

VOICES AND PERSPECTIVES

After sexual violence: Paths to recovery

The Review has chosen to open this issue with the voices of those who have suffered sexual violence and have been overcoming the multiple ensuing challenges. All have benefited from health care, psychological, psychosocial or material support and/or legal advice provided by the ICRC, the relevant National Red Cross Society or local partners – the non-governmental organization Profamilia in Colombia and the “maisons d’écoute” in the Kivus, the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The testimonies below reflect real, personal – sometimes very intimate – stories of persons who have agreed to share their experience, their trauma, the difficulties they and their loved ones have been facing, the way they have worked to overcome them, as well as their hopes for the future. In order to protect them and their relatives, their testimonies have been anonymized and references to specific locations deleted.

: : : : : :

The voice of E.M.

[The attack had] serious consequences for me: my husband left the family home without a word and I haven’t heard from him since. I trembled all the time, lost weight and couldn’t stop thinking about it all. I needed to be comforted because I had trouble sleeping and pain everywhere. I felt I’d been reduced to an object.

I didn’t look for help immediately because I was afraid of being stigmatized in the village and of the shame. Anyway, I didn’t know where to go or what to do in the event of rape. I very much wanted to talk to someone but I didn’t dare One day a neighbour pressed me to go to the fields with her. She could see what a state I was in and began to talk about what had happened to her and how the counselling centre had helped her. That gave me the courage to talk to her and she told me to go to the counselling centre.

Through the counselling centre I had access to medical care, support and above all counselling that helped me to get over the experience. ... The help I



© ICRC/Wojtek Lembryk

received did the trick because now I can sleep again; I have the strength to fight and get on with my life, despite the problems, and that's important to me.

The attack also resulted in the break-up of my home: my husband ran off, leaving me alone with four children. And my in-laws drove me out of the fields because I was no longer married to their son. I had less and less contact with other people and

“Now I can sleep again; I have the strength to fight and get on with my life, despite the problems, and that's important to me.”

I no longer want to spend time with the women of my husband's village. I prefer to stay in [my new village] and find new friends. Life's difficult, and you can't have everything; the main thing is to pick yourself up and keep fighting.

* * *

The voice of M.M.

I went to [the] village to work. In August, I had to go and help with a dinner and I was then asked to help in the farmhouse. I went to bed at dawn, in the place where I was staying with the children, and that's where it happened. The mule driver raped me. I didn't tell anyone about it; I didn't say anything at all. In October I spoke with the lady of the house and she told me that I would have had to go here and there and cross over the river to speak to someone in charge. They would have made me travel back and

forth to talk about what happened. So I decided to just drop the issue, get on a bus and leave with my children. I didn't go to report it because they would have ignored me or even killed me because the man who raped me was one of the people in charge. That's why I left and went to [another city].

In December I was really tired and a friend who realized that I wasn't doing very well told me about the Red Cross and suggested I pay them a visit. I went and talked to a man who helped me.

I was distraught about everything. I started dwelling on it. I was heartbroken and crying all the time; I felt exhausted. Talking with the people at the Red Cross helped me. They worked with me and the children because I wasn't doing very well

“When I go to bed and I remember what happened, I get up, walk around, realize what is happening and say no, just keep moving forward.”

at all and they were all with me. I was in a really bad state... if I hadn't gotten help, I don't know what would have happened because I was very depressed at that time. I went to the Unit for the Care and Treatment of Victims. I didn't get help there right away because there was a very long waiting list.

How did this change my life? I felt good. [I had become pregnant by my attacker, and] I decided to have my daughter. But I still get very upset at times because I relive it and I'm afraid that it could happen to me again or to one of my children. I would like to be able to go somewhere else, to relocate to a place where I can live in peace.

To women who have been through something similar, I would say keep moving forward, life goes on, don't be depressed about anything. If what happened to me happened to you, know that the babies are innocent and should not bear the blame.

What do I see in my future? I'm a mother and head of a household now; I don't even have a job but if I could set up a business and sell something, I'd like to do that.

At times you forget, but you can't forget forever. When I go to bed and I remember what happened, I get up, walk around, realize what is happening and say no, just keep moving forward.

* * *

The voice of A.L.

I couldn't get what had happened out of my mind and I was terrified, especially that I'd contracted HIV/AIDS. But the worst thing was that I was determined to kill myself. My most urgent need was to tell my husband what had happened so that he'd take me straight to the hospital to get medication. But instead he first threw me out and then left me, with four children. I did not know who to turn to or how to reconcile with my husband. He hasn't come back. At first, even my relatives saw me as a fallen woman, but then they understood that I wasn't to blame.



© ICRC/Wojtek Lembryk

Victims of the same kind of violence as me should be treated with love, rather than condemned, and taken quickly to the counselling centre for support and to the hospital for treatment and protection from disease.

* * *

The voice of P.N.

The main consequence of the attack for me was that I was completely demoralized; I felt useless, so I wanted to die. I felt terrible and wanted medical assistance and counselling, to know who I could talk to, because on my own, I felt I was up against a brick wall.

I'd tell other victims to go to hospital and the counselling centre. That way life will seem worth living again.

* * *

The voice of C.F.

I was gathering firewood when an armed man grabbed me and made me have sex with him. I wasn't strong enough to defend myself. I didn't say anything to anyone when I got home.

During and just after the attack I was very frightened, and a few weeks later I started to feel unwell – I was very weak. I thought that, if I were pregnant, that

would be the end because my parents wouldn't let me stay in their home. I was upset and desperate. ... I didn't have the help I needed immediately after the attack A long time later, I saw a woman who was raising awareness about sexual violence, its consequences and the services available for victims. I spoke to her and she told me what I could do.

Three to five weeks after the attack, I went to the counselling centre. After listening to my story, they sent me to the medical centre, where I was found to be pregnant. I'm very happy with the attention I've received, from the time of my arrival at the counselling centre up to the birth (reception, counselling, accommodation, advice, baby kit and informing my family). It was really important for me to talk about what had happened with a professional, not with my family or a friend. Everything went well with the counselling and health centres.

My relationship with the family deteriorated when they discovered I was pregnant; they threw me out, and I found myself alone with no refuge, nowhere to go. But all that was eighteen months ago and now I'm all right because after I'd given birth my family took me back.

* * *

The voice of C.B.

My husband has left me; the responsibility (for the children, schooling and food) is a heavy burden. The counselling centre helped me and that enabled me to meet those needs.

In the community I was already stigmatized because my husband had told everyone I had been raped. It was so upsetting but, thanks to the counselling centre, I picked up my normal life again and understood that life goes on and that I had a role to play in the community and for my children.

I advise other victims to speak out, not to hide and to come to the counselling centre for help.

“Thanks to the counselling centre, I picked up my normal life again and understood that life goes on and that I had a role to play in the community and for my children.”

* * *

The voice of E.G.

As I was raped when I was eight months pregnant, I was very fearful for my own and my baby's health. I was also afraid of my husband's reaction because he'd warned me that if I was raped, I'd have to leave his house.

I was very sick but didn't dare tell anyone what had happened. I didn't know how to explain what was wrong. A neighbour took me straight to hospital. But a week



© ICRC/Pedram Yazdi

later, when I was still passing out, a woman who knew the woman in charge of the counselling centre well suggested I should go and see her, and she went with me.

I arrived at the counselling centre two weeks after the attack and stayed there for a month. That enabled me to get back on my feet. Before I went to the counselling centre, I was in a bad state: I couldn't sleep and kept having flashbacks to the attack. Now I can sleep and I don't have negative thoughts, except about everyday problems.

Also, my husband's family talked him into leaving me by saying that, as I'd been raped, I'd no longer be faithful to him. But he went to the centre and received counselling. That helped us to get over a very difficult period. It was this that made him stand up to his family and stopped him from leaving me.

Before the robbery and the rape, I'd already prepared the layette and the money I needed for the new baby – it was all stolen. But to my great surprise, the counselling centre gave me everything I needed. Otherwise, I just don't know what I'd have done. When you're displaced, life isn't easy, especially if you're a parent. I tried to work to earn what I needed, but it didn't work out; I fell ill (it was too soon after the birth). My main need is food, in fact.

I've already referred two cases to the counselling centre, and I'll continue to send anyone I meet.

“[My husband] went to the centre and received counselling. That helped us to get over a very difficult period.”

* * *

The voice of M.E.

My husband had left and I was all alone when that man came to my house and did this to me. I knew him and because I knew him, I opened the door. As soon as I opened the door, he pulled a gun on me. He raped me that day. And then it happened a second time; he came back at night. He sexually assaulted me; he raped me anally and vaginally. After that I couldn't sit down. I had terrible stomach ache. I couldn't stand being ill-treated that way. I couldn't go back home. So I went and stayed with friends: one friend one day, and another the next day. Then I went to my cousins' house. I saw that man every day.

Two weeks after he raped me, I contacted an organization and they put me in touch with the ICRC. I felt really bad. They provided psychological support and I was tested for HIV. After I got treatment, he came back to do the same thing. We fought but he's a man and he had a weapon so I couldn't do much.

I started going to the ICRC workshops and training sessions. The workshops really helped me. They helped me a lot because I felt hopeless. I didn't get that kind of support from family members or friends because we didn't see each other any more. I wasn't sleeping because I kept thinking about what happened.

If I hadn't gotten help... I don't know what would have happened. I was very depressed. I couldn't see any light at the end of the tunnel and I couldn't talk to my children. As a mother, I didn't tell them anything. One of them had helped out this man, and he despises him. If I told them about what happened, my children would be in even greater danger. My son would take it badly and since that man is a criminal, he might kill him.

After it happened, we left the neighbourhood to rent another place to live. But I couldn't afford it so we had to return to the neighbourhood, where he also lives. So now I meet him on the street. He says hello and I say hello. I am afraid that it could happen again and I keep thinking that he will come back for my children. I don't have anywhere else to go. As for the police, you go to them to report a case and then they tell other people about it.

“Now I meet [my attacker] on the street. He says hello and I say hello. I am afraid that it could happen again and I keep thinking that he will come back for my children.”

It has been about three years now and I felt really good after the workshops. If I think about what happened now, I get sharp pains in my head and my hands go numb. The rape is in the past, but then I think that he may have done the same thing to other women.

What advice would I give other women? Find other ways to handle what happened, like talking to other women who've been through something similar for support. Speak up about it. One day, I would like to have a home, a decent place to live where I could move around, sleep and relax like other women and other people do.

Forgetting, forget... if I said that I'd forgotten what happened, I'd be lying. I have died each and every day of my life.

* * *



© ICRC/Didier Revol

The voice of G.A.

In September 2013, I was on my way to the market to buy palm oil when three [presumed members of an armed group] attacked me and dragged me into the bush. For several hours they beat me, tore my clothes, stole my money and then raped me.

After the attack I was frightened: I thought I'd caught HIV/AIDS. I had pains in my lower abdomen and was terribly weak. When I got home, my husband left me with six children. I don't know where he is.

What I needed most after the attack was treatment, but I didn't know it was free. Then I needed clothing because my husband took everything [when he left]. After that, it was a matter of survival because both my parents are dead.

“The counselling centre gave me a can of oil so I could start a small business. That helped me get my strength back, and the business helps me to pay for educational expenses and food.”

I did look for treatment because I'd attended an awareness-raising session run by the counselling centre on the importance of the PEP [post-exposure prophylaxis] kit. I received treatment within seventy-two hours and I went to the counselling centre the day after the attack, which helped calm me down. The counsellor took

me to the hospital and gave me two skirts, a sweater, some food and soap. Five months later, the counselling centre gave me a can of oil so I could start a small

business. That helped me get my strength back, and the business helps me to pay for educational expenses and food.

[I'd like] a house where I could live with my six children because the oil business doesn't cover all our needs. At the moment I'm renting a house that leaks everywhere. But I'm able to work and in good health.

* * *

The voice of H.C.

I was working in my field when two armed men threatened me, raped me and kidnapped me for four days. When I got home, my husband threw me out and wouldn't let me see my three children. The youngest was only three months old.

After the attack I felt terrible. I had pains in my lower abdomen, a vaginal discharge and insomnia. I was bereft because I didn't know what had happened to my children, and just let myself go. I felt isolated because my husband repudiated me and people in the community started to avoid me because they thought I was carrying HIV/AIDS. I didn't know where to go for help. If I had known, I would have gone, even if it had meant walking all day.

It was only a month later that I received help. The hospital ... gave me medication four times. Since receiving that assistance, I've got my health and strength back; the pains in my lower abdomen [and the other physical effects] have disappeared. The conversations I had with the women at the counselling centre helped me to calm down.

“Since receiving that assistance, I've got my health and strength back; the pains in my lower abdomen have disappeared.”

Now I'm in good health and have no more worries because my children are with me. The best way of helping those who have had the same experience as me is to help them with a proper income-generating activity so that they have the means to deal with the problems of everyday life.

* * *

The voice of I.L.

I didn't seek help immediately because I was afraid of going to the health centre on my own and ashamed to say I'd been raped. You can't imagine what it's like to stand in front of someone and say you've been raped. I thought everyone knew what had happened so I tried to hide.

I needed medical care to avoid sexually transmitted diseases, and also a loan so I could restart my fresh fish business because I'd been robbed and had absolutely nothing. I have to look after two children and my three younger brothers.



© ICRC/Wojtek Lembryk

I didn't know where to turn. I couldn't ask the people in my community because I was a laughing stock once the neighbours I told about the attack told everyone else.

In my experience, counselling is the first thing, then medical treatment and after that financial support to help cope with family responsibilities. The community also has to be told not to ridicule rape victims. It's an appalling experience. To persons who experience the same thing as me, I'd tell them what happened to me and about the help I had from the counselling and health centres and then I'd refer them to the counselling centre, which would take care of everything else.

“You can't imagine what it's like to stand in front of someone and say you've been raped. I thought everyone knew what had happened so I tried to hide.”

* * *

The voice of P.B.

On 19 April 2013, I left my partner's house after a party. I was walking and a taxi driver signalled to me to ask if I wanted a taxi. But ten minutes later, two men got into the taxi, one on either side, and then it happened... they assaulted... they assaulted me sexually... physically, emotionally and psychologically. The men had talked about my son, places I know well, as if I were someone they already knew. Then they threw



© ICRC/VII/Ron Haviv

me out of the car. My father's work had to do with the armed conflict so it's quite possible that that's why it happened. First I played the blame game because, for a very long time, I was used to focusing on the people around me.

The day after it happened, I went to the medical centre and from then on I was on medication. I was taking medication to keep calm. I don't know how to describe how I felt. The ICRC referred me to a psychologist. The first step was detox. I'd been self-medicating. I finally understood that what happened wasn't my fault; I got treatment, and was tested for HIV at Profamilia. That was the support I received and it really helped me to process what had happened.

I feel like I'm one of the lucky ones compared to many victims of the armed conflict because I had the chance to have different experiences with acupuncture, meditation, seeking spiritual relief and relief for my soul. Also, things improved quickly for me because exactly one year later, I had my baby who is my life and the opportunity for a fresh start. I know that usually life is very difficult for victims. I know that there are victims who have to continue living in the same area as their attackers because the authorities do not provide support or that support is very superficial and takes days or months to arrive. It is important to look for opportunities by evaluating what happened. That's easy to say in a big city because it's a free environment and you can speak out, but in a small village you cannot do that because people might hear about it. I feel privileged.

Sexual abuse is terrible: it makes you very angry, and I regret that anger because it drove me to become the oppressor, wishing misfortune upon the

people who did this to me. After that, things happened in my life that showed me that I could move on. I'm reliving it here with you today and it's hard, but at the end of the day it's about seeking out spiritual experiences and focusing on things that make you want to move on, not letting it poison your outlook.

To other women in the same situation: I tip my hat to you. You are courageous and stoic, especially those of you who have decided to have a baby conceived from rape. These are the most beautiful women because they could either continue spewing hatred or do the opposite and explore all the love there is inside of them. Always look inside of you for the best that you have to give because that is precisely why you are beautiful. You cannot let others control you.

* * *

The voice of J.A.

I was very afraid of sexually transmitted diseases and of an unwanted pregnancy, and cried a lot. My main need was for immediate medical treatment in order to avoid all the consequences that could make my life difficult. I also needed help to calm down because I was so terrified.

I sought help straight away, on the same day, because I'd learned from awareness-raising that it was important to be treated within seventy-two hours, sooner if possible. I received medical treatment at the health centre, after referral by the counselling centre, and psychological support from the counsellor.

“I sought help straight away, on the same day, because I'd learned from awareness-raising that it was important to be treated within seventy-two hours, sooner if possible.”

I badly wanted to talk to someone because it was like carrying a heavy weight inside me. I had to

unburden myself. Talking helped a lot. I cried so much talking to my parents and the counsellor and they comforted me. That did me good and I began to calm down.

* * *

The voice of L.B.

I couldn't stop thinking about what had happened. I had headaches and stomach aches, and I lost my appetite completely. [Immediately after the attack,] I felt the need for speedy treatment at the health centre and to stop thinking about the attack all the time, because my headaches were becoming unbearable.

At first I didn't want to talk about it because I was afraid of the stigma as my husband left me immediately. I felt that talking about it could only make my social situation worse. Later, I thought of the counsellor, so I went to see her at the counselling centre.

Family or marital mediation is needed. I'm sure my husband is also suffering a great deal from our separation as he left me because his family told him to. He's started to drink and take drugs.

* * *

The voice of K.A.

My self-esteem plummeted. I lost my virginity through rape, which is shameful. I wish it had happened otherwise. ... For me, the important thing was to calm myself down and be looked after.

The help was effective because the medication was free, and the nurse explained exactly how to take it and what the possible side effects were. I felt a need to talk so the counselling was also good and helped me a lot specifically because I was sure the counsellor wouldn't repeat anything, the nurse too. I'm so glad it was available.

[If I met people who'd had the same problems as me I would tell them,] never hide, and seek help within three days of the attack. I'd help them by referring them to the counselling centre.

“I felt a need to talk... I was sure the counsellor wouldn't repeat anything.”

* * *

The voice of L.M.

The help was very good. Thanks to the medical treatment, there were no physical consequences, and as far as the psychological side is concerned, the anger and thoughts about the attack have diminished a great deal.

In addition to the problems with my husband and his family, some members of the community shunned me, even the neighbours I used to be able to rely on. I just wanted someone to tell them to stop laughing at me, but I had no one to turn to.

To me, the best way of helping people who have been victims of the same kind of violence as me is through family and marital mediation in order to avoid repudiation, and community awareness-raising to fight against the social stigmatization of rape victims. I can tell you, it's so easy to start thinking of suicide or running away.

Overcoming the psychological trauma and psychosocial consequences of sexual violence

The ICRC supports over forty programmes that build up local capacity to stabilize and improve the mental health and ensure the emotional well-being of individuals and communities affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence. These programmes provide mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) to victims of sexual violence, as well as families of missing persons, detainees, and other victims of violence, including unaccompanied minors and first-aiders. The ICRC currently provides MHPSS care to victims of sexual violence in Central African Republic, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali and Somalia. Future programs will be developed in South Sudan, Lebanon and Mexico.

The ICRC frequently utilizes MHPSS experts to identify victims and encourage community outreach when assessing the needs of sexual violence victims. While the response and support provided to victims may not be psychological in nature, MHPSS experts help to ensure, during this assessment phase based on culturally sensitive methodologies, that the ICRC's actions remain driven by the “do no harm” principle and build community trust.

Depending on the context, the ICRC's mental health and psychosocial activities for sexual violence victims may include the set up and supervision of psychosocial support through local actors, that aims to reduce the psychological suffering of victims and increase their capabilities in the immediate term. In other situations, the ICRC may focus on training and supervising health staff and other key community leaders on sexual violence-related issues, signs of distress, and how to give basic psychological support to ensure adequate and appropriate care is available to victims.

The ICRC also conducts community sensitization and psychoeducation activities on sexual violence-related issues (such as the stigma surrounding sexual violence and the importance of medical follow-up in case of rape or other forms of sexual violence) and of available services in the area to reduce victim stigmatization and encourage victims to seek help if they need it.