



This is the testimony of Sheema, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide

My name is Sheema. I am now 25 years old. I was the fifth child in a family of 8 siblings. I was only 11 years old when the genocide started. From our family of 8 children, only 4 of us survived. My father and mother were also killed. I have been looking after my siblings since 1994.

Before the genocide my father was a contractor, my mother was a housewife, he took care of the family. We had an average lifestyle, like many working class families.

The morning following the announcement of the President's death, men with guns and grenades overran my neighbourhood. They quickly began to kill. A group of men, including some my classmates, came to my house to take our property.

Roadblocks were erected at what seemed like every road. At the roadblock near our house, I saw one of my sister's classmates. He let me and my sister and father pass through, and that was the last time I saw my mother and brothers alive. I was later told that my mother and elder sister were killed as they were hiding out in my sister's classmate's house. After the genocide I asked him where the corpses of my family members were, but he denied knowing anything about them. I have never found out where my three brothers were killed either, nor have I found their bodies.

My father was killed by a group of as many as thirty *interahamwe*. They separated men from women and children and straight away cut them to death with machetes. I saw my father being killed. I can still hear him crying for help, as each man in turn was struck down. They had no chance of defending themselves, against the might of *interahamwe* and their deadly weapons.



Then the time came for women. Countless men first raped us. They then herded us to the nearby river, and threw many people in to drown. At the same time, many other groups of refugees were being brought down to the river. In the melee, I managed to slip away and hid with my little sister in the swamp. There was confusion, people crying, others being thrown in the river, others being raped and humiliated. The refugees outnumbered the *interahamwe* and we ran for our lives. We managed to escape.

We joined other refugees seeking sanctuary in a church, but we were attacked again. We tried to defend ourselves, but many were still killed. Only God protected us. We left the church in the midst of the massacres and made it to where some UN people were. We felt safe and hoped for protection. Instead they boarded their helicopters, and left us in the arms of our killers.

I think that now I have nothing. I suffer terrible grief. In our family we were not very rich, but we had enough. Now, it is even difficult to get enough money to go to school. Sometimes I find myself alone at home, and pass the night in solitude. And on top of all that, I must look after my siblings - when I myself need to be looked after too.

I still do not know why or how I survived. I have many memories of my parents. Still I remember my father's last words. He told us that we would be killed but that those who survive should love each other, and be courageous.

When I feel depressed I write in my notebook what I feel. I can only share my anxiety with other orphans, who we meet in solidarity camps. We share similar experiences and comfort each other. After the camps we go back to being heads of households and struggle to provide a livelihood to our families. I take refuge in writing poems. One day I hope to publish them.

Today's Reading of the Testimonies marks the 15th Anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, in support of survivors like Sheema.