contribute to the existing literature on the following fronts: it adds to the wider literature on how marginalized groups in post-conflict societies can attempt to counter their marginalization; and it contributes to the theories on storytelling for self-empowerment and reclaiming agency after trauma, especially that which was induced by mass violence. Second, storytelling is far from a catch all solution that is simple or easy. In the private setting of AVEGA, storytelling was largely beneficial for the informants in this study but could not tackle remaining structural injustices, which can hinder efforts at self-empowerment. But storytelling as highly publicized testimony is also problematic in that the individual is more at-risk of being re-traumatized and of losing authorship and control over their own stories.

Finally, I have a few recommendations for future research, the Rwandan government, and the SIT Rwanda: Post-Genocide Reconciliation and Peacebuilding program. The goal of this study was to analyze the effectiveness of storytelling as a self-empowerment mechanism for a specific group of women in post-genocide Rwanda. Future research should thus focus on studying the efficacy of storytelling for empowering other oppressed groups in Rwanda and in other post-conflict environments. Secondly, I want to recommend that the Rwandan government

encourage further research on storytelling in unofficial settings like AVEGA Agahozo. Given that the country is still engaged in processes of healing and empowering its marginalized populations, it is important to understand alternative forms of self-empowerment that can complement existing efforts through political representation and economic means. Finally, I encourage SIT to entertain the possibility of lengthening the ISP period for its students. A few extra weeks to conduct interviews could result in more in-depth analyses of the research topics at hand and produce richer insights.

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## APPENDIX

### *A.1 The Interview Questions*

#### Questions for Beneficiaries:

1. When did you begin to feel ready to tell your story of living through the genocide to others?
2. Tell me in your own words what you believe are the effects of opening up to others after going through difficult moments such as the genocide.
3. Tell me more about how easy or difficult it was for women survivors of the genocide to share their stories with others.
4. How do you think telling your story about your life during and after the genocide has affected your way of living?
5. Are you able to see tangible benefits of sharing your genocide-related story with others? If yes, would you like to share some of those benefits?
6. Have you ever regretted having shared your story with someone? If yes, why?
7. How do you think telling your story about your life during and after the genocide has helped you empower yourself?
8. Some people believe that telling your story and sharing your difficult experience with others is a key to healing and therefore to self-empowerment. What do you think are the remaining issues that cannot be solved through storytelling?

#### Questions for Staff

1. What do you consider to be the importance of storytelling for women survivors of the genocide?
2. What changes have you seen in the women survivors' sense of self-empowerment? And how do you relate this to their capacity to tell their stories about surviving the genocide?
3. What circumstances do you think are necessary in order for female survivors to feel comfortable enough to share their stories?
4. How, in particular, do you think that the female survivors who are members of AVEGA have been able to share their stories related to the genocide? What do you consider to be the advantages of storytelling for members of AVEGA?

5. When, in your opinion, do female survivors of the 1994 genocide begin to feel ready to tell their stories to others?
6. What challenges do female survivors face, in terms of self-empowerment after the genocide, that male survivors might not?