

Independent Scholar

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Stories to change the world (Often given, sometimes stolen)

Abstract:

Advocates have used stories of suffering and survival to bring about change in policy and practice to confront violations of law and human rights. There is an essential, accompanying requirement that the telling must not constitute theft. Identities must be protected. Ownership must be respected. But undoubtedly, sharing stories ensures awareness of the humanity behind what legal and theoretical debates. The personal can influence the policy. Stories are powerful instruments for change. This writer sets out to show how that might be done. There has been a change in international norms regarding rape in war. After centuries of acceptance that rape in war was inevitable there is now recognition of it as a deliberate tactic of war. There has been accompanying rejection and international response. The conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda – and the international criminal tribunals set up to deal with crimes in those arenas were instrumental in establishing tactical rape as a serious breach of international law, a war crime, an instrument of genocide and torture. In the United Nations, in the courts, in the public media and in academic debate, stories of victims and survivors played a part in effecting attitudinal change. Stories of indifference on the part of authorities were highlighted. The strength as well as the suffering of victims and survivors was told. Using these stories brings great responsibility – to avoid sensationalism, to protect and respect the owners of those stories. Used with respect they are powerful and can make a positive difference.

Biographical note:

Dr Brenda Fitzpatrick is a writer with extensive experience in refugee camps and conflict zones. Working with humanitarian organisations she helped inform and challenge global policy makers and leaders to recognise the use of rape as a weapon and a tactic of war, a breach of international law, a violation of human rights, a war crime, a crime against humanity and genocide. She is the author of many papers, reports and the book, *Tactical Rape in War and Conflict: International recognition and Response*, published by Policy Press, 2016.

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Ngara, 1994. I stood on the bridge dividing Rwanda from Tanzania. In memory, the bridge was high above the water line, but I am no longer really sure. I watched a constant flow of torsos and unmatched limbs drift, get caught in eddies and slowly turn on down the river. I had not registered earlier how much black bodies turn grey when bloated.

The metallic African sun pinged off the struts of the bridge. Another conflict. Another genocide. Just beyond the border of this massacre, heat fell upon the piles of blood-encrusted pangas, farming tools rusting in the full glare of murderous frantic hatred, farming tools which had become weapons of execution, which had savagely created a world of chaos. They now just rusted, the only remnants of living and working, snatched at the final steps into another land, from those who made it to the river.

Survivors fled. Bodies did macabre dances in currents and whorls of the river sometimes nudging each other in death before moving on, sometimes pausing as they occasionally jagged on other debris. Some slowly suppured in villages and fields. Girls and women were raped, violated. Those left alive crept with broken skin and shattered spirits across the bridge, to face the climb up the hill to the mirage of refuge and hope, to arrive to the realities of manifold despair. Signs of rape were everywhere. Seasoned international peace keepers were appalled at the ferocity. One soldier said he and his men found that the savage evidence of rape, rape of pregnant women, rape of little girls, took an emotional toll on them all; a toll even greater than that of the pervasive sight and smell-of death and decay. He said:

The murder of people – I know that can sound bad, but that wasn't as bad to us as the rape and especially the systematic rape and gang rape of children. Massacres kill the body. Rape kills the soul. And there was a lot of rape.'¹

This massacre was already on record. An estimated 800,000 people were slaughtered in less than three months. Signs of rape were everywhere. We were too late, too late to make any real difference. We could only document it, document it and hope it would somehow help. It was a very faint hope.

The photographer standing with me on the bridge echoed my doubts, "What the hell are we doing here?"

Before I could attempt any response, a Rwandan nun standing behind us erupted shrilly in heavy French- accented English, "You are here, here to tell the story of what happens when men go to war, what happens to women and little girls when men go to war!" They were her people, those bodies in the water. "You are here to tell the world that not all Rwandans are devils. Tell them! Tell them what happened to women, these women and these little girls! Tell them! Tell them."

Her words struck a nerve, recalling my own anger some weeks earlier, in another war, another place. I had been in Zagreb as the war in the former Yugoslavia raged and the local mosque had thrown open its doors to refugees regardless of their religion or their culture.

In another part of town an orthodox priest reluctantly unlocked his doors to us. I asked him about the whispers circulating in Geneva where I was based. The rumours (later proven to be true) were of rape camps, of widespread rape of Bosnian women and girls. Rape as a tactic of this war.

He had shrugged. Shrugged. “It is war, madam. Rape, rape happens.” I heard a chilling acceptance.

Not far from his doors I sat with women on cold concrete floors I heard them tell the stories of rape, rape that was widespread and brutal. Sometimes the stories were couched as happening to ‘my sister’, or happening to ‘my friend’ or to ‘a woman I knew’. Sometimes they spoke in the first person despite the shame they felt. They felt shame! It was so wrong that they should feel shame!

Women reared in patriarchal societies often believed they were valued when deemed chaste. Many women raped became pregnant. Some suicided. Some killed their babies. I spoke with a professional woman helping at the mosque, who understood the complexity of their anguish: “Deep down inside me, even I believe that my children are the children of their father.” So many of the babies conceived in violence and abuse were deemed the children of the enemy, the enemy who raped their mothers. They were the children of their fathers. One Islamic leader called for understanding, “These women are heroes. Take them to wife.” But his voice was often ignored. Some victims and survivors of this rape lived isolated and rejected by their communities.

I could not accept this as ordinary, as inevitable, as unstoppable – even in war.

So I listened when the nun on a bridge in Africa screamed at me to tell the stories. And I told the stories – and I keep telling the stories. Some stories were given to me – mostly on condition of protecting the identities of the tellers. Some I deliberately stole. The stories about people like the priest and the officials who failed to take notice of these crimes, these crimes against women and little girls, crimes against humanity.

I was based in Geneva because a man telephoned me one night and offered me a job. When he described the role I said, “It sounds like you want a journalist. That’s not me.”

He replied, “I want a story teller, someone to tell humanitarian and UN agencies what people in emergencies, in camps, in wars, really need.”

I was a housewife working for a women’s organization, but, “I am Australian, I can tell stories.” So I went to wars, and I went to floods, and I went to slums, and my reports were mostly just what people told me, their stories, their words, their feelings. These were the stories given to me. They were stories, given to me in the hope that I would use them to help others to understand the horrific reality of the use of rape in war.

There were many stories to tell from those Rwandan camps. All the workers there believed what one said aloud: “Every female who has made it this far, has probably been

raped – and probably more than once. Including the old women and [including] the kids too.” Some stories were horrific to recount but many, many screamed to be told.

One woman ran to escape the gangs. She hid in the river holding her baby on her back. She waited in the water, waited crouching in reeds, waited listening to voices filled with hatred and mob excitement. Eventually, there was silence. Cautiously she emerged, reached the bank and scrambled onto the bank ready to flee again. Her child was silent too. Her baby had drowned.

One woman who had been gang raped had been flung away in the bush. Another group found her and again and again she had been raped, this time with weapons too, and again discarded. Slowly, painfully, she had crawled along a road hoping to find safety. She was bleeding and desperate. She saw some of her own people. As they approached she forced herself to sit but did not speak. She was too ashamed to speak. The shame again – that terrible added burden of suffering.

In the camp, many women sat wordlessly, staring into a distance, a recent past that I could not see, could only guess. Many stories would never find voice. Many would remain hidden, buried, secret. These stories would never be stolen although they were about stolen lives. Victims and survivors had the right to their stories even whilst other rights were denied. Their stories were theirs to share or not to share. But they were always felt, they could not be denied. But some stories were shared, some were given for re-telling.

In the camp I found Tutsis, who had fled the genocide. I found Hutus who had committed the genocide then fled the avenging Tutsi forces. Victims and killers together. War is chaos.

Some teenagers and little girls had somehow escaped, broken, hurt. One young girl had witnessed her family attacked and murdered. She ran and she ran and she ran. Running alone, in terror she somehow made it across the border. All alone, she came to the tents where humanitarian agencies did what little could be done to help the thousands who had fled. Some nuns took her in and she began helping distribute food to the long lines of the hungry and the hurt. I had noticed her because when she sat by the fire at the end of the day she twirled a curl around her finger. My daughters did that when they were daydreaming at home. Her dreams would not be like the daydreams of my daughters, though I wished they could be. One day I found her sobbing in the arms of one of the nuns. She had been handing out supplies when she saw, in the line, one of the very men she had seen killing her brother, attacking her family. The man was wearing the shirt she herself had given to her brother for his 15th birthday. I strangled my own sobs and I asked what she had done. She said, “It is up to God to deal with that man. I gave him his food.”

In this camp of both victims and killers who could be sure who was good or who was bad?

One day as we went out along the hot dusty hill which was the last phase of the journey for many, I saw an old man. Not many old people survived this journey. He was wrapped

in a blanket in the rawness of the burning sun and he trudged with a stick – half a foot, in front of half a foot, in front of half a foot. It was a long, steep climb to the camp. In front of him on the side of the road was a young woman slumped, cradling the limp body of a baby. She was still, she was silent. I saw the old man reach under his blanket to bring out a small cloth bag with a string, rather like the bags my son had used to keep his marbles. Without breaking the slow painful rhythm of his steps, the old man drew out a handful of beans and, as he passed, he dropped them into the lap of the young woman. That was all he had. That was what he gave.

The genocidaires had included youth groups whipped into a frenzy of hate and violence. Armed with only rudimentary tools they became killing gangs. Many were in the camp too. One day I became lost in the sea of blue canvas shelters in the camp, separated from the team accompanying me. A crowd of kids surrounded me. It was like a crowd in a playground when a fight breaks out. I talked my way out in my very bad French and one young boy about fourteen offered to show me back to the compound. Then, as we walked together he asked me, “Do you believe in God?” I fudged my answer. Then he asked, “Will God really forgive people who do bad things, even murderers?” He was asking for forgiveness. Again, I fudged my answer.

The night before, I had been called away from the fire by the nun who had screamed at me on the bridge. We sat together in the darkness and she, who was so strong, cried as she held my hand. She spent all day trying to comfort women and little girls. She said that she told them God would help them, God cared for them and God would give them strength to survive and live again. “But,” she said in the hidden blackness of her own despair, “I tell them this but I no longer believe it.” The genocide had killed her faith. Still she worked all day. I told stories.

Some stories I later unearthed from the disintegrating, dusty files of court proceedings, stories of courageous witnesses and some of lawyers and prosecutors who failed to respect survivors. I had decided that the story needed to be told to governments and policy makers. I had become one of the advocates for recognition of what I came to call ‘tactical rape’, rape used as a tactic of war, rape that is deliberately planned, condoned, encouraged. Eventually, international criminal tribunals were set up to try crimes in conflicts like Rwanda. Eventually, findings forced the UN Security Council to recognise rape as a weapon of genocide, a weapon of war, a tactic of war.

Women testifying in these courts were brave – and many paid dearly for their bravery. They shared their stories but in the process many were robbed again of dignity, respect and value. One was asked in court, “Why would that man want to rape you when you had not bathed for days? Why would he want you?” Some women were expected to bring witnesses when this was clearly impossible. One had her testimony dismissed because she had sought psychological support for her trauma so she was deemed an unreliable witness. There were battles to establish that coercion could be more than physical violence.

At last there was international recognition and rejection of tactical rape. A few perpetrators are slowly being held accountable. Grains of sand in the desert of redress. Grains of sand in the desert of prevention.

Tactical rape continues. Women in conflicts still suffer violation, violation and death by rape. But I have to hope that telling their stories helps at least a little. I endeavour not to steal those stories but I continue to tell them. I will not stop telling them. I have to believe that it must be better that tactical rape is now recognised as a heinous crime – not ‘just’ an inevitable by-product of war.

Is this the end of the struggle for justice and protection for women and for little girls? Clearly not. Is this a beginning? I hope it is.

Research Statement

Research background

Advocates use stories of suffering and survival to bring about change in policy and practice to confront violations of law and human rights. There are generally accepted accompanying responsibilities regarding ownership of those stories and the rights of the tellers. This includes protection of identity and dignity in many cases relevant to war and conflict. Academia has set standards of ethics for research papers but many general publications fail to observe these.

Research Contribution

This paper sets out to demonstrate that advocacy can be *effected* while respecting the identity and ownership of victims and survivors of tactical rape in war. This is an issue which demands telling with dignity and respect for those whose suffering results from a crime which has been largely accepted as inevitable for centuries. It sets out to show that observers can be mandated by victims and survivors to re-tell their stories and that they have a duty to do so respectfully.

Research Significance

The significance of this paper is that it highlights and demonstrates the power of storytelling to bring about change in international law, policy and practice. It does this while demonstrating respect for the essential humanity and the individuals which demand such change. It is important that writers acknowledge and practise responsibility to maximise the impact of telling stories they are given – and that they be prepared to steal stories of indifference, irresponsibility, cruelty and criminal activity, at any level.

¹ Nowrojee, Binaifer, 2005, *Your justice is too slow: Will the ICTR fail Rwanda's rape victims?* United Nations Research Institute for Social development , November , p.1