



## **This is the testimony of Emma, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide**

I am originally from Kibuye, in Kigali. In April 1994, whilst visiting family friends, and aware that our lives were at risk, my friend advised me that the best way to escape the killings was to work as a prostitute. I soon became the victim of regular rape.

Probably a week after the genocide started, the locals knew that I was staying with this family. The servant was the one who flagged up the fact that I was there. From then on, all the local boys, friends of the servant, came to rape me. I can't be sure how many, or the number of times they raped me. There were many of them and they would rape me several times a day. The lady of the house wasn't concerned about me at all. She said that even if thousands of men raped me, at least I'd still be alive. I lived with this situation throughout my stay in Kigali.

As the fighting intensified in Kigali, the family abandoned their house. The husband was killed and his wife disappeared. I was left with the servant who had been among the rapists and he took me with him to the refugee camps in Zaire.

He made me his wife. I lived under atrocious conditions, under constant threat from him and from others. Despite all this, I held out well. I used to wonder if I'd be able to find an escape from the camp, so I could slip out and get back home to Rwanda, but I was heavily guarded.

I became pregnant. When the child was born, his physical resemblance to me was evident. This increased the hostility of my captor who accused me of having slept with a Tutsi. He began to harass me, saying he was sorry that he had not killed me earlier. Isolated and far from home, I was not able to get away from him until 1996. By then though, I was already pregnant by him again. I eventually made my way back in Rwanda, where the only surviving members of my family were living.

An old grandmother in my extended family asked me to go and live with her, so that's what my children and I did. We still live with the old lady today. Since the genocide, I've had a lot of temporary illness and pain in my lower parts, but I never thought that I might be infected with the HIV virus. I told myself that I felt the way I did because of the long journey and the difficult conditions I'd put up with in Zaire.

My aunt noticed that something wasn't right however, and she would always ask me to go and get tested, to see if I was HIV positive. She didn't tell me outright that she was worried. She said it was so that we could plan my future since I had suspended my studies in the third year of secondary school.

I took the advice of my aunt, but was immediately plunged into a cycle of fear and depression when I learned that I was HIV positive.



When they told me the news, I felt as though I'd been given an electric shock, as though the day of my death had already arrived. I was very anxious because if the neighbours ever found out, they'd ostracise me. My biggest fear was that other people would identify me as HIV positive. I was afraid of what the neighbours would say to me. I sought refuge in prayer, and little by little, I was able to accept my fate.

The initial response of those I spoke with only made me feel worse. Some people tried to make me understand that I was responsible for what had happened to me, that I should never have gone into exile, that I should have escaped the interahamwe. That was another blow. But how? How could I have eluded their vigilance? I'm not so stupid as to ruin my life if I could have done otherwise. It was obvious that the people who said this had not experienced the genocide.

Fortunately, I found a neighbour who did understand because she too had been raped in 1994. Following her advice, I decided to break the silence.

I'm no longer afraid to speak about my situation. Being able to speak out is a relief. I know that I'm not the only one to have gone through this terrible ordeal.

My principal concern at the moment is how to feed my family. In general, old friends have been supportive and I rely upon them, and the errands I run for neighbours, to supplement the small income from my fields.

I don't know how long I can go on living like this. But when I think about what happened in the past, I feel that I can be optimistic. Maybe after my death, my children will have somebody who will look after them.

But I can't even be sure about that though. Certainly no one from my family will be able to look after them, as they have all been killed.

**Today's Reading of the Testimonies marks the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, in support of survivors like Emma.**