

## Conflict and forgiveness in Rwanda

In 1994 when Hutu extremists initiated the violence that led to the Rwandan genocide where 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed, Anne-Marie\* was a married mother of six. With another child on the way, she was living a comfortable life in rural Rwanda while her husband was working as a truck driver in the capital, Kigali. On the second day of fighting, Anne-Marie was called to the local telephone and told that he had been killed.

After seeing one of her sons thrown into a mass grave, Anne-Marie fled with her remaining five children. But in their escape, they met a group of violent young men trained to kill. Their commander ordered them to shoot her thirteen-year-old eldest daughter. "When the militia shot her, she didn't die straight away so she was crying out in pain," says Anne-Marie. "That sound will stay with me forever and I hear it every day."

In an ambush a few days later, Anne-Marie's remaining four children were killed, beaten to death with rocks. Anne-Marie's life was only saved because the militia leader decided that she was more use to him alive. She was dragged back to the militia camp and only freed when the camp was liberated.



Photo: Annie Bungeroth

The following August, Anne-Marie gave birth to the daughter she had carried throughout the war. She had to learn the difficult lesson of how to find a space in her broken heart for a new life. Anne-Marie struggled and eventually was taken to a psychiatric hospital.

A sympathetic doctor recognised that her problems were caused by trauma and grief. He told her about CAFOD partner, AVEGA, which works with widows of the genocide, and about its counselling service.

"At that time I was very forgetful. I would get up in the morning and decide to go out somewhere. But I would get to the end of the road and forget where I was going and just carry on walking."

Slowly, through regular counselling and contact with other widows in similar situations, Anne-Marie began to feel stronger.

Two and a half years after the genocide, a neighbour working as a driver told Anne-Marie that on his travels he had seen a little boy who looked like her son, Manwe. The son that she had last seen being thrown into a mass grave had survived. Manwe told her that while the soldiers were burying the bodies it had started raining, so the soldiers had left to seek shelter. He had crawled over bodies to escape.

Anne-Marie says, "I want to forgive [what happened to me] so that my children can grow up mixing with other people, because if you show them hatred there is no way they can learn to love other people."

Anne-Marie now lives in Kigali. She is bringing up her daughter, Alphonsine, and her son, Manwe, in a house built for her by AVEGA.

*\*The names have been changed to protect the identities of the genocide survivors.*

*Colette Nusaburasoni is counselled by Liberate Muhagihana (left). Colette lost all her children in the genocide. Liberate has received counselling and training and now works as a counsellor for CAFOD partner, AVEGA, in Rwanda.*