

STEP UP!

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR RWANDAN WOMEN

As far as the eye can see, rolling hills, terraced to the very top, each a dozen colors of green, march across the horizon. Trees glow with red and yellow blossoms and wildflowers dot purple and white in the lush grass. A pair of new-white twin goats nibble chartreuse sprouts coming up between the stones of the path. It is the land of a thousand hills. It is also the graveyard of a million people killed in the 1994 genocide.

Our mission for this trip is to assess the needs of the ABASA women in Butare, in southern Rwanda. ABASA is a word from Kinyrwanda, the local language, that means “we are all the same.” The group was founded by Sister Speciosa, a nurse who works at the University Hospital. As the genocide ended, women came to the hospital seeking treatment for injuries and infections from sexual violence. Sister Speciosa formed small groups so that the women could talk and give comfort and support to each other. As the groups increased in number, she combined them and ABASA began. The women have all been raped, often by so many men they lost count. Some had been taken as “wives” by militiamen, and kept in sexual slavery throughout the course of the genocide. When the Tutsi RPF ended the genocide, these women were often forced to flee to neighboring countries and only slowly made their way back home.

Throughout the course of the month, Beatrice Gallimore and Barbara Bauer interviewed 54 of the 60 ABASA women. The youngest, six at the time of the genocide, is now 18. The oldest ABASA woman, 69 now, was 57 when her husband and son were killed and she was raped. All of the women have lost multiple family members and several are sole survivors of what were once large families. Most of the women have 6 years of primary education, but other than the young ones who are currently in school, none continued on to high school. For many years,

Tutsis were excluded from pursuing high school education. Their only choice was to attend trade school where they could study cooking, sewing and housekeeping.



Bea with Suzanne, the oldest of the ABASA women

Many of the women have multiple health problems due to beatings and sexual abuse: fistulas, antibiotic resistant syphilis, frequent urinary tract infections. Migraine headaches are mentioned frequently as are general body weakness and pain. Symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are very apparent, particularly sleep disturbances, nightmares, emotional numbing, hypervigilance, avoidance, and fears. Depression frequently accompanies the PTSD. Anxiety about the future and meeting the daily needs of their children was universal.

During one of our visits to ABASA, we brought 100 kilos each of rice, beans and sugar for them to share. So many are hungry from the drought of last season. Another organization had donated 5 treadle sewing machines and the women had already organized to produce school uniforms. We told them we'd buy the first 50 uniforms and donate them to the ABASA children. This will provide seed money to purchase more fabric. We

arranged to lease a shop for a year, close to the market where they can sew and sell the uniforms. Several women have been trained in sewing but the site they had been using was too far from the market.

Ten hours of training in *Introduction to Trauma Psychology* was given to 34 nurses at Butare University Hospital. Recognizing symptoms of trauma, relaxation, use of imagery, listening skills and problem solving were taught. The participants are eager to continue on to *Advanced Treatment of Trauma* when we return.



Barbara demonstrating relaxation

Conclusion: The needs of the Rwandan women are enormous. Not only are there needs for practical things such as jobs, food, and school supplies, but the mental health needs have largely remained unaddressed. Post traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety remain as aftermaths of the intense horror of the genocide. The women are very much willing to work but are handicapped by the emotional pain that is with them constantly. Training of paraprofessionals such as nurses, teachers, social workers, and other volunteers in basic interventions for trauma relief can be implemented to address these needs.

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this important work**



Rose Burizihiza (president and founder of ABASA) age 25 during the genocide

Rose is under special protection because of testifying in court against the killers. She is often threatened by people and lives in a military camp.

"I was taken as a sexual slave to be a witness of the genocide. According to him, I was supposed to see everything that happened and stay alive to tell everybody how the Tutsi were exterminated. My oldest child, age 2, was dragged on the ground in front of me and thrown into the pig sty where she died. The 1-year-old and 4-month-old were tossed to the dogs. I thought they were going to be killed and eaten. Fortunately, the dogs bit them but didn't kill them. When the rapist sent me out to milk the cows, I saw my kids were still alive but full of wounds and dripping. I put them in the cow trough and covered them with straw. I nursed them back to life by stealing milk and giving it to them. The killers paraded me around and I was called a flag. Before killing someone they would say 'let's raise the flag' and they would make me stand by. That's what they did when they killed my mother and brother. The worst death I witnessed was my husband's. The guy stripped me of my clothes and asked me to laugh and smile while he was raping me. I knew, no matter what, my husband was going to be killed but, again, I thought about my kids inside that container and I obeyed. They didn't beat him, they didn't cut him, they put him in the grave alive. They took bricks and, one by one threw them on him. When they took me away from the mass grave, he was still groaning, half-alive. That killed me inside. My two children survived but they were in bad shape. I nourished them back to health."

Rose says, "I told God, if you give me a chance to survive, I will testify anywhere they ask me to."