

World view –

Lindsey Hilsum on Rwanda and a nude calendar

by Lindsey Hilsum
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Eighty per cent of the women and girls who survived the genocide in Rwanda were raped. At least half of them are now HIV-positive. Can a nude calendar help their cause?

I was listening to the testimony of Rwandan rape victims when an image caught my eye. A large black-and-white photograph showed a naked white woman sitting on a wooden chair, with the word "Exposed" above her head and "2005" beneath her feet. It jarred. How could someone be selling a nude calendar at an event to raise money for women who were raped during the genocide in Rwanda?

We were in Trafalgar Square, where more than 200 women had gathered to read aloud testimonies collected by the human rights group African Rights. The stories were harrowing: "Men visited daily to abuse us sexually. I have no idea how many men raped me, nor how many times I was raped." "I've not told anyone other than my mother that I'm HIV-positive. Every time that I sense death getting closer, I wonder where my children are going to stay."

Tens of thousands of women were raped in Rwanda in 1994, when leaders of the country's majority Hutus tried to wipe out the Tutsi people. A decade on, they are dying of Aids. Many genocide survivors no longer dare live in their villages, where they are likely to encounter the families of the rapists, if not the rapists themselves, so they have gathered in the towns. But the stigma attached to rape and Aids is so strong that few talk openly about their experiences.

A small London-based organisation, the Survivors Fund (Surf), is trying to provide antiretroviral treatment for the genocide widows, and the calendar is a fundraising effort by a group of women from the village of Horsley in Gloucestershire.

They are challenging our attitudes to rape, nudity and sexuality. When I glimpsed the first image, I thought it "inappropriate", as if the public display of the female form was somehow an insult to those who had been raped. Yet why should it be? The image was neither provocative nor sexualised.

"We wanted to use our bodies in an empowered way, to show strength and vulnerability in support of those brave, yet vulnerable women," reads the statement on the back of the calendar. Eschewing the jokey tits-behind-teapots images of the Women's Institute, the Horsley women say "the decision to appear naked is not a frivolous one".

"We're thankful that we can be in a safe environment where we can choose to take our clothes off," says Jo Hofman, who posed in a meditation position. Several years ago, she narrowly avoided rape while on holiday in Greece. "First he offered me money, then when I refused he knocked me down," she recalled. "I managed to get up and he knocked me over again. This time I whacked him with a stone and ran away."

Mary Kayitesi Blewitt, director of Surf, praises the Horsley initiative as "a noble thing to do". It is so important, she says, that the issue of rape and Aids in Rwanda be raised, and "these women have used the best means at their disposal to do so".

In the decade since the genocide in Rwanda, the scale of rape has gradually emerged. The Widows' Association estimates that 80 per cent of female survivors were raped, and at least half of them are now HIV-positive.

The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in Arusha, Tanzania, has even convicted a woman for rape. Pauline Nyiramasuhuko, a minister in the genocidal government, used to pick out Tutsi women for her son Arsene Shalom Ntahobali and his comrades to rape.

Shortly after the genocide, I tracked down Nyiramasuhuko to a refugee camp where she was caring for lost children. Her anger against the Tutsi-dominated rebels who had ousted her government was most bitter when she talked about sex. "They never marry Hutu women," she said. "They look down on us."

Tutsi women are regarded as more beautiful and sexually adroit than Hutus, and an eminent Hutu man would prize a Tutsi mistress as a status symbol.

The photographer Angela Williams says that while images of war can create apathy, the photographs of the Horsley women "endeavour to create images of empathy, defiance and solidarity". One of the most striking photographs places the silhouette of a woman in front of a dark tree, a starburst of light caught between her legs.

In Rwanda, women are always covered in public - bikini tops and shorts would shock in Kigali. Many of the genocide victims no longer want to see themselves as sexual beings - their pain is too great. But the women of Horsley are right. Their naked images need not be an affront to those who were raped, but a reassertion of all women's essential, female selves.

As they explain, "it conveys feelings beyond words".

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www.survivors-fund.org.uk

www.hwcalendar.co.uk

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