



MMS Bulletin #109

"AIDS and livelihoods"

A story from Rwanda

Step by Step – The Road to Recovery

Von Rose Mukabalisa

My name is Mukabalisa born in 1959 in Shyorongi – Rwahi in Kigali rural Province. I am a survivor of the 1994 genocide living at the Village of Hope, Kagugu Sector, Gisozi District in Kigali Urban Province. I am a woman living with HIV/AIDS with one daughter and five sons, my first husband died in 1987 and I separated with my second husband before the 1994 genocide because of ethnic tensions at that time. He took all the property and cash we had and left me with the children.

After seeing the problems I was going through, a friend of mine (a widow) living in another province gave me one house among three houses she had on a plot in Kigali city. I used to manage her property, collect the rent and then send the money to her. The 1994 genocide took place when I was living in this situation. I was found in this house and gang-raped by Interahamwe militia while my children watched. This went on for like one month until I sought refuge in a nearby church. On the way to the church at night I was stopped on a road block and beaten. At the end of the 1994 genocide, I returned to my house and came to learn that my friend, who had given me the house, was killed in the genocide. I went to visit her children and resumed my responsibility of delivering the money for rent to them.

Polyclinic of Hope

It was at this time that, due to the horrific experiences I went through – gang rape, beatings, the fear and trauma – I joined the Polyclinic of Hope Centre, a Rwanda Women Network (RWN) project for victims of rape and violent crimes. The Polyclinic of Hope started in 1995 and I was one of its first members. The Clinic is a space for interaction, provides free medical care for members and their families, trauma and HIV and AIDS counselling, care and support for people living with HIV/AIDS, micro-credit, information on human rights and legal aid, and education and awareness on different issues.

In 1998, because my house had been destroyed during the genocide, the RWN assisted me to rehabilitate it. I was offered materials including sand, stones, cement, paint, timber and iron sheets, as well as the labour to help in the repairs that needed to be done.

In 2000, I started receiving people claiming to be brothers to the husband of my friend demanding that I move out of their house because the house was not mine. I refused to move out because I believed the house to be mine, although I had no documents showing that my friend had given me the house. Her children were aware of this situation and also the family of her husband had not contributed anything in the property's acquisition. The problem continued and I was reported to the local authorities. The claimants' main strength was that I had no official document showing the house was given to me. They reported me, saying I had refused to give them their property.

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I was accompanied and advised by RWN on the day our case was to be heard and through the whole process. The authorities were not ready to believe my statement without any written document. It was only when my friend's children came forward that matters improved. They testified that they were aware of their mother having given me the house and that I was helping them manage the rest of the property in their absence. Hearing this, the local authorities decided I should stay in the house and gave me a document testifying to this decision.

The claimants were not satisfied with this decision and resolved to use other means to get me out of the house. In collaboration with my neighbours and the surrounding community involved in my genocide case, they started harassing me and my family. At night they would throw stones on the roof of my house; they would attack, beat and harass me as I came from the market where I was working. When I reported the different harassment incidents to the police, the people involved were arrested but after about a week they were released.

After this, they were determined to do worse. They came at night with pangas and knives, started hitting on my door saying they would kill me. They were heard by some of the neighbours, one of whom was a policeman. He came with a gun and shot in the air and the assailants ran off. I reported again to the police, investigations were carried out and arrests were made.

I was traumatised and living in fear for my life and family, so the police advised me and the RWN to find a way to relocate me for security reasons. At that time, beneficiaries for a shelter programme among women victims of violent crimes at Polyclinic of Hope Centre were being identified, so I was included.

A new house in the Village of Hope

At the end of the construction of the 20 houses that make up the Village of Hope, I moved to my new home, the police department even provided transport. The Village of Hope was constructed by the RWN for women victims of rape and other violent crimes who had no shelter at the end of the 1994 genocide.

When I decided to rent out the house I had been staying in, the different tenants were harassed the same way I had been harassed – with stones and other objects being thrown on the roof at night. When the last tenant moved out, the house remained empty for like two months and then the same people who had reported me before reported again to the local authorities. They claimed that I had moved out of the house, left it empty and that the person who had given it to me without even any written document had left orphans who were suffering and could use the income from the same house to improve their welfare.

Women need to be sensitised

Considering the case history – no written document to show that the house was given to me, lack of security and income from the house due to the tenants being harassed out of it, the fact that I had a home to stay now, and in consideration of my health (a woman survivor who had been gang raped and was living with HIV/AIDS because of this) – the RWN advised me to claim for the funds invested in renovation and then allow the house to revert to the children of my friend. This is the decision the local authorities passed and the money used for rehabilitation was given back to me.

Concurrently with the above, I was following up a case with my second husband for having deserted us, and not having provided any support to our two children. Because we were not married legally under Rwandan law, I first of all took him to court in 2002 in order that he acknowledges the children as his. Upon the decision of the court in favour of the aforementioned, my former husband was supposed to provide child support and the children would have a right to inherit their father's property. He did not fulfil his responsibilities as a father and I reported him to the local authorities. After hearing our case, the court requested my former husband to give me RWF 15'000 per month for child support.

In conclusion, I would say that in order for women's rights to be protected, women need to be sensitised. They also need to be determined to demand that their rights be respected. Women also need support and reinforcement because I would have found it very difficult to follow up my cases and demand for redress without the assistance of RWN and the Polyclinic of Hope. Also, for the existing laws and structures that protect women's rights to work, women have the responsibility of coming forward.

**Rose Mukabalisa is Member of Polyclinic of Hope – Rwanda Women Network (RWN). Interview by RWN, March 2005*

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Kontakt

Deutschschweiz

Medicus Mundi Schweiz
Murbacherstrasse 34
CH-4056 Basel
Tel. +41 61 383 18 10
info@medicusmundi.ch

Suisse romande

Medicus Mundi Suisse
Rue de Varembé I
CH-1202 Genève
Tél. +41 22 920 08 08
contact@medicusmundi.ch

Bankverbindung

Basler Kantonalbank, Aeschen, 4002 Basel
Medicus Mundi Schweiz, 4056 Basel
IBAN: CH40 0077 0016 0516 9903 5
BIC: BKBBCHBBXXX