

# In Conversation

## Healing Work with War Survivors:

Margo Okazawa-Rey speaks with Ruth Ojiambo Ochieng about ISIS-WICCE's work with women in northern Uganda

Ruth Ojiambo Ochieng, the Executive Director of the Kampala-based women's network Isis-Women's International Cross-Cultural Exchange (Isis-WICCE), attended the AGI workshop on Gender and Militarism held in Cape Town in October 2007, where she shared the many challenges of Isis-WICCE's pathbreaking work with women in conflict zones. In this conversation with Margo Okazawa-Rey, Ruth shares the personal experiences and insights that led her to establish an extensive outreach programme through which she and her team document and mobilize support systems, and develop self-help among women surviving in some of Africa's most marginalized and neglected conflict zones. She describes how the methodology they used to intervene and support women in local communities relied on the gradual building of trusting and close relationships with women who suffered shocking levels of violence and had little support or treatment. Instead, many have been compelled to secrecy and silence for fear of repudiation and ostracism, and hence are living with their personal trauma, sometimes for years.

Isis-WICCE is an international network that was originally based in Switzerland, but moved its offices to Uganda in 1993. It works to promote women's human rights by documenting women's realities and providing skills training. The core purpose of their work is to promote the fundamental human rights of women through networking, action oriented documentation of women's experiences, and cross-cultural exchange of skills.

**Ruth Ojiambo Ochieng:** My first degree was in Information and Communication, and then I did a Masters in Communication Studies. So when I came back home, I felt I needed to do something different, that would really show some change, while linking in with what I had studied. Isis-WICCE came along with

their advertisement – and the advertisement was put in such a way that I immediately said to myself, “This is it.” So I went to Isis, met my new director. I immediately told her, “If we wish to tap the voices of the African women, then the only way to do this is to go the women, not to sit here and women come to this process. The information we have in this documentation center has nothing to do with African women.” It wasn’t easy, but I did manage to convince her.

When we went out to start documenting the voices of women in situations of conflict, the first time I heard them – much as I lived in a conflict country – I could not believe that someone who had gone through such experiences could even be talking. I started feeling so pained that I began talking to everybody I met to try to make them understand the horrors that these women were living through. I started wondering: how do I attract the eye and the ear of whoever I am talking to? How do I get them to listen, to begin to comprehend what women are going through? I recalled that in communication studies we are taught ‘seeing is believing’. That’s when I decided that the only thing that is going to make these people believe what I am saying about women is to have them see it – to put it on film.

One of my colleagues said, “You are crazy Ruth. Who among the women who have been raped or who went through those humiliating experiences is going to be willing to talk on our video? Women are so shy about the camera.” She was right. I said, “Yes, that is true. But I must find a way to let them know that this is a way that their lives can be transformed.” So the documentation was not just about the idea of going and *talking* to women, but I planned it in such a way that I integrated the idea of *sharing*. When we go into a village, we start by just sharing – sharing their homes, their children. But in the back of my mind, I knew that in the course of the sharing we were going to touch on their lives in situations of conflict, even if we started with life at home. To my surprise, the women never even talked about life at home. They were ready to start talking about what they saw and experienced during the conflict, and how, if they had known what was coming earlier, they would have picked up their children and gone to another district. So, in that way we began talking in quite a relaxed manner, where someone would say, “I know the woman who really went through this ...” and they would not say “rape” they would say “Those soldiers forced themselves on her.” We would sit and talk at length – for three or four hours. Then they would begin to see how useful it is just to talk. It is only when one talks that someone can know what

is in your life, and share your burden. One woman said to me, “These three times you have come, I find myself not having this thing which was on my chest. I can now feel much better when I go back to remember.”

There were a lot of ideas about how to do this well. I would go to meet them with some gift - something like a pound of sugar. After all, we had brought them away from their homes, and when they returned, the men would say to them, “You went moving around and what have you brought back?” So small things - a kilo of sugar, or giving them transport back to their community would go far. They began to see that I was empathizing with them. We became very close. Every time I went, they would say, “How are you?! How is Kampala?” And that enabled them to open up and some of them are now coming in privately to say, you know, “I have something I want to say that I can’t say in that group”. I would say, “That’s fine. Do you want to come and say it in Kampala?” And she says, “Yes because I don’t even want my husband to know.” So that’s when I started getting the stories of actual sexual violence. In groups they would just be talking about how they were beaten and how husbands were taken, how they were tortured, how their children were abducted. But when it comes to sexual violence they would say, “I know of a woman in a village, eh!” But by the end of the first month, these same women were coming quietly, individually, to say they wanted to say something more. That’s where I got shocked, because some of them came with really terrible, terrible ailments.

**Margo Okazawa-Rey:** Physical injuries?

**ROO:** Physical! I was sitting with them and at first, little did I know. You know that most villagers cannot afford medical help. So I could smell something like urine, but as some had children, I thought it was just the baby’s urine, or perhaps they didn’t have soap - sometimes I would come with soap. It wasn’t until they opened up individually that I realized how terrible the things were. Because one day, one of them - Betty Nyambura was her name - she said to me, “I need a place to show you how I am *down there*” - she just said *down there*. And we agreed that she was going to come to Kampala and we would go to my house, for privacy. So she came, and my goodness... She opened up her clothes, and I had never seen anything like what I saw. At first I thought, “Why did God make this woman like this?” But then she told me:

“I was raped four times. One time they locked me in a room with others. I don’t know how many men raped me because it was dark - there was no light! They would come in and just rape. Then we were able to escape. While I was

running back into my village I came across a roadblock. There were other men”.

She was repeatedly raped, and she counted about 21 men on that occasion, and said that ever since, whenever she urinates or defecates, everything just mixes. I was deeply shocked and confused by what she showed me. Of course I went to my colleagues and I said, “I have seen something I have never seen in my life.” They said, “What is it?” So I described it to them, and they said, “No! Maybe you didn’t see properly.” I said, “No! It was in my house, there is light!” So, that actually just turned me around.

I consulted with a Professor of Gynaecology and she explained to me that what I was seeing was the woman’s uterus. She told me that, when you get that kind of rape – it can be dislodged because of the force. She had what is called a vaginal fistula. But worse still, because Betty was not treated for STIs, she had also suffered chronic infection. I said “Oh my God, now what are we going to do!?”

Later on, when we started documenting women’s experiences at other places, I saw this very often.

**MOR:** So that is what mass rape leaves behind?

**ROO:** When I saw all of these things, I began presenting this everywhere I went. In Europe they would tell me, “Please don’t tell us! No, that is too much, that is too much!” In African countries they would either brush it off or block it. At some stage I realized that I was simply not drawing these people in emotionally, to care about the fact that these things are happening to women in conflict zones, and this further motivated me to find women who would talk.

The Isis-WICCE exchange program works by bringing women from all over the world who have experienced conflict to come and share. So I decided that when we had an exchange in Kampala, we would get all these women to go to this rural district to share with local women.

**MOR:** Oh, what a great idea!

**ROO:** Yes. So there were Filipinas and Sudanese women, women who came from Kosovo, Colombia, Cambodia – many women who are not Africans. The whole idea was to take them to meet with the women in our villages. We sat down under a tree and these women started sharing with the help of a translator. Gladys looked at this woman from the Philippines, who was saying they have women who were raped during WWII, 50 years ago, and up to today they are asking for justice. And the only way they managed to continue with this is because they went on talking to different people, and then she

said, “We recorded all this”. When she finished Gladys put up her hand that she wanted to share.

MOR: That’s quite something!

ROO: She said, “Ruth this time I am going to talk on video. I know I have been telling you not to film, but I know I am already HIV positive and I am going to die. But my talking on video – now I have seen it will help other women to know what I went through. And maybe it will encourage them to stop war from coming to them. Because if I did not open up to you, today I would already be dead.” At that time ARVs were not available in Uganda – but we had made sure she got some treatment, and later we cared for her children.

MOR: She would have died without that.

ROO: When she was in the hospital on her deathbed she said, “I know even when I die, I will die in dignity because there are people who will care.” She allowed for that to be on video. I went and produced a very short video – just 5 minutes, about her life. And you can’t believe how it changed people’s lives! Even the women who had been silent now changed. I produced tapes with translation, but I also made them in the local language. Since then I have never had a problem with women not wanting to talk about their sexual abuse. Surprisingly, when we went to northern Uganda I didn’t really need to use this video. They were all ready.

MOR: They had heard about you.

ROO: Yes. So they were ready to talk, but I think its about the approach we use. Even in other countries – like Southern Sudan, we find that women will share their stories. The whole approach is respectful and confidential – I tell them we want to use their voices for people to hear and to know the truth. I avoid making promises to them, but tell them that when people hear their voices they will respond. In fact, after some time the women started mobilizing themselves. They started going back into their districts, after they had come to see the doctors we had mobilized, and actually began making their own interventions, which had nothing to do with Isis-WICCE. After a while, we went back to train them on how to identify victims, and how to counsel each other. They have now become group therapists within their own local communities!

MOR: That’s remarkable.

ROO: Yes. The women are now activists themselves. The only thing we did was to facilitate them coming out. There are some very strong women who

now advocate for their own communities. Even the government of Uganda has responded. Of course we engaged them on behalf of the women in the first place and said, “Look, you need to do something!” And the government was like, “We have done everything in that region! What are you saying? You are saying we have done nothing!”. The good thing was, by that time, the Minister of Disaster Preparedness, who used to be called the Minister of Post-Conflict Rehabilitation, was a woman. So she said, “No, no, no. Luwero Triangle? We have done everything!” So I said, “You know, it would be nice for you, if you have time, to let us take you to this district and you will really see how these women live.” When she agreed we were like, “Thank God!”. So what we did was to plan with the women. Then we went village to village to show her how women were living and she could not believe what she saw! Immediately she went back to her office and ordered that iron sheets and cement be given to the women to make homes for themselves. That also made the women say. “Oh my God! It is about speaking out.” So that gave us the energy to continue documenting.

**MOR:** It sounds as if initially though you had to bring yourself to the process so you were connected and developed some kind of reciprocity in your relationship with the women. There were all kinds of ‘little things’ you did that made a difference: the kilo of sugar, the ride somewhere.

**ROO:** That is very important. In academic research I know there is a saying, “Oh that means you are biasing people.”

**MOR:** That is a conventional academic view, but these days there is a deeper understanding of social relations in research processes, so that is not necessarily so.

**ROO:** No, it’s not about that. Having a relationship actually enables your respondent to realize that you actually care for her. I would even go and sit with them, and know their children too. Most of us had our own children – so we would gather our children’s old clothes for their babies and just go and say, “Look, we don’t have anything much, but – here”. As we grew closer, that’s how they started telling me – you know, “Even that one was raped” or “That one, the husband even refused to take her back, so she is by herself.”

**MOR:** And did they actually eventually start using the word ‘rape’ or did they still use euphemisms?

**ROO:** No. Traditionally, among African women there is that perception that the person who sleeps with you must take you as a wife, but here we were dealing with women who were already married. So they could not call themselves

wives of their rapists. But later on they started using their local language, the terminology for rape, “They forced themselves on me.”

**MOR:** So they developed a language for their experience.

**ROO:** Of course. I never knew that they had it, but they did. Because that is not my language. But now when they talked and we went and translated it, then the women who come from that community said, “What they are saying is that ‘they forcefully had sex with me’”, which is rape. Then of course they started opening up to say,

“I feel dirty. I have never told my husband. Whenever he wants sex, I just feel the hurt. It becomes so terrible, sometimes I just find myself throwing him away. And it has caused problems between me and my husband, because my husband thinks I am having sex somewhere else. He does not know that whenever he wants to have sex with me, that image comes back.”

**MOR:** Like a retraumatizing experience.

**ROO:** Exactly. And that’s how we now picked the issue of working with physiologists and psychiatrists. Because Professor M told me, “I have listened to this audio, but Ruth, these women, some of them have reproductive problems, but for others, it is their mind.” So you need to bring a holistic approach to whatever you do. Bring psychiatrists, gynecologists and psychologists. Some of them, because of the rape, would say, “My stomach is painful.”

**MOR:** Psychosomatic pain?

**ROO:** Yes. But then the doctors have found nothing. Professor M told me, “Yes, it is in their minds.” So when women started opening up, we realised that we needed to bring the professionals on board so they could see how these women could be helped. They would always say, “But Ruth, don’t ever tell my husband, because if he knows I was raped then he is going to throw me out because of HIV/AIDS and I don’t have anywhere else to go.” At the same time we also wanted them to enjoy their life, so it was important for us to find how to do it. So we brought some psychologists in and started working with them slowly. After two years, women began to come to me saying, “Thank you much. That doctor you sent me helped me quite a lot.”

**MOR:** And what kind of therapy did she do with her? Individual talk therapy or group?

**ROO:** It was group, because we identified them and they would come in a group and she would just talk to them. It proved to be an expensive

venture because we had to do it very many times. The ministry didn't have the money so we had to fundraise. But the most interesting thing that the psychologist did was, after putting them together for about 3 months in therapy, she developed it in such a way that they now came together and started as a group.

**MOR:** Kind of a self-help group?

**ROO:** Yes. She helped them to know that they had done nothing wrong, and what they had suffered should not stop them from enjoying sex with their husbands. This woman comes and tells me, "I have started enjoying sex with my husband. I try to do what the doctor says and the fear just goes and I continue. And the friction between me and him has also reduced." Of course she also helped those who were worried about HIV/AIDS, she helped them to get tested.

**MOR:** But how was this secrecy maintained? How can the husbands not know?

**ROO:** They do not know because the rape was not done in the homes. Most times the rape was done by government soldiers who would wait for women to go out to fetch water or firewood.

**MOR:** Didn't they hear rumors?

**ROO:** I think the only women who knew about each other were those who were raped in the same incident. Then because they both didn't want their husbands to know, it remained a secret between the two of them. So if you told my husband, then I would say, "But we were together! You were also raped!" So they kept their secret. Actually some of them became very good friends. It was a common experience. I think they just wanted to continue keeping it hidden forever. When we started introducing the psychologist, we did not let on that we knew that they had been raped. An individual would come and say, "We were in a group, and about five people were raped." So we know that this whole group was raped.

**MOR:** And they came as a group?

**ROO:** They came as a group. We just said look, there will be a doctor. Anyone who wants to come to the doctor can come.

**MOR:** One of the things you said that really moves me is thinking about the impact that listening to these conversations must have on you and the whole Isis group. While you are doing it, how do you all take care of each other? How do you deal with your own feelings as you listen to the stories, as you recognize that they are women like yourself?

**ROO:** Initially when we went out we never went out with a psychologist. We



just went out with a researcher – Professor Mwaka, who is a geographer. I remember one day we had just finished documenting and we were traveling back to Kampala from the village where we went to document, about 80 kilometers away from the city centre. And what struck me was that all of us were quiet for 80 kilometers.

**MOR:** That is a long time.

**ROO:** Yes. I would just hear us sighing. You would hear people sighing. We are normally quite a talkative team. So just before we reached I said, “Oh my God we have all been quiet. Why?” Then my other colleague Jessica Nkhule, said, “Ruth, you don’t know what I listened to today.” The next day was Saturday. I went home and just talked to my husband nonstop. We went to bed, and I was still talking. So he said, “Ruth, can you stop? I want to sleep. You know what? I am now sick and tired of whenever you go the field, you come home and there is nothing else you are talking about other than what you found. Don’t we have anything else to talk about?” Another colleague just cried the whole time. Her husband called me to ask, “What happened out there? Because my wife just cried and cried and cried.”

Then, on Monday when we met and began talking about our weekend, one of us suggested we have a cup of tea. So we sat down to have this cup of tea and started talking and talking. And whoever spoke, their voice would start getting hoarse. The researcher who was there said, “You people, you know what? You are going to go crazy. I will send a colleague of mine to talk to you.” Just like that! So he sent us a psychologist, who helped us begin to work through the pain and anger we were feeling.

**MOR:** So you didn’t recognize initially that you had been traumatized by the stories, by listening?

**ROO:** Not at first. We were just angry with the men, we were angry with the soldiers. I have a cousin who is a soldier and I picked the phone up and I said, “You know what? If you come in my house, never come in uniform. If you come in uniform I am going to lock you out!” So he was like, “What has happened to this woman!?” Now we have come to understand that this is what was happening to us. The psychologist taught us that the best thing to do is that whenever you come back from the field, wherever you sleep, you need to debrief. It helps you. So that is how our psychologist comes in to the picture. When we go out and train women in other countries to go out and document, we confirmed that we needed to integrate trauma management within the work. How do you handle a traumatized women? And how do

you handle yourself? Now I can do a documentation of a very painful thing. I have learned to hear it but not really put it in my heart.

**MOR:** And has the quality of your work changed?

**ROO:** No. It hasn't. But having said that, much as I distance it like that, when I am doing it, sometimes it comes back later.

**MOR:** Yes, I can imagine.

**ROO:** She told us how to handle it. But my handling is always through crying. I cry and then I listen to music. There is some music that really calms me down. But when I went to Darfur, there were things I'd never heard of... And I just can't forget - things still work on you. Even when I get home, back into my own bed I still feel something in me.

**MOR:** Yes, I noticed your eyes changing. It is still there.

**ROO:** Yes. It is still there; it is not something that will go away. But to my best knowledge, those terrible atrocities have given me the energy to move on. When we bring Sudanese, Rwandan, and other women to the institute, we start to hear things across places.

**MOR:** Right.

**ROO:** You see, we don't know the meaning of this rape to this woman's mental, spiritual, physical way of being. This is something that this woman lives with forever - if she is not helped.

**MOR:** And it is not the same for every woman. There may be some similarities but it is not the same.

**ROO:** One of the psychiatrists says, when someone cuts off your finger - immediately like that, the trauma will not be as much as if he comes and removes the nail first and then comes and... you see? That whole analysis, I put it to the rape. These women, who they say, you are found on the street and someone rapes you and runs away. It is not the same as these other types of rapes. He rapes you, he does everything on you, and it is a long thing. And worse still, they are doing it in front of people whom you love most.

**MOR:** So there is this deep humiliation and indignity.

**ROO:** So you are no longer yourself. And until we hear this whole full story, no one will understand the meaning - what this means to this woman who was raped.

**MOR:** What inspires you to keep doing the work? And what gives you the strength and the courage? And you are such a joyful person!

**ROO:** You know, I think it was my upbringing. I was brought up in a very modest home. My father was a priest and we were taught that God says

you must share. Also my mother died when I had just gotten married and all my brothers, even the older ones, wanted a mother figure, and I was the first girl. So now I grew up with all those, looking after them – even the bigger boys. So I think that also gave me that lineage. Then my career, my background is about talking about people and sharing, so that whole communication component.

**MOR:** You put it in a very different context, though. You're really communicating with women.

**ROO:** In my leadership as the Executive Director, I find my role always to be, to let the others speak. I am not a person who really likes limelight. But I always feel so satisfied when I see those who never had an opportunity to have the limelight, really come out and become different. I think that is it. I think it's my character also – people find me easy to talk to, a person who is flexible. When I go the village, I really become a village woman.

**MOR:** You mentioned in our conversation about the academic researchers, and how they think you have to have a PhD to be a researcher. If you could say one thing to them, directly, about their attitude, what would you say?

**ROO:** You know, I would tell them, knowledge is with all of us. And it would be very useful to use all ways of providing knowledge, sharing knowledge, and using the knowledge that we all have. I am saying that because, if I had not been pushed to do what I wanted to do, I would have given up, just accepted that I didn't have the methodologies and training, that I had no proper quantitative data. I would have missed out on getting the stories, the real stories of these survivors. If academics limit themselves to their own kind of data collection, they are actually missing what the women would like to tell the world about the violations they go through. Counting statistically how many women have been raped tells us nothing, and does not help us know how to respond and support their recovery. When they actually do share with you, it changes you.

**MOR:** Yes. We are transformed by what we hear and learn.

**ROO:** We are transformed. And once transformed, you become a different kind of researcher all together.

**MOR:** Thank you so much!