



Voices from the Rwanda Tribunal

Official Transcript: Ololade Benson (Part 4 of 9)



Role:	Translator
Country of Origin:	Nigeria
Interview Date:	23 October 2008
Location:	Arusha, Tanzania
Interviewers:	Donald J Horowitz Robert Utter
Videographer:	Nell Carden Grey
Interpreter:	None

Interview Summary

Ololade Benson speaks about her role as a translator and the challenges of communicating sensitive material such as witness statements concerning rapes and killings. She discusses her personal engagement with an international non-profit organization that she founded in 1998 to help single mothers, widows and children in Rwanda. She emphasizes the importance of transparency and accountability for charitable organizations operating in post-conflict settings. Benson draws attention to the targeting and suffering of women in Rwanda during and after the genocide.

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Part 4

- 00:02** Donald J Horowitz: I want to talk about the job again for a minute.
- 00:04 Okay.
- 00:06** DJH: The job itself, has it been pretty consistently the same here?
- 00:10 Yeah.
- 00:10** DJH: You're translating documents.
- 00:12 Yeah.
- 00:13** DJH: And I take it you're translating court documents.
- 00:15 Yeah, here in Ar-, in Arusha, yeah.
- 00:17** DJH: Is that mostly court documents?
- 00:18 Mostly.
- 00:19** DJH: Yeah. I take it that you would also however sometimes again do witness statements
...
- 00:24 Yes, yeah.
- 00:25** DJH: . . . and things of that sort. And I think you've described to a certain extent the effect that that has on you and the – that that finally those people began to recognize the effects on the staff, started to do something about it.
- 00:40 Yeah.
- 00:43** DJH: In terms of the job and, and why don't you bring me up to date? What are you doing now? Is it pretty much the same as you have been doing and . . . ?
- 00:53 You mean translation?
- 00:54** DJH: Yes.
- 00:55 There is more legal stuff here, a lot of legal stuff; judgments, appeal judgments, appeal documents, motions. Once in a while you get the witness statements or so but it's more legal stuff here.
- 01:07 It's a lot more challenging than it was in Kigali. Kigali, at some point you could just close your eyes, because it's like, "when I heard the Interahamwe come in I went and hid in the

cupboard,” stuff like that. Where here it’s, here it’s here. It’s, it’s the defense submits this and stuff. It’s, it’s different.

01:22 DJH: Are you enjoying it?

01:23 I’m enjoying it, yeah. I like, I like challenges, you know. I don’t like, I don’t like routine. I like, I like people to throw challenges at me, yeah.

01:33 DJH: And are you planning to stay here until whenever it ends? Or what, what are your, what are your thoughts?

01:42 I’m a bit confused about that. If I get something that would make me work with women and children I would not even think about it twice. If somebody offers me a job right now, gender – because I’ve been doing, I’ve done about 14 online courses just on gender, conflict prevention, HIV AIDS, and things like that, because that is really where my passion is. So eventually I would like to go in that direction.

02:06 DJH: Well that’s – and that’s a good transition to beginning to question you on the other . . .

02:11 Ah, okay.

02:12 DJH: . . . on the, on the other pattern of this, of this interview. You talked about going back while in, in Rwanda itself, you, unof-, started unofficially as an individual with some friends to assist single mothers or widowed mothers and their children, or women whether they were childless or not.

02:34 DJH: Some of them may have had children and perhaps were now childless. I as-, assume some of them . . .

02:39 Yeah, yeah, yeah.

02:40 DJH: Okay. And di-, were, were there some particular kinds of services or products that you wanted initially when you were sort of still hadn’t quite formed the organization that you were focused on, what, the kinds of services that (___) . . .

02:58 Initially, I think I used to help in four areas, if I’m not mistaken – I’ll pay rent, school fees, I’ll set up a business for you, small scale business or if you are over 60, I just give you a stipend, you know, something, very little money, just for you to buy groceries, yeah.

03:14 DJH: Okay. I missed the first one you said. A parent?

03:16 Rent, rent, rent, rent.

03:17 DJH: Oh rent, rent. Okay.

- 03:18 Yeah, house rent.
- 03:19 DJH: House rent.**
- 03:19 And I'll sit – I'll meet them. I'll interview them and I'll say I can only help in one area. You decide in what area you need help the most. And if it is school fees it's one child per family and I tell them, "You go home, think about it. People love your children, you give it to, give me, you give me that child and I'll educate that child for you."
- 03:40 DJH: So you developed a structure right at, right from the beginning.**
- 03:42 Yeah.
- 03:43 DJH: I take it because you knew you had limited resources.**
- 03:46 Yeah, exactly yeah.
- 03:49 DJH: All right.**
- 03:50 And then I also – sorry, I also wanted to be clear from the very beginning, you know, because you are dealing with people who have all kinds of needs and, you know, when they meet you the first time, they want you to do everything for them and I'm usually very, very clear.
- 04:01 "These are the areas in which I operate, these are the things I can do for you. I don't, my, my resources are limited and I can only help you in one area." That had to be clear from the very beginning. () . . .
- 04:13 DJH: And then as you began to formulate an organization, that was like '98 I think you said. '96-, '98 . . .**
- 04:21 Yeah, '98, '98 yeah.
- 04:22 DJH: Yeah, '98, okay. Did – what changed, if anything, about your approach in what you were focusing on?**
- 04:31 I began to keep records of everything I did. I opened a file for each of my patients and yeah. Actually, to tell you the truth, I think I was, kind of, to some extent, organized right from the very beginning. I'm a very organized person. I'm very, very good at administrat-, at organization. I don't like doing things in a haphazard way.
- 04:52 DJH: Well then, why did you start an organization versus continuing to do it by yourself? Was there some reason you did that?**
- 04:58 I wanted to do things properly. I wanted to have it registered. I wanted to open a bank. I wanted to have a constitution, but when I tried to do that in the UK they told me you go

and start first, and then you come back with evidence to show that you're doing something, you know, yeah.

05:13 DJH: Tell us about forming the organization and what you did then while you were still in, in Rwanda.

05:18 I decided, I decided that to give the organization a name – the first thing that came to my mind was sharing. I said well what I'm doing is just sharing the little resources I have, and eventually I decided to add the word "love" to it, and so that's the, the organization was now given the name Sharing Love, and then I re-, I approached colleagues and people were very, very happy about what I was doing.

05:42 And I got – initially I used to do a-, "adopt a child" kind of thing. "Adopt a child" meant that you pay school fees for a child or when you adopt a mother, you pay rent. So I'll talk to people and I'll tell you these are – I'll give a list of all my prospective beneficiaries and then you select.

06:00 If you wanted to pay rent or if you wanted to pay school fees or – I don't impose anything on anyone. And, and I realized that that was a good approach, because somebody would look at the list and say, "I have a daughter called (____). I'll take this girl and educate her."

06:14 And somebody would tell me, you know, "I have an auntie who had problems, accommodation problem and I know what it is when you cannot pay your rent. She was eventually evicted." So people identified with various needs and, on the basis of that, selected people they wanted to help, which was very good for me. And, and because of that as well there was continuity.

06:35 DJH: Okay, and how did you – did others join your organization?

06:40 No, not really. People just gave me money. Yeah.

06:42 DJH: Okay. How did you raise money at that point?

06:46 I just approached people, and people were living in Rwanda and they knew what was going on in Rwanda, you know. And that was just it. And also not trying to blow my own trumpet or anything, people have a lot of confidence and trust in me, so getting money from people was not a problem.

07:05 DJH: Okay, and did there come a time when some people . . .

07:10 Yeah.

07:11 DJH: . . . became more interested and began to provide some ongoing help?

- 07:16 Yeah, yeah. Because sometimes like I said it's a child per family. I have people who will decide to pay for two, three children in a family and I have people who would tell me – like I had a colleague who was being transferred here and he said, you know, "I cannot continue this. Then why don't you find out from the woman what she wants to do?"
- 07:33 And I sat with the lady and she said, "Okay, just buy me a cow." You know in Rwanda, for them the cow, cows are a very, very big thing. She said, "Buy me a female cow." I can't remember if it was a female or male cow. Her neighbor had (_____). I said, "They will come together and will share whatever comes out of it. I'll sell the milk and I'll slaughter the cow once in a while."
- 07:53 And we did that for her, you know. So I mean because I, I also, I, I also did not want this dependency thing to continue and that's why I only give people who were over 60 money. The rest of them, I try to teach them how to fish, yeah.
- 08:09 DJH: Go milk a cow, okay. Do you, do you follow up to see . . . okay.**
- 08:15 I do. I have a re-, a report from – I have a community worker in Kigali. I mentioned it in one of my newsletters. Somebody told me to hire someone and they would pay and she's still there. Her name is Sharon.
- 08:25 DJH: Hire someone at the . . .**
- 08:27 A community worker who would help me, so she used to go around because I had a full time job as well. So she would go around and she would come and do it. And she still sends me reports, you know.
- 08:37 DJH: So that people you've helped, she follows up on (_____) . . .**
- 08:40 She follows up, yeah and then I also have orphans where – I worked with commercial sex workers who, who, I had one or two of them who died and left me orphans. I even have their photographs on the wall in my office and I still, I still buy them food. I mean, seven years down the line I'm still looking after those kids; three of them.
- 09:00 So Sharon takes care of that. At the end of every month she buys them foodstuff. She takes it to them. Compassion has taken one of them. I mean educat-, Compassion is educating one of them.
- 09:11 DJH: Comp- . . .**
- 09:12 Compassion, Compassion . . .
- 09:13 DJH: Yes, I know the word.**
- 09:14 . . . the NGO, yeah Compassion. (_____), they have an office in Kigali, so.

09:18 **DJH: Oh, that's the name of the organization?**

09:18 The na-, organization, yeah, Compassion. Yeah.

09:20 **DJH: Ah okay, I understand now, okay.**