



International Committee of the Red Cross

Addressing the needs of women affected by armed conflict: an ICRC guidance document

Executive summary

While *Women Facing War* has made a significant contribution to raising awareness of the specific needs of women in armed conflicts, the study's results must be translated into practical terms for policy-makers and people working in the field if they are to have the desired impact. The aim of the guidance document is to provide an **operational tool** for ensuring that humanitarian programmes and services adequately address women's needs. This document is primarily addressed to **ICRC staff** concerned with the planning and implementation of humanitarian programmes. It has also been written in a way that allows the ICRC's experience of working for and with women affected by conflicts or violence to be shared with the staff of other organizations.

Designed for quick reference, the guidance document is divided into specific themes that can be consulted separately. These themes, which revolve around the needs of beneficiaries, include:

- Personal safety
- Sexual violence
- Displacement
- Freedom of movement
- Food and essential household items
- Water
- Sources of livelihood
- Shelter
- Health
- Hygiene and sanitation
- Preservation of the family links
- Access to education and information
- Religious and cultural practices
- Social groups
- Legal issues

The problems faced by women in **detention** are dealt with separately since persons deprived of freedom must rely on the detaining authority to meet their basic needs and the ICRC has a special mandate in relation to detention. This section of the document helps the reader to recognize issues specific to women deprived of their freedom.

The thematic organization of the guidance document reflects a basic finding of the *Women Facing War* study, namely that women's experience of armed conflict is multi-faceted, including detention, isolation, loss of relatives, physical and economic insecurity, various kinds of deprivation and an increased risk of sexual violence, injury and even death. Both the study and the guidance document itself endeavour to show that while women may be placed *at risk* by the outbreak of hostilities, they are not necessarily and

inevitably *victims*. Around the world, women's experience of armed conflict also encompasses social, professional, public or political activities and service in armed, security and police forces.

The **guidance document** is replete with suggestions for operational steps and activities aimed at mitigating the impact of armed conflict on women. These suggestions are based on best practices and lessons learned in relation to the protection and assistance needs of women affected by armed conflict. Concise background information is provided at the start of each section so that readers can focus on suggested guidance rather than on problem description, which is readily available in other texts. This is followed by a summary of key points to consider in relation to programmes run for women, including pitfalls to be avoided. The document further provides an overview of the relevant legal framework, namely the general and specific rules protecting women affected by armed conflict. Practical examples illustrating each theme have been included to increase comprehension of a problem by placing it in a realistic context. Readers can compare and contrast a given scenario with situations they are currently facing and use it as a basis for developing appropriate responses. The examples are grounded in real situations encountered in the course of ICRC operations or in research carried out for the *Women Facing War* study.

This manual should be of assistance in designing and implementing activities responsive to women, taking into account:

- the role, status and position of women as part of the global analysis;
- the specific ways war can affect the lives of women;
- appropriate ways to respond to victims of sexual violence;
- the need to include women in humanitarian programmes;
- the need to tailor communication messages to the specific context and to include the specific issues women may face;
- national laws and practices linked to the situation of women.

The **involvement of women** in assessing, implementing and monitoring programmes carried out on their behalf makes it possible to better understand their needs. When female staff take part in relief distributions, moreover, women are less susceptible to exploitation and abuse. Humanitarian organizations should therefore ensure that their teams comprise both male and female members (and, where possible, both national and international staff). This does not mean that protection and assistance for women can be regarded as the sole responsibility of female staff. *All* humanitarian personnel must take into consideration the general and specific needs of women facing war. The guidance document seeks to assist in this endeavour.

To ensure that women affected by armed conflict are better protected and assisted requires an **understanding of the law** that affords them protection. **International law**, in particular international humanitarian law, refugee law and human rights law, adequately addresses the needs of women in wartime. The premise of the guidance document is that the plight of women can be improved if international humanitarian law is upheld with respect to both combatants and non-combatants, be they male or female. The challenge lies in putting existing law into practice by ensuring compliance with the existing rules. From an operational perspective, several steps can be taken to maximize the legal protection afforded to women in situations of armed conflict. These include making humanitarian law better known to all parties to armed conflict, monitoring and promoting respect for the law, and placing emphasis on the general and specific protection that humanitarian law offers women. Communication activities and dialogue with parties to armed conflict should be used as opportunities to draw attention to problems specific to women, with a view to prompting action to prevent and end violations. Apprising humanitarian workers and policy makers of the relevant legal regime can equip them to make a persuasive case for the need to protect women. It must be clearly understood that the Geneva Conventions, their Additional Protocols and various human rights instruments enshrine a legal obligation to respect the physical and psychological integrity and dignity of women. Knowledge of the law can be used to strengthen such protection, as it makes it possible to disseminate the law and promote its enforcement.

To improve the dissemination of humanitarian law pertaining to women, it is important to systematically emphasize the prohibition of all forms and threats of violence against civilians, including sexual violence. This point should be included in military codes, training manuals and instructions given to bearers of weapons. It is vital to spread the knowledge that all forms of sexual violence are categorically prohibited at all times, while stating unequivocally that it is the perpetrator who is dishonoured rather than the victim or her/his family. Moreover, publications distributed to bearers of weapons, including peace enforcement and support personnel, must depict both women and men in various roles. For example, the recurrent portrayal of men as combatants and women as aid recipients or victims neglects the fact that men are often civilians and women can be active members of the armed forces or detainees.

Effective fact-finding and reporting techniques strengthen the capacity of humanitarian organizations to understand women's needs and monitor violations of their rights. Among other things, it is essential to:

- Identify victims of sexual violence or, where this is not possible, find other sources of information about sexual violence;
- Establish a safe place where victims can report violations;
- Allow sufficient time for a sensitive and meaningful dialogue;
- Keep discussions confidential so as to protect the victims and ensure respect for their privacy;
- Check on the victims to see whether their situation has improved and to ensure that they are not subjected to retaliation;
- Foster an understanding within local communities and civil society of the role played by humanitarian organizations;
- Identify the authorities that can put an end to violations.

Regrettably, humanitarian organizations are often denied **access** to areas where the worst abuses are taking place and where there are enormous needs. The guidance document serves to remind humanitarian actors that the people to whom they do have access may represent but a fraction of all those in need, and that the plight of people in other areas may be even worse. All attempts to improve protection and assistance for women affected by armed conflict must take this into account, and all those in a position to facilitate access for humanitarian organizations must do so.

As the foregoing makes clear, the guidance document stresses **practical responses** to the needs of women. Readers seeking a more theoretical approach, or more comprehensive information on the provisions of international law safeguarding women in situations of armed conflict, should turn to studies such as *Women Facing War*. Relevant reference material is listed at the end of the document.

The guidance document is available in English, with a French version to be produced in 2004.