

**This is the testimony of Odette, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide**

When the militiaman was going to rape me, I begged him kindly, saying, "I'm still a student. I'm still young. Wait. When I finish school, I will be your wife, but please don't rape me." Then he told me, "You don't have time to go to school, so forget about being anyone's wife. Even if you are lucky enough to survive, you will just be a maid in my house." Before my father died, he told me that I shouldn't get pregnant before marriage. I imagined my brother asking me, "Why are you pregnant? Who got you pregnant?"

While I was pregnant with a child of rape, I thought of my father's wish that after four years of secondary school, I should go to a convent and become a nun. I tried to abort the baby, but I didn't know how to do it. I also thought it was a sin against God, so I decided to keep my pregnancy. I started loving my son when I went back to school and I began studying psychology. That's when I knew that this child of mine needed a lot of attention and that he's innocent. I tried to remove the hatred from me and turn it into love.

My job now involves helping widows and orphans. One thing that I find in common with all of them, and is true for me in particular, is a loss of dignity. They also have health problems. So many diseases related to rape are not easily talked about. They don't talk to just anyone, and many are dying because they keep quiet about their past and their health. The challenge is to get to the point of addressing this. If it wasn't for the counseling I received, I don't think I would have talked about my experience at all.

I don't think I'm a mother. I don't think I'm a girl. I'm something in between. Something I don't know. Because a mother must have a home. I don't have a home. A girl doesn't have a child. I have a child. I have a photograph of my mother that I look at when I'm lonely. She's the one who brought me into this world. Whenever I feel traumatized, I look at her picture. Whenever I feel lonely, I look at her, and I feel like I have a parent even though she's not here anymore.

We have families that are broken and torn up. We have people who were dehumanized and treated like animals. I want the world to ensure that everybody's human rights are protected. But above all, I want the world to ensure that rape and acts of sexual violence never happen to anyone. They not only affect the individual victim, but also the children that are born of sexual violence.

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