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Sexual Violence and Transitional Justice in Rwanda: From Solidarity to Silence

Abstract:

This paper explores the evolution of international and local responses to sexual violence during the 1994 Rwandan genocide, highlighting the shift from early transnational feminist solidarity to tokenization and silence. International human rights advocates collaborated with Rwandan organizations to document sexual violence and landmark legal precedents, including the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda's *Akayesu* judgment, defining rape as genocide. These efforts influenced global norms and the Women, Peace and Security agenda. However, sustained engagement faltered as international activists moved on, leaving survivors to navigate stigma, poverty, and trauma with limited support. Within Rwanda, transitional justice mechanisms processed thousands of cases but failed to adequately protect victims, ensure confidentiality, or provide reparations, underscoring systemic gaps in gender-sensitive justice. National memorials and public discourse remain largely silent on sexual violence, perpetuating survivors' marginalization. Today, children born of genocidal rape face enduring social exclusion and intergenerational trauma, revealing the long-term consequences of incomplete justice. By tracing these dynamics, the paper interrogates assumptions about the durability of global human rights advocacy and calls for renewed, multi-generational strategies to address the needs of sexual violence survivors and their families. Ultimately, it argues sustainable solidarity requires embedding gender expertise and survivor-centered approaches in all transitional justice frameworks.

Keywords: Rwandan Genocide, Sexual Violence in Conflict, Transitional Justice, International Feminist Advocacy, Children Born of Genocidal Rape

This paper traces international and local responses to sexual violence during the 1994 Rwandan genocide, from early transnational feminist solidarity to tokenization and silence. In the immediate aftermath of the genocide, international feminist human rights activists worked closely with Rwandan women's organizations to document sexual violence and ensure its recognition as central—not ancillary—to genocide crimes. This collaboration established legal precedents for prosecuting sexual violence internationally and informed the UN Women, Peace and Security agenda. However, the lived experiences of Rwandan survivors became increasingly disconnected from this international discourse. Rather than sustained solidarity, international activists moved on to other causes. Within Rwanda itself, the legacy is equally complex: genocide prosecutions produced mixed results for sexual violence cases, while national memorials and museums remain largely silent on sexual violence, speaking only in generalities and rarely recognizing specific victims or survivors.

By examining transnational solidarity and its long-term impact in Rwanda, this paper reveals how early feminist solidarity gave way to international amnesia, leaving survivors to face stigma and hardship. By tracing these dynamics, the paper interrogates assumptions about the durability of global human rights advocacy and calls for renewed, multi-generational strategies to address the needs of sexual violence survivors and their families. It concludes that sustainable solidarity requires embedding gender expertise and survivor-centered approaches in all transitional justice frameworks.

Sexual Violence in the 1994 Rwandan Genocide

The 1994 genocide of Tutsi in Rwanda lasted from April 6 to July 4 and claimed an estimated 800,000 lives. Approximately 77 percent of Rwanda's Tutsi population—nearly half a million people—were annihilated.¹ Alongside killings, perpetrators committed torture, sexual violence, destruction of property, and widespread looting. Government officials, politicians, and military commanders coordinated the violence while government security forces played key roles in implementing the genocide nationwide by setting up security checkpoints, coordinating large-scale attacks, and mobilizing civilians to what was called a “national defense.” The notorious Interahamwe militias served as the primary instigators of violence during the genocide. Their zeal and strength provided the force needed when local residents were reluctant to attack their Tutsi neighbors. Local government officials, who were most citizens’ primary interface with the state, wielded considerable authority and respect and were the primary conduits of national policy in remote rural areas lacking direct communication by telephone and having only limited access via roads.² The genocide occurred during a civil war begun in October 1990 by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) rebel group.

Despite peace accords signed in August 1993, killings of Tutsi civilians, journalists, human rights activists, and opposition party members, that started within weeks of the RPF attack in 1990, intensified in the months leading up to the genocide. On 6 April 1994, the assassination of President Juvénal Habyarimana triggered the start of widespread killings that became a nation-wide genocide.

Although perpetrators targeted victims based on whether they were “Tutsi,” so-called “age-old, tribal” hatred was not the cause of the genocide. Rather, the killings resulted from political strategizing and conscious choices by elites seeking to maintain power. At roadblocks, perpetrators used race marked on national identity cards to target people. Men presenting “Tutsi” cards were killed instantly with any accompanying children. Women with “Tutsi” cards were usually killed immediately or raped and then killed, though some were spared according to attackers’ whims, held as sexual slaves, or forcibly taken as “wives” by soldiers, militiamen, or civilians. Those with “Hutu” or “Twa” cards were examined for verification. Perpetrators often relied on stereotypical physical markers of “Tutsiness” to choose their targets.

Sexual violence rose sharply beginning soon after the RPF attack in 1990.³ Although rape and sexual violence had existed prior, they were acknowledged as serious social problems, nor had women's organizations mobilized around the issue. The civil war, genocide, and their consequences fundamentally altered Rwandan society. As national security deteriorated, members of the Interahamwe militias, the Rwandan military, and others exploited the breakdown of order to commit sexual violence without fear of consequences. In 1993, Human Rights Watch reported, “Rwandan soldiers frequently rape women, but because they are never punished for the crime, victims rarely report the attacks. Women know that to accuse soldiers is futile and may well lead to further harassment or even death.”⁴

While sexual violence intensified during the civil war, its savagery and scope during the genocide (April 6-July 4, 1994) constituted an unprecedented violation of social norms. Genocide perpetrators used rape, sexual torture, mutilation, and enslavement as weapons against Tutsi women and girls and “to terrorize the community and warn all people of the futility of resistance—those targeted as victims and those who might wish to protect the intended targets.”⁵ I am intentionally leaving out the details to avoid glorifying this violence through its description.⁶ An epidemiological survey of women in Rwanda in 1994 found that 49 percent of them had been raped.⁷

Sexual violence in the genocide inflicted profound symbolic and psychological harm. Perpetrators specifically attacked the culturally valued role of Rwandan women as mothers.⁸ Extremist propaganda had targeted Tutsi beauty and desirability.⁹ Survivors

consistently reported perpetrators stating they wanted “to see if Tutsi women were like Hutu women.”¹⁰ Rape during the genocide also served as an economic weapon. The Rwandan state pursued elimination of the Tutsi ethnic group through destruction or systematic seizure of their assets. Soldiers, militiamen, and civilian perpetrators received “rewards” for their participation in the form of confiscated property, including Tutsi women and girls, who were frequently treated as spoils of war.¹¹ In certain communities, local authorities attempted to preserve the lives of Tutsi wives married to Hutu men solely because “depriving a man of the productive and reproductive capacities of his wife harmed his interests” and might undermine his support for the genocide.¹² Women's land rights sometimes comprised part of the “compensation” for militiamen. One survivor described how the local militia leader distributed her and her sisters to militiamen as “wives,” with their father's land divided among the “husbands.”¹³ The higher survival rates of women and girls can be partially attributed to this exploitation of women and girls as economic assets for acquiring land and property through forced marriage.

Hutu women and girls—and those of mixed parentage—also suffered sexual violence during the genocide. Rwandan soldiers commanded the director of a nursing school to surrender female students, and raped female employees of a Roman Catholic seminary as “a contribution to the war effort”.¹⁴ Genocide perpetrators raped or sexually coerced Hutu women married to Tutsi men.¹⁵ Women and girls born to parents from different categories were targeted as well. Women and girls across ethnic lines faced coerced sexual relationships with soldiers even after reaching supposed safety in camps controlled by the Rwandan Patriotic Front or the French peacekeeping forces who entered Rwanda in late June 1994 under the Turquoise Operation. Understanding this complexity is essential to grasping the full scope of sexual violence during the conflict.

Aftermath of the Genocide: A Moment of Solidarity International-Local Collaboration (1994-1998)

Despite prolonged debate in the U.N. Security Council about a potential intervention, the genocide ended when the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) rebels seized most of Rwanda. As the RPF advanced, the interim government, Rwandan security forces, and two million civilians fled becoming refugees in neighboring countries. Some of those civilians had participated in the genocide. Inside Rwanda, the situation was dire. The country's physical infrastructure had been destroyed. There was no food, no potable water, insufficient shelter, no sanitation as most toilets had become impromptu mass graves. Genocide survivors were physically and psychologically traumatized. Hutu civilians who remained in the country were also traumatized as they had witnessed the

killings of family members, friends, and neighbors. They were also fearful of the RPF rebels who were now in power.

In the first few months after the genocide, everyone was focused on survival. Justice for the genocide was a luxury few could contemplate. The RPF-led government faced devastated infrastructure and loss of most educated professionals who were killed or fled into exile. In these difficult circumstances, three international human rights organizations led efforts to document genocide crimes: African Rights, the Human Rights Watch, and International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH).

African Rights was a small London-based human rights NGO founded in 1992 by Rakiya Omaar and Alex de Waal. When the genocide began, Raika Omaar was in Nairobi en route to Somalia, but she immediately traveled to the Tanzania-Rwanda border where refugees were fleeing. She began to collect firsthand testimonies from survivors. She then entered Rwanda escorted by the RPF rebels and continued her documentation.¹⁶ This work eventually became the first substantial documentation of genocidal violence in Rwanda, *Rwanda: Death, Despair, and Defiance*, published in September 1994. Despite later critiques of their work, African Rights' documentation was used by researchers and legal proceedings.¹⁷

Human Rights Watch, headquartered in New York, and International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) headquartered in Paris, were among the first international human rights organizations to start systematic documentation of the genocide in 1994. The organizations collaborated in their work under the leadership of Alison Des Forges, a historian and expert on Rwandan history who had begun working with Human Rights Watch in 1990. In May 1994, they issued their first report based on evidence collected via telephone and fax from eyewitnesses in Rwanda.¹⁸ Later in 1994, they published two preliminary reports based on brief field visits to Rwanda after the RPF victory in July.¹⁹

The Human Rights Watch and FIDH teams worked closely with several Rwandan human rights organizations that had emerged in the years leading up to the genocide. In 1992, the *Collective of Leagues and Associations for the Defense of Human Rights in Rwanda* (CLADHO) brought together four organizations originally founded in 1991: *Association Rwandaise pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme* (ARDHO), *Association des Volontaires de la Paix* (AVP), *Ligue Rwandaise pour la Promotion et la Défense des Droits de l'Homme* (LIPRODHOR), and *Association Rwandaise pour la Défense des Droits de la Personne et des Libertés Publiques* (ADL).²⁰ Before, during, and after the genocide, the leaders and staff of these organizations often faced death threats or even assassination attempts.²¹ Many of them eventually fled the country seeking asylum abroad. Working closely with these local partners, eight researchers led by Alison Des Forges documented the

genocide across Rwanda to build a robust evidentiary record that supported genocide prosecutions. Their work culminated in *Leave None to Tell the Story* published in English and French in 1999, German in 2002, and Kinyarwanda in 2014.²²

Despite these efforts, the scale scope of sexual violence remained largely invisible as human rights researchers and legal scholars focused on massacres and property crimes. Despite widespread attention to sexual violence in the former Yugoslavia, international media focused on genocidal killings in Rwanda. Finally, in February 1995, nine months after the mass killings in Rwanda were front-page news, sexual violence “was first reported in the European press.”²³ As the scope of sexual violence became clear, feminist lawyers and advocates worked strategically to ensure that it was addressed in transitional justice efforts.

In the interim, Rwandan civil society organizations and ordinary citizens led numerous efforts to support survivors in the wake of the genocide. In health centers and hospitals around the country, doctors and nurses provided treatment for survivors sometimes even providing abortions, which were forbidden by law.²⁴ Dr. Peace Uwineza, a genocide survivor, opened the Polyclinic of Hope for sexual violence survivors in 1995.²⁵ Mary Balikungeri founded Rwandan Women's Network and supported the Polyclinic with Church World Service funding. Beatrice Mukansinga created *Mbwira Ndumva* (Tell me, I'm listening) within Barakabaho Association. In Taba commune, Godeliève Mukasarasi, a social worker and women's activist, founded *Solidarité pour l'Épanouissement des Veuves et des Orphelins visant le Travail et l'Autopromotion* (SEVOTA) in Taba commune, providing psychosocial support to survivors and pregnant women. These programs enabled survivors to assist documentation efforts.

Human Rights Watch and FIDH worked collaboratively with these local women's organizations and human rights to document sexual violence and torture. In 1995, Human Rights Watch sent Janet Fleishman, director of its Washington office, and Binaifer Nowrojee, a Kenyan-born lawyer, to Rwanda to investigate sexual violence during the genocide resulting in the groundbreaking report, *Shattered Lives: Sexual Violence During the Rwandan Genocide and Its Aftermath*, published in 1996. This report documented the systematic nature of sexual violence during the genocide and established that it was central to the genocide itself. The report focused on rape and sexual violence in Taba commune where they worked closely with SEVOTA. The HRW report as well as the collaborative research among international and local organizations helped build the evidentiary foundation for eventual prosecutions of sexual violence before the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR).

Transitional Justice & Transnational Solidarity

After the genocide, multiple mechanisms prosecuted genocide crimes in Rwanda. At the international level the United Nations Security Council created the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) in November 1994, “for the sole purpose of prosecuting persons responsible for genocide and other serious violations of international humanitarian law committed in the territory of Rwanda and Rwandan citizens responsible for genocide and other such violations committed in the territory of neighbouring states, between 1 January 1994 and 31 December 1994.”²⁶ Inside Rwanda, the new government set about crafting a law to prosecute genocide crimes via its national court system. The government initially set out to prosecute every single genocide perpetrator, from the leaders who organized the genocide down to the subsistence farmers who stole their neighbors’ property.²⁷ This approach was formulated with the long-term goal of ensuring stability the approach created an insurmountable backlog of cases which would have challenged any legal or penal system in the world, much less one destroyed by genocide. In response to the immense caseload and inhumane prison conditions, the government transformed a traditional conflict resolution mechanism known as *gacaca* into a nation-wide system of Gacaca courts, where local citizens served as judges, prosecutors, defenders and witnesses. The Gacaca courts became the primary mechanism of transitional justice within the country. In a little over ten years, the Gacaca courts processed almost 2 million cases, 65 per cent of which resulted in guilty verdicts.²⁸ Courts in Belgium, Spain, France, and the United States eventually also prosecuted Rwandan nationals for genocide crimes in their national courts.

Yet, transitional justice for sexual violence victims and survivors in the Rwandan genocide faltered. In the first draft of Rwanda’s genocide code, rape and sexual violence were classified in the lowest level of genocide crimes, which focused on property crimes such as looting and pillaging. Rwandan women activists and sexual violence survivors were outraged the law treated rape and sexual violence as lesser offenses downplaying the physical atrocities and social, psychological, and community harm it caused. Women’s and survivors’ organizations mobilized and even marched in protest the draft law. They demanded that rape and sexual assault be recognized as among the most serious genocide crimes. The final law passed in 1996 placed “acts of sexual torture” in Category 1, the most egregious crimes.²⁹

Conventional courts began prosecuting genocide suspects with this new law in December 1996. The first trials led to the first and only public executions for genocide crimes in 1998. However, progress was slow—only 1,292 cases had been completed by early 1998—prompting concerns that trials could take centuries.³⁰ In January 1998, Vice-

President Paul Kagame announced that Rwanda could no longer sustain the \$20 million annual cost of maintaining its prison population.³¹ To address this crisis, a national commission explored alternatives and proposed adapting the traditional *gacaca* conflict resolution mechanism for genocide cases. Ultimately, *Gacaca* courts were officially launched in June 2002 with five objectives: revealing the truth, accelerating trials, eradicating impunity, fostering reconciliation, and demonstrating Rwanda's capacity to resolve its own problems.

Despite the 1996 genocide law and efforts to address genocide-related sexual violence through the *Gacaca* courts, shortcomings in victim and witness protection, inadequate training for judicial authorities, and poor representation of women in law enforcement discouraged sexual violence survivors from reporting these crimes or hindered their prosecution. These deficiencies, combined with the absence of compensation and limited access to health care and counseling, left rape survivors among the most disadvantaged of genocide victims.

Prosecution of sexual violence at the ICTR faced similar obstacles. Although rape was included as a crime against humanity in the "*Statute of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda* and also mentioned therein as an example of the war crime of humiliating and degrading treatment," the first series of indictments before the ICTR did not include charges of sexual violence.³² "Genocide and other atrocities in Rwanda occurred after the widespread commission of rape and sexual violence in the former Yugoslavia had broken through media disinterest and captured world attention, and after rape had been listed as a crime against humanity in the statute of the ad hoc International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia."³³ The ICTR investigators seemed to believe that "rape is somehow a 'lesser' or 'incidental' crime not worth investigating."³⁴ Rhonda Copeland, an important lawyer in this international advocacy moment, explained "It was common, at that time, to hear the assertion that genocide is killing, not rape, and that the women who were raped and survived were lucky they were not dead."³⁵

As the scope of sexual violence in the Rwandan genocide became clear, feminist lawyers and advocates worked strategically to ensure that sexual violence was addressed by transitional justice at the ICTR and in the Rwandan courts. A coalition of feminist legal scholars and human rights advocates came together to lobby the Louise Arbor the Chief Prosecutor of the ICTR and International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia (ICTY) to include sexual violence among the charges brought against defendants. The Women's Project at Human Rights Watch initiated this advocacy and worked closely with the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development in Montreal (later known as Rights & Democracy), and the Monitoring

Project on Gender-Related Crimes at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. The coalition sent “numerous critical letters . . . calling for institutional changes that would facilitate the effective investigation of gender crimes.”³⁶

This network of feminist legal scholars and human rights activists built on global movement to enshrine women’s rights in international law. The 1993 Vienna Conference on Human Rights produced a final document that “condemned ‘systematic rape,’ and called for the elimination of violence and discrimination against women in public and private life as a priority matter, as well as the mainstreaming of gender in the human rights system.”³⁷ The slogan, “Women’s rights are human rights,” became widely adopted and the conference. In March 1994, the UN Commission on Human Rights established the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women.³⁸ Through its resolution the Commission on Human Rights recognized violence against women as a violation of human rights and created an independent mechanism to investigate and report on its global prevalence and underlying causes. Since its inception, the Special Rapporteur’s mandate has been periodically renewed and currently reports to the Human Rights Council. The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing: “elaborated on the principle that ‘women’s rights are human rights’;” named “systematic rape, sexual slavery and forced pregnancy” as egregious humanitarian law violations; and “called for gender balance among judges and other personnel in judicial institutions, including the ad hoc tribunals.” To help put these principles into force, the women’s human rights movement advocated for “the election of women judges” to the ICTY and ICTR.³⁹ Judge Navanethem Pillay, a South African woman and one of the first judges appointed to the ICTR, played a crucial, proactive role in ensuring sexual violence was addressed by the ICTR.

Feminist legal scholar, Rhonda Copelon, and the City University of New York’s International Women’s Human Rights Law Clinic, were key to legal research and advocacy in Rwanda after the genocide. Copelon had founded the International Women’s Human Rights Law Clinic in 1992 with Charlotte Bunch. The clinic regularly sent law students to Rwanda help document survivors’ testimony about sexual violence during the genocide. Based on the evidence they gathered working in collaboration with Rwandan women’s organizations and SV survivors; they filed an amicus brief with the ICTR. In addition, Copelon’s legal scholarship on rape during war contributed to the recognition of rape and sexualized violence as torture generally and as genocide in the Rwanda Tribunal.⁴⁰

The first accused to go to trial before the ICTR was Jean-Paul Akayesu, who had been the burgomaster (or mayor) of Taba commune, a rural community approximately 20 km from the capital city, Kigali. Even though FIDH/HRW’s groundbreaking report *Shattered*

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Lives focused on rape, sexual violence, and sexual enslavement in Taba commune, no charges or evidence of rape were included in the indictments when the Prosecutor v. Jean Paul Akayesu case went to trial. The prosecutor's office claimed "that it was impossible to document rape because women wouldn't talk about it."⁴¹

Judge Navanethem Pillay played a crucial role in ensuring sexual violence was addressed in the Akayesu case. During the trial proceedings in 1997, Judge Pillay noticed witness testimony was beginning to reveal systematic rape and sexual assault occurring in Taba commune often in Akayesu's presence or with his knowledge. Judge Pillay actively questioned witnesses about sexual violence, creating space for them to testify about these crimes.⁴² Her sensitive questioning helped witnesses come forward with testimony about widespread rapes and sexual assault that had occurred at the commune office. Judge Pillay suggested to the prosecution that evidence emerging during trial demanded formal charges. Despite this judicial activism made possible through ICTR procedural rules that allowed judges to question witnesses, the prosecutor did not change his strategy.

Once again, a coalition of feminist legal scholars, human rights activists, and Rwandan women's organizations stepped into the void. CUNY's International Women's Human Rights Law Clinic, "the Working Group on Engendering the Rwanda Tribunal," the University of Toronto Faculty of Law, and the Center for Constitutional Rights in New York City, "prepared and submitted an amicus curiae brief" in the Akayesu case.⁴³ Curiously, this amicus curiae brief was never "listed in the docket of the case" and several ICTR personnel claimed not to have received it even though the ICTR chamber acknowledged receipt of it in a fax.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, two weeks later the prosecutor indicated his intention to amend the indictment to include sexual violence citing witness testimony before the court. As Copelon described it, "I tell this story because it is important that we understand the critical and, like gender, often 'invisibilized' role of NGOs in the process of making change, as well as the indispensability of mechanisms like the amicus curiae brief that make the courts permeable to the concerns of the larger community. It is likewise important that official documents recognize the contributions of NGOs."⁴⁵

In the landmark Jean-Paul Akayesu case, the ICTR became the first international court to recognize rape as a means of perpetrating genocide and defined rape in international law. This established the crucial legal principle that sexual violence could constitute a war crime, crime against humanity, and act of genocide. In its judgement, the ICTR formally acknowledged NGO's advocacy on the issue of sexual violence:

The Chamber notes that the Defence in its closing statement questioned whether the Indictment was amended in response to public pressure concerning the prosecution of sexual violence. The Chamber understands that the amendment of the Indictment resulted from the spontaneous testimony of sexual violence by Witness J and Witness H during the course of this trial and the subsequent investigation of the Prosecution, rather than from public pressure. Nevertheless, the Chamber takes note of the interest shown in this issue by non-governmental organizations, which it considers as indicative of public concern over the historical exclusion of rape and other forms of sexual violence from the investigation and prosecution of war crimes. The investigation and presentation of evidence relating to sexual violence is in the interest of justice.⁴⁶

The pursuit of justice after Rwanda's genocide was not only a legal challenge but also a feminist struggle that transcended borders. Women's organizations and survivor advocates mobilized globally to contest the marginalization of sexual violence in early legal frameworks, reframing rape as a core atrocity rather than a peripheral harm. Their activism influenced both the ICTR's jurisprudence and domestic reforms, ensuring that sexual violence could be prosecuted as a crime of genocide and a grave violation of human rights. This transnational feminist solidarity transformed transitional justice discourse, embedding gender-sensitive norms into international law and demonstrating the power of collective advocacy to reshape responses to mass violence.

Legal Precedents, Ongoing Advocacy, & Continued Needs

In the short term, the Akayesu case and related ICTR/ICTY cases set groundbreaking legal precedents. The Akayesu judgment was revolutionary because it:

- Established that rape and sexual violence as potential constitutive acts of genocide
- Recognized sexual violence as a deliberate weapon used to destroy ethnic groups
- Provided international legal definitions of rape and sexual violence
- Demonstrated individuals can be held criminally responsible for sexual violence committed under their authority
- Influenced subsequent international criminal law, including the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court

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The case transformed how international law addresses sexual violence in conflict and genocide, recognizing it not as collateral damage but as a deliberate strategy of destruction. Throughout the conference, we repeatedly heard the refrain, “rape is a war crime.” Before the international women’s movement of the early 1990s, the Akayesu trial at the ICTR, and related trials at the ICTY, this was a radical idea. Thanks to this movement woven together by feminist legal scholars, international human rights organizations, and Rwandan women’s organizations, it became “commonsense that rape is and must be a war crime.”⁴⁷

The feminist movement's advocacy during and after the pursuit for justice for sexual violence victims during the Rwandan genocide directly also influenced the conceptual foundations of the series of UN Security Council Resolutions that addressed sexual violence in conflict: 1325, 1820, 1888, 1960, 2106, 2242, and 2467 (see Table 1). This long list of United Nations Security Resolutions over the last 25 years signals that we still much work to do to address conflict-related sexual violence. Although these resolutions have been passed and put into law, they have not been successfully put into force.

Table 1. UN Security Council Resolutions related to sexual violence in conflict

Resolutio n	Year	Main Focus
1325	2000	Launched the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda; called for women’s protection from gender-based violence.
1820	2008	Recognized sexual violence as a tactic of war and a threat to international peace and security.
1888	2009	Established UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict.
1960	2010	Established monitoring and reporting system for conflict-related sexual violence.
2106	2013	Reinforced accountability and prevention measures for sexual violence.
2242	2015	Promoted gender-responsive approaches and women’s participation in peace processes.

2467	2019	Emphasized survivor-centered approaches and addressed gaps in protection and justice.
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Inside Rwanda, the prosecution of genocide-related rape and sexual violence in Rwanda’s *Gacaca* courts achieved some notable successes but was fraught with serious shortcomings. The transfer of over 8,000 cases to *Gacaca* in 2008 enabled many sexual violence victims to access justice more quickly than would have been possible in conventional courts and with procedural adaptations offering limited relief to sexual violence survivors.⁴⁸ These measures often failed to guarantee confidentiality, exposing victims to stigma, retaliation, and community harassment. Structural weaknesses, including judges’ close ties to accused persons, reliance on minimal testimony, and reports of corruption, undermined fairness and impartiality. Lenient sentences, absence of compensation, and the emotional toll of public exposure left many victims dissatisfied, highlighting the tension between *gacaca*’s community-based model and the sensitive nature of sexual violence cases. In the end, most perpetrators were found guilty of murder, participating in mob violence, looting, or destruction of property and not sexual violence. These challenges reveal a core dilemma in transitional justice: how to reconcile community participation and restorative justice goals with the need for specialized, gender-sensitive mechanisms to address crimes of sexual violence.

Genocide memorials in Rwanda are largely silent on sexual violence, speaking in generalities rather than naming victims or survivors. Despite this public silence, the Rwandan women’s movement uniting civil society organizations, the Forum of Women Parliamentarians, and the Ministry of Gender and Family continued to advocate for women’s and children’s rights.⁴⁹ In the early 2000s, Rwandan media reports raised public awareness about sexual violence as an ongoing problem in society. In response, the Ministry of Gender and Family published a study on gender-based violence in 2004.⁵⁰ In 2005, the government held a national conference which spurred a small group of parliamentarians—mostly, but not exclusively, female—to draft an anti-gender-based violence bill, which they introduced into parliament early 2006.⁵¹ After a long grassroots consultative process and numerous revisions, parliament passed the bill in 2008.

The needs of sexual violence survivors from the 1994 Genocide of Tutsi in Rwanda have not come to an end. Many still need access to life-preserving medications to fight off HIV infections contracted during their assaults. Many face the long-term consequences of economic and social abandonment by kin as well as community-level stigma and isolation. Conflict-related sexual violence is a transgenerational crime. Many children

witnessed their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, or sisters being raped. Many rape survivors gave birth to children conceived during their assaults.

An estimated at 10,000 to 25,000 people born of genocidal rape are now adults, often stigmatized as “*children of hate*” facing profound social and psychological challenges.⁵² Research shows they are and regarded as living reminders of the genocide, leading to discrimination, isolation, and economic marginalization within their communities.⁵³ Many grew up without knowing their fathers’ identities, and mothers frequently struggled with guilt and trauma, making disclosure of their origins difficult; when disclosure occurred, it sometimes strengthened bonds but also reopened wounds. Despite Rwanda’s progress in reconciliation, these individuals report that national commemorations rarely acknowledge their experiences, and they remain largely invisible in public discourse. Recent studies highlight both resilience and vulnerability: while some have built strong relationships with their mothers and shown empathy, many still grapple with intergenerational trauma, poverty, and barriers to education and employment.

Conflict-related sexual violence survivors deserve our sustained attention and care. The legacies of sexual violence extend through a survivor’s entire life, into subsequent generations, and travel far and wide in society. At a minimum, we should address the gaps left by the landmark ICTR Jean Paul Akayesu case that established sexual violence as a weapon of genocide. This case fell short in addressing genocide-related sexual violence in several ways.

First of all, there was a continued absence of a clear policy on gender violence in the ICTR prosecutor's office even after Akayesu’s successful prosecution.⁵⁴ This absence highlighted the need for a gender expert with oversight authority to be part of any transitional justice mechanism. We must have gender experts embedded in every transitional justice mechanism who focus on gender-based crimes.

Second, the needs for witness protection and special considerations for sexual violence survivors must be addressed systematically.⁵⁵ Many of the initial witnesses who spoke with ICTR investigators or testified at the court were killed because of their testimony. Only after many witnesses’ deaths did the ICTR begin providing witness protection. The International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals established by UN Security Council Resolution 1966 on 22 December 2010 continues to provide long-term protective arrangements for witnesses and victims from ICTR, health care, and psychosocial support. However, those witnesses are a tiny portion of sexual violence survivors in Rwanda, most of whom do not have long term support. We must provide long-term support and care for conflict-related sexual violence survivors.

Third, the offices and staff responsible for investigating war crimes or genocide crimes need to be trained to conduct interviews with special victims and in gender sensitivity.⁵⁶ Most of the initial members of the investigators' office of the ICTR were Australian and American police officers. Most of them were men, and none of them at the time had training in how to investigate sexual violence crimes. We need to build this expertise into all transitional justice mechanisms whether the International Criminal Tribunal, regional courts, or national jurisdictions.

Finally, we must focus on the long-term and multi-generational needs of sexual violence survivors, their children, their family members, and their communities. As German poet Jenny Schon described eloquently during the conference's opening panel discussion, children unknowingly carry the pain their mothers secreted away for decades. Conflict-related sexual violence survivors deserve better than we have given them. They deserve to be supported, remembered, and respected.

¹ Alison Des Forges: *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda*, New York 1999, p. 15.

² Scott Straus: *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda*, Ithaca, New York 2006, pp. 202–3.

³ This assessment is based on information gleaned during interviews with Rwandans conducted between 1995 and 2011. Official statistics of sexual assaults in Rwanda before 1994 are not available.

⁴ Human Rights Watch: *Beyond the Rhetoric: Continuing Human Rights Abuses in Rwanda*, New York 1993, p. 11.

⁵ Meredith Turshen: *The Political Economy of Rape*, in: Caroline O.N. Moser and Fiona C. Clark (Eds.): *Victims, Perpetrators, or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence*, New York 2001, pp. 55–88, here: p. 59.

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