



**28th International Conference
of the Red Cross and Red Crescent**
2-6 December 2003

WOMEN AND WAR

**Implementation of the ICRC Pledge
to the 27th International Conference**

**Report prepared by
The International Committee of the Red Cross**

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IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ICRC PLEDGE TO THE 27TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

BACKGROUND

The ICRC's mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and internal violence by promoting respect for international humanitarian law and other relevant bodies of law, and to help the victims regain their self-sufficiency as quickly as possible.

In November 1999, the ICRC president made the following pledge at the 27th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent.

THE ICRC'S PLEDGE (2000-2003)

"The ICRC is gravely concerned at the occurrence of sexual violence in armed conflict. Sexual violence, in all its forms, is prohibited under international humanitarian law and should be vigorously prevented.

*For this reason, the ICRC **pledges** to put emphasis throughout its activities on the respect which must be accorded to women and girl children. Focus will be placed on actively disseminating the prohibition of all forms of sexual violence to parties to an armed conflict.*

*Furthermore, the ICRC **pledges** to ensure that the specific protection, health and assistance needs of women and girl children affected by armed conflicts are appropriately assessed in its operations with the aim to alleviate the plight of the most vulnerable."*

In 2000, the ICRC set up the Women and War Project to facilitate and oversee the implementation of this pledge. Since 2000, Women and War has been an institutional priority and has featured in objectives for field operations drawn up by the Directorate.

1. PUTTING THE PLEDGE INTO PRACTICE

Implementation of the ICRC's pledge regarding women has been a unique undertaking involving and influencing all levels of the organization, its presence in the field and relations between the ICRC, its target populations and outside contracts.

The ICRC's approach to implementing the pledge has been to address the needs of women throughout the whole range of its activities, rather than to assign the task to any one part of the organization. The responsibility to ensure that women's needs are taken into account and appropriately addressed lies with *all* units and departments. This integrated approach has encouraged individual staff members to understand the general and specific needs of women affected by armed conflict and, where women are among the vulnerable, to respond

appropriately. To be attentive to the specific issues faced by women is not to depart from the aim of setting up programmes or activities on the basis of need rather than on any other ground, including that of the sex of the beneficiaries.

Over 650 ICRC field staff have been informed of the aims of the pledge through individual briefings and debriefings. Further information has been given on missions to the field and in presentations to headquarters units and internal training courses. In this way, the integrated approach to the issue has been put into practice within the organization.

The pledge has resulted in the ICRC devoting more attention to women adversely affected by armed conflict and adapting, where necessary, its working procedures to ensure that it adequately assesses and meets the needs of women. In fulfilling this pledge, the ICRC has by no means altered its “all victims” approach of providing a comprehensive response to the needs of people adversely affected by armed conflict. Indeed it has reinforced this response through a better understanding of the needs and specific vulnerabilities of one particular category of victim. The aim is to ensure that the practice of taking women’s particular needs into account is sustained, long after the four-year period of the pledge has elapsed, by integrating it into all existing and future programmes and activities. This will enable the ICRC to bring appropriate and relevant aid to those who are most vulnerable.

Within ICRC operations in the field, heightened awareness of the impact of conflict on women has been reflected in a marked improvement in the quality and quantity of programmes since the advent of the pledge. Almost every operational delegation now has activities taking into account the needs of women and/or includes women as a specific target population in its annual Planning for Results (PfR) exercise defining objectives for the next year. The specific needs of women or situations affecting them are taken into account in dissemination, training, and detainee-welfare activities and in programmes addressing sexual violence. In 2000, the field PfR indicated that just two delegations had programmes specifically relating to women. By 2003, some 40 delegations had such programmes. In reality, the progress achieved was far greater than even these statistics indicate, since they do not take into consideration any of the vast number of ICRC programmes that benefited women without being specifically designed for them. The PfR for 2004 includes even more activities that take women into account – particularly in planning operational responses to their needs – and that increase respect for provisions of international humanitarian law that concern them. Women may benefit from these programmes even where they are not the primary target. The annual PfRs are reviewed by the Women and War Project to ensure that the problems afflicting women are being adequately taken into account in situation analysis and programme planning. Whereas there was initially no mention of women in PfR exercises, they are now included not only in connection with objectives specifically relating to women but in a whole range of other activities as well.

2. THE *WOMEN FACING WAR* STUDY

One of the major accomplishments during the period of this pledge has been the publication of *Women Facing War*, an ICRC study on the impact of armed conflict on women. Although it had already been under way as part of an internal review process and had not originally been intended for publication, the study took on added significance as a result of the pledge. For example, the ICRC made public the findings of its research in response to requests from States to do so.

Women Facing War highlights ways in which women are adversely affected by armed conflict through its focus on and insights into their needs in wartime. The ultimate objective of the study

is to enhance the quality, relevance and impact of ICRC operations by raising awareness of women's specific needs. To this end, it attempts to perform four main tasks:

- determine the impact of armed conflict on women and identify and analyse their needs (general and specific);
- assess the extent to which international humanitarian law and other relevant bodies of law, such as human rights law and refugee law, meet the identified needs;
- draw up a realistic and comprehensive picture of activities undertaken by the ICRC on behalf of women adversely affected by armed conflict; and
- in light of the above-mentioned objectives, compile a list of recommendations ("key points").

The study focuses on civilian women and on women deprived of their liberty. Although the study focuses on the situation of women in general, many of its recommendations are equally applicable to girls, who in some cases are even more vulnerable than women.¹ The focus on women has undoubtedly also led to greater knowledge of the impact of war on girls, an issue which has been widely reported.

A number of visits were paid to ICRC delegations to assess the work being carried out on behalf of women and to talk to women on visits to places of detention, hospitals, camps for displaced people, etc. Since initiating the study, those involved in the Women and War Project have visited 32 countries to speak with women for the purpose of strengthening, where necessary, the operational response to their general and specific needs, and to share best practices and lessons learned.

This study was published in English in October 2001 and was subsequently translated into French, Spanish, Arabic and Russian. An executive summary was also produced and translated into several languages.

Launch events to promote the conclusions and key messages of *Women Facing War* were held in Amman, Beirut, Geneva, London, Melbourne, Moscow, Ottawa and Pretoria, in addition to a pre-launch event in Washington. Special events were held in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Brazil, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Georgia, Mexico, Syria and the United States. The launches in Amman and Beirut were held under the patronage of Her Majesty Queen Rania of Jordan and reached a wide audience throughout the region.

The primary purpose of these events was to raise awareness among key audiences of issues relating to women's experience of armed conflict, in particular:

- the needs of women in war;
- the law (particularly international humanitarian law) protecting women in war;
- the ICRC's work with and on behalf of women adversely affected by armed conflict; and
- a reminder that everyone is responsible for improving the plight of women, together with a call for greater compliance with international humanitarian law.

Since the pledge was adopted in 2000, representatives of the ICRC's Women and War Project have participated, often as keynote speakers, in over 80 conferences, seminars and workshops organized by donors, governments, academic institutions, and regional, international and non-

¹ The ICRC's work on behalf of girls is carried out within the Children in War Project.

governmental organizations. The conclusions of *Women Facing War* were thus conveyed to a large number of very different audiences.

In 2002, the ICRC played host to a meeting of experts from international organizations, where it presented the study and its findings.

The ICRC pledge is being implemented on the basis of the findings, information and research provided through this study. Within its own operations the ICRC has used and will continue to use the study's key points (particularly those pertaining to the review of ICRC activities) to develop and strengthen, where necessary, its protection, assistance and dissemination activities relating to women and girls.

3. PLAN OF ACTION: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE *WOMEN FACING WAR* STUDY FINDINGS

In its pledge the ICRC committed itself to ensuring that the needs of women affected by armed conflict are appropriately assessed in its operations. Preparatory research for the *Women Facing War* study – part of which was carried out in field delegations – was vital in determining ways in which the ICRC could strengthen its response to the plight of women.

In the course of the study, it was found that the ICRC was already doing a lot for women adversely affected by armed conflict. However, the organization believed it could do more. Consequently, since making its pledge, the ICRC has endeavoured to work more closely with women and to improve the tools used by delegates and field officers to understand and respond to women's needs. For example, it has produced documents, which are given to delegates going to the field, offering advice on how to bring about improvements in the situation of women in detention, key points relating to relief and health-care activities, and guidelines on communication activities involving women. In addition, the Women and War Project has reviewed certain ICRC courses, such as the introductory training course for new delegates, and incorporated recommendations from the study. Furthermore, ICRC trainers and delegates who teach international humanitarian law to bearers of weapons have received instruction in how best to integrate the recommendations of the study into their work.

In early 2002, the ICRC drew up and adopted an internal plan of action, which headquarters and field delegation staff were instructed to carry out as a means of ensuring that the general and specific needs of women were included in ICRC programmes and activities throughout the world. As a result, delegations found ways of improving their general activities on behalf of women and/or implemented programmes that specifically targeted women because they were identified as among the most vulnerable. Pilot programmes to prevent violence against women and to support and assist women who have been victims of sexual and other forms of violence are being implemented in several ICRC field delegations. It is hoped that lessons learned from these programmes will be helpful in the development of future projects to support the survivors, male and female, of sexual violence.

4. RESULTS ACHIEVED

The ICRC has achieved considerable progress in realising the objectives of the pledge and the internal plan of action. This is clear from the way the institutional understanding of issues affecting women has in many respects broadened and evolved.

On the issue of sexual violence, messages aimed at raising awareness of the problem and its causes and consequences now permeate ICRC dissemination sessions. The ICRC has engaged expert consultants to acquire further insight into the cultural setting and context in which sexual violence occurs, with a view to developing more appropriate ways to respond. Responses currently include the establishment of referral networks for the benefit of victims of sexual violence, which build upon existing structures and facilitate both the identification and treatment of victims. For example, the ICRC has participated in the training of traditional midwives as a means to increase proximity to the victims in areas affected by violence and insecurity. The midwives are trained to provide adequate pre- and post-natal care, to identify victims of sexual violence and to refer them to appropriate treatment facilities. The ICRC has also focused on raising the awareness and improving the training of all personnel who may potentially come into contact with survivors of sexual violence, so as to ensure that these women receive appropriate advice, protection, medical care and follow-up. The ICRC has strengthened the link between protection and assistance by using assistance programmes to discover what factors of vulnerability they face and channelling this information back into prevention activities.

A broader institutional understanding of the notion of war victims has also evolved. This stems from an awareness that the victims of war are not just those who are wounded as a direct result of hostilities, but also those whose health and livelihood are adversely affected by the destruction of public services and infrastructure occasioned by armed conflict. As a result, there is a heightened consciousness that matters such as the surgical obstetric needs of women caught up in conflict situations must be taken into account in programme planning and considered a priority.

In detention environments, more systematic attention is being given to women's conditions of detention and treatment, to ensure that they comply with international standards. The ICRC endeavours to verify that women are housed separately from men and have safe access to hygiene facilities, open air and appropriate recreational activities. Measures are also taken to ensure that women detainees are supervised by female guards. In detainee-welfare and other activities, there is an awareness of the value of having mixed teams of delegates and translators, so as to make them more approachable for women and to foster dialogue. Wherever possible, the ICRC endeavours to provide women beneficiaries with the possibility of being interviewed by female field staff, delegates and national employees.

Throughout ICRC delegations, there is a greater consciousness of the benefits of keeping sex-disaggregated data. This information is used as a basis for analysing the different impact a conflict has on women, men and children, and to ensure that women are included as beneficiaries of ICRC programmes and have access to assistance. One example is the use of such data to ascertain which demographic group is suffering most frequently from landmines, in terms of their social roles, movements and tasks. In programmes such as prosthetic-limb rehabilitation, delegates now have a better understanding of the different impact such injuries have on men and women.

Rehabilitation programmes take into account the fact that women may be ostracized because of their disability, and thus include income-generating programmes for female amputees as well as programmes to ease their reintegration into the community. Delegates are also sensitive to the difficulties of reaching women and girls through programmes designed to raise awareness of the dangers of mines and unexploded ordnance, owing to cultural factors such as restrictions on their mobility. The delegates tailor programmes to overcome these obstacles to the greatest possible extent. In relief programmes, data (by age and sex) on the demographics of the population requiring assistance may highlight the fact that men are a minority, which has

implications for the type of assistance required by households headed by women, who have to take the place of the missing breadwinner.

The attention paid to the plight of women has generated a deeper understanding and improved response to the problem of the missing. The emphasis is no longer exclusively on tracing activities aimed at determining the fate of those unaccounted for in relation to armed conflict, but also on the needs of the families who are left behind to bear the emotional and economic burden of having a missing relative. Psychological, social, legal and economic support has been provided to such families, the majority of which consist of women with dependants.

Significantly, women beneficiaries are consulted about decisions that affect their lives, such as those concerning the location and maintenance of water and sanitation facilities, and the composition of food and other aid.

5. GUIDANCE DOCUMENT

Building on the study and the pledge, and pursuant to Resolution 1 of the 27th International Conference, the ICRC drew up a “guidance document” on protection and assistance for women adversely affected by armed conflict. It is hoped that this document will be a useful operational tool for policy-makers and people working with women facing war. The document will be available in English at the 28th International Conference and will be produced in French and Spanish in 2004.

6. COMMUNICATION MATERIALS

A communication strategy for the promotion of protection for women was endorsed by the ICRC’s Directorate in spring 2001. This led to the production of a number of communication materials. Communication guidelines were also adopted and circulated to all delegations and headquarters services for use in future materials relating to the protection of women.

The ICRC’s comprehensive communication strategy and communication materials made it possible to:

- reach a wide range of audiences through targeting of materials, particularly audiences that were unaware of or did not understand the plight of women in armed conflict;
- raise awareness within and outside the ICRC on the many ways women are adversely affected by armed conflict, and emphasize that their plight could be improved;
- increase understanding of international law protecting women so as to improve the plight of women through greater compliance with the law; and
- present ICRC policies and activities relating to women and war, with a view to increasing recognition of the ICRC’s efforts to ensure that women receive appropriate assistance and protection, and that international humanitarian law is respected.

7. AUDIO-VISUAL MATERIALS

In October 2001, the ICRC produced the *Women Facing War* series of short films. The 11 films in the series highlight different situations women experience in wartime such as displacement, the emotional and economic burden of having a missing family member, exposure to sexual violence and limited access to health care. Shot in countries that were then or had previously been at war, the films depict women explaining how war has affected their lives. Each film also

carries a strong message on the protection accorded by international humanitarian law to women in situations of armed conflict. A number of television companies broadcast the films in 2002, reaching a large audience. The films were also distributed to all ICRC delegations and National Societies, the International Federation, key donors, UN agencies, and non-governmental organizations, and also at conferences and in training workshops. They were produced in English, French, Spanish, Arabic and Russian and were also made available through the ICRC's Web site.

"Working with Women in War," an ICRC film shot during the making of the above series, was distributed to ICRC delegations, National Societies and donors. This film highlights how the ICRC responds to the general and specific needs of women adversely affected by armed conflict.

In 2000, the ICRC also co-produced a film entitled "Women and War: At the End of a Gun," which was broadcast all over the world. In addition, the ICRC co-produced and handled the worldwide distribution of a radio programme entitled "People and War: Women and War," which was broadcast for the first time on International Women's Day, 2000. These products were also promoted on the ICRC Web site.

8. FACT SHEETS AND POSTERS

In 2001, the ICRC produced a series of eight fact sheets and five posters with core messages relating to the impact of war on women and their protection under international humanitarian law. These were widely promoted, including on the Web site and by means of a flyer distributed in *Red Cross Red Crescent* magazine. The fact sheets and posters were supplied to all National Societies and to donors and permanent missions in Geneva and New York. They were also distributed at conferences, and among United Nations agencies and international and non-governmental organizations.

9. WEB SITE

The ICRC set up a "Women and War" Web site to mark the launch of the study, and has kept it regularly updated ever since. The site received over 70,000 "hits," most of which focused on pages highlighting the study, during the first few weeks of its existence.

10. MISCELLANEOUS

For the Beijing +5 Review of the World Conference on Women held in the USA in June 2000, the ICRC produced a brochure entitled "Women and War," which was widely distributed to States, all National Societies, the United Nations, and international and non-governmental organizations. The brochure was replaced in 2001 by a series of fact sheets.

A travelling exhibition on "Women and War" was produced in 2002 and is currently touring ICRC delegations and National Societies throughout the world. Used as a backdrop to events, this exhibition calls attention to the ways in which women are adversely affected by conflict and the protection they are afforded under international law. In addition, an exhibition of photographs highlighting the dignity, suffering and courage of women facing war was launched by Her Majesty Queen Rania of Jordan at events in Jordan and Lebanon.

Presentation materials and speaking notes on the conclusions of the study, the impact of war on women, and the protection of women under international humanitarian law have also been made available to ICRC delegations and National Societies. They will be available on CD-ROM in 2004.

The ICRC also produced several articles on the experiences of women in wartime which were published in the *International Review of the Red Cross* and other publications. The articles were widely distributed, in particular by ICRC delegations and through the ICRC Web site.

The ICRC co-hosted conferences on women and war with the National Societies in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, which were attended by representatives of the military, the government, and non-governmental organizations, as well as academics, the general public, and the media.

11. CONCLUSION

The protection of women against the effects of armed conflict, especially the acts of violence to which they are particularly vulnerable, is a matter of serious concern to the ICRC. The organization endeavours to prevent such acts by making representations to parties to conflict and perpetrators of violence, be they States or other entities, urging them to comply with international humanitarian law. The ICRC carries out and promotes the dissemination of this body of law among parties to armed conflict and also in times of peace, and actively works to protect and assist women victims of conflict through detainee-welfare and protection activities, relief and medical-assistance programmes, and efforts to re-establish family links. The pledge made by the ICRC at the 27th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent focused increased attention on the situation of women, so as to ensure that the ICRC was doing as much as it could to improve their plight and to call for greater respect for and implementation of international humanitarian law.

The ICRC took this pledge seriously and will continue to pursue its aim of improving the protection of women in wartime. The pledge was thus the beginning of more concerted action. While the ICRC will – and must – do its utmost to improve the situation of women adversely affected by armed conflict, it needs to be emphasized that this responsibility does not belong only to humanitarian organizations such as the ICRC, but to *everyone*. Parties to armed conflict must do much more to prevent violations of international humanitarian law, and to ensure that the protection of women who are not, or are no longer, taking an active part in hostilities is upheld. The existing body of international law adequately addresses the needs of women in situations of armed conflict; the challenge lies in ensuring compliance with the existing rules.

The ICRC takes this opportunity to call for greater respect for international humanitarian law by all, and to thank the States and National Societies that have supported the implementation of the ICRC's pledge.