

Intended Consequences: Rwandan Children Born of Rape

Photographs and Interviews by Jonathan Torgovnik

I first traveled to Rwanda in February of 2006 on assignment for *Newsweek* magazine with then health editor Geoffrey Cowley, to work on a story about HIV/AIDS on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the disease's identification. While there, we met Odette, a woman who had been brutally raped during the Rwandan genocide and contracted HIV/AIDS as a result of those encounters. It was the saddest and most powerful interview I have ever experienced. Odette described how her entire family had been killed and recounted, in detail, the abuse she experienced. She also told us that she had become pregnant as a result of the multiple rapes she endured in the genocide, and bore a baby boy. Her horrific story led me to return to Rwanda, embarking upon a personal mission to document the stories of women like Odette and to share them with the international community.

I learned from local nongovernmental organizations that an estimated twenty thousand children were born of rapes committed during the genocide. Over the last three years, I have returned to Rwanda several times, uncovering more details of the heinous crimes committed against the mothers of these children.

All twenty-five interviews in this exhibition were conducted in the privacy of the women's homes. Even though I knew what their stories might contain, it was impossible to prepare myself for what I was going to hear. Most of them had not revealed their stories to their children or communities; yet with each interview, the women told me intimate details of their suffering and the daily challenges they continue to face as a direct result of the brutality. They knew why I was there, and they wanted to tell their stories to the world.

These mothers have lived through the most severe torture any human can endure, and in the aftermath they continue to struggle against multiple levels of trauma. I admire their resilience and courage; they are undoubtedly the strongest human beings I have ever encountered.

Unfortunately, victims of sexual violence in Congo, Darfur, and around the world are facing similar challenges. My greatest hope is that, in reading these stories and seeing the images of the women and children in this exhibition, people will be inspired to act and work toward ensuring that similar acts of violence never happen again, and that these families can have a brighter future.

Deeply moved by these testimonies and the incredible challenges these women and children face daily, I was inspired to act, cofounding a non-profit organization, Foundation Rwanda, to improve the lives of children born of rape committed during the genocide. Foundation Rwanda provides funding for secondary school education for these children and links their mothers to existing psychological and medical services. It also helps to raise awareness about the consequences of genocide and sexual violence through photography and new media. This exhibition is an extension of my work there, providing a space for these mothers' voices to be heard.

The names of the women and children featured in this exhibition have been changed to protect their identities.

This exhibition is made possible by generous support from the Open Society Institute, Amnesty International, and Foundation Rwanda. Additional support for *Intended Consequences* was provided by Henry Buhl; SanDisk; Artis—Contemporary Israeli Art Fund; Kodak; and the Consulate General of Israel, Office of Cultural Affairs, in New York.

For more information and to learn how you can help the women and children in this exhibition, please visit: www.foundationrwanda.org.



Jonathan Torgovnik is represented by Alan Klotz Gallery, New York. Extended interviews can be found in the publication *Intended Consequences: Rwandan Children Born of Rape*, by Jonathan Torgovnik (Aperture, 2009).