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Violence Against Girls in Africa

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Violence against girls in Africa during armed conflicts and crises

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I. Introduction

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)[1] is grateful to the African Child Policy Forum for this opportunity to address the issue of violence against girls in Africa during armed conflicts and crises. The following paper draws attention to the many different ways in which girls[2] experience such situations and briefly presents some of the activities carried out by the ICRC to protect and assist them.

Protecting and assisting people caught up in armed conflicts or internal violence is at the very heart of the ICRC's mandate, whether these people are resident or displaced civilians or whether they are wounded, sick or deprived of their liberty. This "all victims" approach is aimed at providing a comprehensive response to the needs of every population group affected by the violence while taking into account the fact that complex emergencies have a different impact on men, women, boys, girls, and male and female elderly.

As most humanitarian organizations, the ICRC is deeply concerned about the specific nature and magnitude of the violations committed against women and girls in today's conflicts, in particular sexual violence. In recognition of this problem, the ICRC pledged in 1999, at the 27th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, to promote respect for women and girls, with a particular focus on eliminating sexual violence, and to appropriately assess and address their needs. To implement this pledge, the ICRC launched an in-depth study[3] designed to gain a better understanding of the needs of women and girls affected by armed conflicts and of how their needs may differ from those of men and boys. The study also evaluated the extent to which international law meets the needs of women and girls and assessed the ICRC's activities in this area. It highlighted issues such as physical safety, sexual violence, displacement, missing persons and their families, health care and hygiene, food, water and shelter. In keeping with its pledge, the ICRC seeks to ensure that an appropriate response is given to the needs of women and girls affected by armed conflicts, that they are consulted concerning the activities that are to be carried out on their behalf and

[1] The ICRC is an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of persons affected by armed conflict and other situation of violence. The ICRC's mandate is base on the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their 1977 Additional Protocols and on the Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. The organization maintains delegations and offices in some 80 countries around the world. It has 24 delegations in Africa, where a large part of its work is carried out.

[2] Drawing on the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, this article defines a girl as "any human being of female sex below the age of 18." It does not take into account the fact that a child may be defined differently depending on the socio-cultural context.

[3] *Women Facing War: ICRC Study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women*, ICRC, October 2001.

that the specific protection afforded to them under International Humanitarian Law is widely promoted.

II. Legal framework

International Humanitarian Law stresses that the lives and physical and mental integrity of persons not taking a direct part in hostilities must be respected in all circumstances.

This body of law protects the civilian population as a whole against the effects of hostilities, without giving preference to one category of individuals over another. In addition, it grants special protection to women and children by addressing the risks to which both groups are particularly vulnerable, and to children as inherently vulnerable persons.

The specific protection afforded to women relates primarily to their distinct health, hygiene and physiological needs and to their role as mothers. The most fundamental provisions of humanitarian law protecting women are those stipulating that women must be afforded the "regard" or "consideration due" to them "on account of their sex" and that they must be granted special respect and protection.

The specific protection afforded to children, in particular orphans and children separated from their families, relates primarily to care and education (e.g. protection of school buildings), special nutritional requirements, the prohibition on the death penalty (insufficient *mens rea* for the criminal offence involved if under 18 at the time of commission) and the prohibition on recruiting children under 15. The latter prohibition is absolute and covers both direct participation in hostilities and indirect participation, such as gathering information or passing on orders.

Like any other civilians, girls are entitled to respect for their right to life and for their physical and mental integrity. Like anyone else, they benefit from the prohibitions on coercion, corporal punishment, torture, collective punishment and reprisals.

Girls are entitled not only to general protection but also to the special protection[4] accorded by International Humanitarian Law to children, and to women where relevant (due respect for their sex, specific protection while pregnant, etc.).

Wherever they take a direct part in hostilities, girls lose the general protection afforded to civilians but are still entitled to specific protection as children. As combatants, girls are covered to the same extent as men by the provisions regulating legitimate means and methods of combat and those protecting prisoners of war, the wounded and the sick. Of course, inasmuch as girls are entitled to the full *protection* of IHL, they also incur the relevant *obligations* set forth in that law.

Without entering into their normative content, mention should be made here of several other treaties, either universal or regional, that afford protection to girls in armed conflicts:

a) the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, adopted in 1990;

b) the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989, and its 2000 Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict;

c) the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, adopted by the General Assembly in 1993;

d) the 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which makes it a crime to recruit children and expands the number of specific sexual crimes while reinforcing their status as war crimes and crimes against humanity;

e) the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, which came into force in November 2005.

III. Forms of violence against girls in armed conflicts

Today, the vast majority of armed conflicts occur within State borders. Such internal violence has a devastating impact on civilians, with some of the worst consequences being indiscriminate attacks that kill or injure innumerable people and economic collapse that forces many others to flee their homes. Moreover, it is common knowledge that women and children constitute a large proportion of the world's refugees and displaced persons.

War's impact on girls is inextricably linked to its impact on the adults – men and women – on whom girls depend. The very fact that many men are absent often leaves the women and

[4] Of some 560 articles contained in the four Geneva Conventions and their two Additional Protocols, 25 refer specifically to children and 42 specifically to women.

children who are left behind in greater danger, while contributing to the breakdown of the traditional support mechanisms upon which the community – especially women – previously relied. As the burden placed on women to provide for the basic needs of their families increases exponentially, there are numerous spill over effects for their daughters. Girls are not only prey to the same ills as the rest of the community, they may also face drastic and harmful changes in their lives and specific dangers owing to their sex and age. Recent ICRC experiences and studies on ongoing conflicts show that girls are the victims of innumerable acts of violence.

The following pages explore the multifaceted and deeply individual experiences of girls affected by armed conflicts, taking into account the factors of vulnerability among particular groups of girls and the situations that threaten their physical and mental integrity and their individual development.

A. The vulnerability of girls

Vulnerability is most aptly assessed on the basis of exposure to risk and the capacity to cope with risk without sustaining long-term physical, emotional or economic damage.[5] In wartime, vulnerability is also related to the ability to cope with stress, shock and trauma.[6] Girls *per se* are vulnerable in armed conflicts, but the younger the more vulnerable they are. As children, they can be categorized as vulnerable persons by virtue of their age, their stage of development and their dependence on others for their well-being. However, speaking of girls solely in terms of vulnerability would not do justice to the courage, ingenuity and capacities that girls display on a daily basis when facing the consequences of armed conflict. At a very young age, they often have to fulfil expectations and obligations incumbent upon them as big sisters, daughters or even mothers, since they may have children of their own.

As already mentioned, the vulnerability of girls increases drastically when the traditional protection afforded to children by their families and communities is disrupted or unavailable owing to displacement or separation. In such circumstances, girls are all too often exposed to threats or acts of violence by parties to armed conflicts, be they military forces, armed groups or the police. At times, their personal safety is also threatened by members of peacekeeping

[5] Elizabeth W Jackson, *Coping and Vulnerability in Crisis: A Framework of Analysis and Response*, Tufts University, 1999.
[6] *Women Facing War, op. cit.,* p 29.

forces, humanitarian workers[7] or private individuals. In addition, they suffer from a lack of access to vital services such as adequate medical and health care. These are but a few of the ways in which war has an impact on girls.

In brief, girls' individual experiences of war are influenced by many factors, including:

- age – a young teenager is physically able to flee from the hostilities, for example, whereas a small child depends entirely on her parents, primarily her mother, to ensure her safety and welfare;
- context – rural and urban areas present different problems and offer different solutions;
- support networks – some children remain with their families and communities, others are separated from them.

Humanitarian organizations should therefore pay greater attention to children, especially girls, in armed conflicts and local and national authorities should adopt specific measures to protect them.

B. Changes in gender roles

It would be restrictive to look at the plight of girls in armed conflicts in Africa without taking into account the fact that they remain, as females, significantly disadvantaged from a social and cultural point of view even in peacetime. While girls are particularly susceptible to the marginalization, poverty and other ills engendered by armed conflicts, they were often victims of discrimination before war broke out. Discrimination against women and girls in terms of access to food, water, shelter, education, social and health services, and political power – issues canvassed in the *Beijing Platform for Action* – merely continues in times of war. The *Beijing Platform* states that: "while entire communities suffer the consequences of armed conflict and terrorism, women and girls are particularly affected because of their status in society and their sex." This continuum of discrimination and other harmful practices[8] against women and girls – from the private to the public sphere, in times of peace and in times of war – explains some of the forms of violence perpetrated against girls in armed conflicts. It also

[7] *Women Facing War, op. cit.,* pp 78-9 and 87; see also *Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Against Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons: Guidelines for Prevention and Response*, UNHCR, May 2003.
[8] "Harmful practices" means all behaviour, attitudes and practices that negatively affect the fundamental rights of women and girls, such as their right to life, health, dignity, education and physical integrity.

explains the importance of complementary action by organizations with different mandates, whether they work in the field of human rights or International Humanitarian Law, whether they are oriented towards humanitarian or development activities and whether they operate in times of conflict, transition or peace. The age and gender mainstreaming approach adopted by certain international organizations whose mission is to promote human rights, such as the right to equality, or whose core mandate is linked to development, is different from that taken by the ICRC. The ICRC does not have a policy on transforming relations between men and women, for the ICRC has no mandate to induce social change concerning the status of men or women within the cultures in which it carries out its work. Rather, the ICRC uses a gender analysis (to understand the respective socio-cultural roles of men and women) without adopting a gender policy (aimed at changing these roles with a view to attaining gender equality).

War forces girls into unfamiliar roles and calls for a strengthening of existing coping mechanisms and the development of new ones. The lives of girls can be completely changed by armed conflict, particularly as regards their role in the family, the community and public sphere. This is not something that is planned and girls are generally not prepared for the changes that are forced on them. The loss of relatives and the absence of men – because they have gone missing, have been killed, are taking part in the hostilities, have fled while the women stayed on to take care of the house and children or have become separated from their families as a result of displacement or deprivation of freedom – can lead to the breakdown or disintegration of family and community networks. This obliges girls to take on new roles within the family and the community, roles which often challenge and redefine their cultural and social identities. Changes in the gender roles ascribed to women and girls can sometimes be seen as positive developments; girls do mature more quickly when faced with armed conflict and acquire new levels of responsibility and independence. Yet it is important to weigh these benefits against the loss, poverty and deprivation endemic to war, and the fact that in many societies women and girls still only gain status (economic and social) through marriage. The lack of marriage possibilities (because of the absence of men or the social rejection of girls who have been abused or have played a voluntary or involuntary role in hostilities) can have enormous implications. Conversely, armed conflict may lead to an increase in early and/or forced marriages, sometimes used as a means of "protecting" young girls from sexual harassment or recruitment by armed groups.

Another example of changed gender roles is provided by female genital mutilation (FGM). It is estimated that approximately 50% of the female population between the ages of 8 and 18 in Liberia's rural areas underwent FGM before the civil war began. FGM was practised by

some but not all of Liberia's ethnic groups. There are no laws in the country that make this practice illegal, but the Association of Female Lawyers in Liberia has spoken out against FGM. Many believe that the civil war made this practice less common by undermining social structures and traditional institutions, such as the secret societies that often performed FGM as an initiation rite. It is not yet known whether, with the end of the war and the resurgence of traditional communities throughout the country, FGM will become more common again in rural areas among groups for whom it has been a significant and important rite of passage.

Cultural and social expectations regarding gender roles and responsibilities also put enormous pressure on demobilized girls. Communities often reject or stigmatize girls who have broken down traditional barriers or gone against society's expectations and values by becoming associated with fighting. This may explain why some of them are reluctant to go back home.

C. Sexual violence, a specific risk

A particular risk to the safety of girls in armed conflicts is the prevalence of sexual violence. This includes not only rape but also forced prostitution, sexual slavery, forced impregnation, forced maternity, forced termination of pregnancy, forced sterilization, indecent assault and trafficking.

Sexual violence is used against girls in wartime, as it is against women, for many different reasons: as a form of torture, to inflict injury, to extract information, to degrade and intimidate, as a form of punishment for actual or alleged actions committed by themselves or their families and to destroy the cohesion of their communities. Perpetrators also attack very young girls through the mistaken belief that raping a virgin will protect from or cure HIV infection. Recent conflicts have highlighted the systematic and/or specific targeting of women and girls for sexual violence – indeed the use of rape as a method of warfare. It is important to note that there is a fine line between opportunistic rape that is not discouraged, and systematic, widespread rape aimed at achieving the objectives of the armed conflict. It therefore remains difficult to determine when sexual violence rises to the level of a method of warfare. For that matter, the use of abducted girls for the purpose of providing sexual services to armed groups can be a particularly difficult case to characterize. It could be seen as the provision of "logistical support," a form of remuneration or an incentive for continued

participation in hostilities, albeit not a direct attack upon the adversary.[9] In addition to being direct victims, girls may also be forced to watch sexual violence committed against members of their own families.

Targeting girls, who symbolize the ability to procreate and survive, is used as a method of demonstrating that they cannot be protected in the absence of their fathers and of bringing "dishonour" upon an entire family or community. Rape not only dims any prospect of marriage, it can have two very frightening consequences that endure long after the act has been committed: unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS. Pregnancy for girls entails the physical risk of bearing a child at a very young age, the psychological trauma of carrying the child of their rapist, the fear of what members of their family and/or community will say and do when they find out, and the physical concerns linked to being pregnant during an armed conflict when safety is far from guaranteed and resources are scarce. STIs are also a very high risk, the probability of contracting HIV/AIDS being greater owing to girls' physiological immaturity and the violence of the act. There might also be a risk of ostracism and reprisals on the part of family members or the wider community owing to the notion that girls have been "dishonoured." While the only person to be truly "dishonoured" is the perpetrator of rape, this is rarely acknowledged.

D. Internally displaced and refugee girls

On the whole, the ordeal suffered by internally displaced girls does not differ greatly from that endured by refugee girls. However, internally displaced girls do not benefit from the protection afforded by the status of refugee. The main provisions that exist for the protection of girls who are displaced within their own countries during armed conflicts are to be found in International Humanitarian Law.[10] They are also contained in relevant national laws and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which apply across the board, whatever the situation. The UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement afford specific protection for internally displaced persons in all situations as well. They comprise a body of norms taken from humanitarian law, human rights law and refugee law, which cover prevention and all phases

[9] This is particularly true when women are brought into a country or area for this purpose, as is or was the case in several conflicts in Africa.

[10] In armed conflicts, internally displaced girls are protected by the rules of International Humanitarian Law that apply to civilians, whatever the cause of their displacement. It is the violation of those rules which is often at the root of the problem since humanitarian law prohibits the forced displacement of civilians, unless justified by security or military reasons, and protects civilians from the effects of hostilities. Humanitarian law also protects civilians during displacement.

of displacement. However, these principles are not legally binding in terms of international law.

Displacement may not be a voluntary choice of last resort. Boys and girls, alone or with their families and communities, are too often forcibly displaced by a party to a conflict as part of a deliberate strategy to empty of its population an area under the control of the opponent, to allow large-scale military operations or even to engage in so-called "ethnic cleansing."

It is often stated that women and children make up the majority of the world's refugees.[11] Yet the reasons for this are rarely examined, particularly the fact that men may be denied the possibility of fleeing and/or that their status as civilians is largely ignored. Moreover in internal displacement, women and children may face less difficulties to flee and be less often arrested, detained or killed since they are seen as civilians with a limited potential for fighting and thus as less of a threat. In several African conflict areas, women and girls are still moving around to find food stating that they face sexual violence whereas their men folk would be killed. Thus whenever women and children are the majority in a context of displacement, it should be a determinant factor when providing humanitarian aid. While voluntary displacement is a means of escaping insecurity, ironically it often exposes women and girls to further enormous risks. Those who flee generally take few possessions with them and many become separated from their family members. Girls who find themselves unaccompanied by male relatives in a war zone, either because the men have gone missing are because they are taking part in the hostilities, are particularly vulnerable. Displacement may force girls to rely on support from the local population or on assistance from international and non-governmental organizations, and they are particularly exposed to abuse and exploitation by any individual in a position of power.

Displaced women and pubescent girls may also have trouble managing their menstruation for lack of adequate feminine hygiene products. This is not only unsanitary but can also be humiliating and affect their ability to move about freely.

Like women, girls often have to travel long distances in search of food, water, firewood and medicinal herbs for themselves and their families. In so doing, they frequently risk sexual abuse, especially rape, in addition to injury from mines or unexploded ordnance and attack by armed fighters. Like women, girls are targeted precisely because of their sex – as child

[11] See, e.g., *Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Against Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Person, op. cit.*

bearers, they are perceived as being responsible for passing on the cultural and ethnic identity of their communities to future generations.

Displacement and separation often lead to changes in the division of labour within a family. The workload that falls on girls may increase and girls may also be forced into the informal labour market (including prostitution) in order to supplement the family income. In their struggle for survival, girls may be forced to take on new roles for which both they and their communities are ill prepared. Older girls must tend the fields and younger girls are expected to take over housework and care for their younger siblings. It is not rare to find girls who become heads of household. Such girls may be vulnerable to attack or threats from members of their own families or communities for not conforming to traditional roles. In other cases, girls may be targeted by the adversary in order to destroy or subvert those roles. Both phenomena are particularly acute where armed conflict has an ethnic dimension and a group is struggling to preserve its identity and traditions. As a result, age-old practices that discriminate against girls, such as dowry payments, early marriage and FGM, are further strengthened. In Sierra Leone, for example, 500 FGM were carried out in a single night on young girls newly displaced to a camp near Freetown. An increase in the incidence of early marriages has also been observed in some places, the purpose being to ensure that a girl can find a husband before it is too late or to boost the family's income with a dowry. Greater protection and improved material conditions provide further incentives for girls living in disrupted social environments to get married early.

In Uganda, for example, the threat of abduction by rebels of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) compels some 40,000 children to leave their homes and walk for miles every evening to spend the night in the relative safety of towns. Not only do these children have to travel long distances to avoid abduction but forced commuting makes the girls easy targets for sexual abuse.

E. Girls associated with fighting forces

Recognizing the difficulty of defining what is meant by "child soldier," especially in the case of girls, international organizations have widely adopted the Cape Town Principles. These define a child soldier in broad terms as: “any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers, and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members. [The definition] includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and for forced

marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms." This document is especially important in addressing claims that girls associated with armed groups are 'wives' rather than 'soldiers' since it clearly states that girls who are non-combatants are to be accorded the same status as those who take an active part in the fighting.

Abduction and forced or voluntary conscription of girls into armed forces and armed groups from a very young age are well-documented practices in Africa, even though they are forbidden by ratified conventions and national law. Between 1990 and 2003, girls served as active combatants in armed conflicts in 10 African countries.[12] While evidence shows that boys make up a slightly larger number of child soldiers, girls are nevertheless well represented and play an important role for armed groups. In Africa, girls are among the primary targets of armed forces and armed opposition groups that abduct children and force them to become warriors and sexual and domestic slaves.[13] Estimates show that girls make up 60% of the children abducted in Sierra Leone.[14] The development and proliferation of small arms also explains the strong presence of children in armed conflicts – fast and easy to handle, small arms can be used by untrained hands.

Often, the forced recruitment of children into armed forces or armed groups is used as a means of terrorizing or blackmailing civilians. In addition to being forced to participate directly in hostilities, girls can be used as spies, messengers, servants, sexual slaves, etc. In Liberia, for example, 75% of women and girls associated with fighting forces who came forward to be disarmed and demobilized reported that they had been sexually assaulted.[15] Girls also take part in abducting and training other children, and are used for duties such as transporting material, helping to loot villages or reconnaissance missions. Whatever the circumstances, they are abused and put at terrible risk. According to girls who were associated with fighting forces in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Uganda,[16] those who complained were beaten and those who were caught trying to escape were killed or were told that their families would be punished. The first assignment of a new recruit is usually to attack her own village or execute a member of her own family in order to make desertion impossible and turn her into a killer, altering her personality.

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[12] Burundi, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Liberia, Mozambique, Uganda, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sudan. Source: Dyan Mazurana and Susan Mc Kay, *Where Are the Girls?,* Rights & Democracy, March 2004.

[13] Dyan Mazurana and Susan McKay, "Child soldiers: What about the girls?", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists,* September/October 2001.

[14] *The Impact of Conflict on Women and Girls in West and Central Africa and the UNICEF Response*, UNICEF, February 2005.

[15] According to Amnesty International.

[16] ICRC interviews.

Boys and girls associated with fighting forces are deprived of a family, an education and all the other advantages that would help them develop and prepare for adulthood. Among the reasons why children are enlisted as soldiers is that they are easily manipulated, are not fully aware of the dangers and have unformed notions of right and wrong. In addition, the roles played by girls are particularly vital for group survival in terms of logistics (cooking, fetching water and wood, cleaning, caring for the sick and wounded.)

Extensive research and interviews have also shown that, apart from those who are abducted or forcibly recruited into armed forces, some girls voluntarily join up for various reasons. They may wish to get away from a home life where they were being ill treated, to seek revenge for the killing or abuse of a relative, to follow or please their parents or to serve a religious, ethnic or political cause. In a study[17] of individuals from nine countries who said that they had volunteered to join armed forces or armed groups before the age of 18, none of the girls interviewed cited providing for their families or protecting others as a reason for joining, whereas boys often did. Girls, on the other hand, spoke more often than boys of the need to protect themselves – in particular from rape and other forms of sexual violence. In addition, some girls joined to assert their equality with male members of the family involved in armed forces or groups.

Girls may also be recruited among children who are left to their own devices in conflict zones. Cut off from their familiar environment, they lack any certainty about their future and the whereabouts of their loved ones. The role of the family is decisive in preventing girls from being recruited or, on the contrary, encouraging them to join up. In many countries at war, girls are more likely to be recruited where certain social conditions prevail, such as street violence, extreme poverty or a lack of support structures. In these circumstances, recruitment is a way of gaining a degree of protection and social status, and may even be a matter of survival – to some, bearing a gun seems like the only way to ensure access to security, food and protection. In many cases, "voluntary" recruitment may not be what it seems. "Black Diamond," the leader of a group of Liberian women rebels – the Women's Artillery Commandos – fighting alongside Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), attributes her rise through the rebel ranks partly to her traumatic experience of being gang-raped by the notoriously ill-disciplined forces loyal to former President Charles Taylor in

[17] Rachel Brett, "Adolescents volunteering for armed forces or armed groups," *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 85, No. 852, December 2003.

northern Lofa county, when she was 17. "If you are angry, you get brave. You can become a master in everything."[18] Many of Black Diamond's female comrades have similar tales.

Armed with lethal weapons, plied with alcohol and drugs to incite them to violence and fearlessness, forced into dependence on the group that recruited them, unable or too fearful to find a way out, girls become a danger to themselves and others.

Girls are also at risk because of their very presence among the armed forces or armed groups that recruited them – against their will – to be sex slaves or to cook and clean in the camps. While they are with the groups, and often even afterwards, these girls not only face considerable danger from their abductors but are also at risk of attack by the opposing forces because of their involvement in the fighting itself or because of other activities or roles.

Girls from Uganda, Liberia and Sierra Leone who discussed their experiences[19] pointed out that they had been able to attain positions of command and perform leadership roles, demonstrating that a measure of equal status could be reached within armed opposition groups. However, the responsibilities given to them were often related to violations they had been forced to commit, sometimes in their own villages, or to the number of civilians they had killed.

Among the girls associated with fighting forces, the risks faced by those who are abducted by the LRA are well documented. Made to be porters and soldiers for the rebels, they are often initiated by being forced to kill a family member and to torture or commit odious crimes against civilians. They are also given to rebels as a reward; girls as young as 10 reported[20] that they had been allocated to rebels through a ritual in which the men threw their shirts in a pile and the abducted girls were forced to take a shirt. The man who owned the shirt would then take the girl as his 'wife' and would systematically rape her until she escaped, often many years later. For other girls who are assigned to help the 'wife' as cooks or babysitters, there is also the risk of violence from the 'wife' herself. Many young girls reported physical abuse and the withholding of food on the part of girls forced into marriage with commanders. This fosters hatred between these girls after their demobilization.

[18] BBC News, 26 August 2003.
[19] Discussions held during two conferences attended by the ICRC in Geneva and Addis Ababa with women combatants from armed opposition groups (report available on the website of Geneva Call).
[20] Research conducted in Uganda by Alison Cole for Amnesty International.

F. Girls and DDR processes

When a conflict ends, the international community may launch a disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) process involving complex policy decisions and programmes. The effectiveness of such a process is usually measured by the number of weapons collected rather than the successful reintegration of former combatants into society. The fact that most formal DDR programmes are narrowly conceived as opportunities to disarm factions (one man, one gun) and that the surrender of weapons is a criterion of eligibility often leads to the exclusion of children, especially girls. In October 2000, the international community unanimously recognized that, despite the existence of relevant guidelines and commitments, women and girls were not sufficiently included in peace and reconciliation processes, including DDR programmes.[21]

It took a long time and several disastrous experiences before the international community realized that addressing the problem of demobilized girls was crucial to their protection. For example, although it was estimated[22] that the number of abducted girls married to soldiers from the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) was somewhere between 5,000 and 8,000, none had been formally demobilized and the refusal to acknowledge the role played by child soldiers, especially girls, during Angola's hostilities certainly complicated efforts by humanitarian organizations to address the problem. During the DDR process in Mozambique, the question of child soldiers became so sensitive that neither the Mozambique National Resistance Movement (RENAMO) nor the liberation Front of Mozambique (FRELIMO) wanted to acknowledge that they had recruited boys and girls. A few programmes were later set up for boys but nothing has been done for girls. In Sierra Leone, although children did not have to surrender a weapon to enter the DDR programme, the vast majority of girls thought that this was a requirement and therefore did not go through an official demobilization process or benefit from appropriate support and services. According to various sources,[23] children constituted 50% of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council / Revolutionary United Front (AFRC/RUF) members, with girls making up between 33% and 50% of the total number of children. Several UN reports state that children constituted one quarter of the government coalition forces (Sierra Leone Army and Civil Defence Force), with girls making up 33% of the SLA children and 10% of the CDF children.

[21] E.g., Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, S/RES/1325, Security Council, 31 October 2000.
[22] *Forgotten Fighters: Child Soldiers in Angola*, Human Rights Watch, April 2003.
[23] Dyan Mazurana and Susan McKay, *Where are the Girls? Girls in Fighting Forces in Northern Uganda, Sierra Leone and Mozambique: Their Lives During and After War*, Rights and Democracy, Centre International des Droits de la Personne et du Développement Démocratique, Montreal, 2004

Between December 2003 and September 2004, 1,718 boys but only 23 girls were demobilized and referred to four international NGOs in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.[24] Among the 101,495 combatants who were formally disarmed in Liberia, only 22,370 were women (22%) and 2,440 girls (2.4%).[25]

The fact that girls associated with fighting forces are overlooked in DDR processes stems from a number of factors, including:

- reluctance to acknowledge involvement in the illegal and unethical practice of recruiting children;
- discrimination and lack of gender analysis in armed conflicts;
- the perception of women soldiers as outcasts;
- poor planning and implementation of DDR processes;
- the fact that it is easier for communities to deny or hide the problem.

When there is no formal demobilization process, girls can leave fighting forces by escaping, being captured or being released, in particular as a result of political agreement, amnesty or pressure brought to bear on their captors. In all these cases, however, it is often difficult to gain access to these girls in order to offer them protection and support. Even if there is a DDR process, girls may shy away from the options it offers because they do not want to be known or registered as former combatants, given the stigma attached to this status. In other cases, they stay away either because they have not been released by their partners or abductors, they believe – rightly or wrongly – that they do not meet the admission criteria or they are dissuaded by the insecurity prevailing in the gathering centres and quartering areas.

In Liberia, demobilized girls often continue to face difficulties because they live with violent partners or family members. The "return package" they received did not enable them to make real life choices.

G. Girls deprived on their liberty

As stated in the United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Freedom (resolution 45/113 of 14 December 1990), the imprisonment of juveniles – persons

[24] Beth Verhey, *Reaching the Girls: Study on Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo*, Save the Children UK, 2004, and NGO group CARE, IFESH and IRC, November 2004.
[25] Source: United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL).

under the age of 18 – should only be used as a last resort, and the age limit below which it should not be permitted to deprive a child of his or her liberty should be determined by law.

In Africa, as elsewhere in the world, women make up a very small percentage of all persons deprived of their freedom. The presence of female juveniles in detention is rare. In 2005 the ICRC registered and monitored the cases of 8,695 individuals detained in relation to an armed conflict in sub-Saharan Africa, of whom only 211 were females.

In all circumstances, persons deprived of their freedom should be considered as vulnerable. However, their vulnerability is greater when they are detained in connection with an armed conflict or a situation of violence. Although they comprise but a small minority of detainees, women and female juveniles are exposed to two types of abuse: abuse linked to their detention and abuse linked to their sex and age. They may be subjected to ill-treatment and they may lack adequate food, hygiene, shelter and medical care. They may also have special requirements in relation to their sex which are not being met.

Too often, women and female juveniles are abandoned by their families and communities while in detention and ostracized after their release. They face much greater difficulties in attempting to reintegrate into society than do men and boys.

The absence of regular family visits while in detention may have serious consequences when the detaining authorities do not fulfil their obligation to cover the essential needs of the detainees. Lack of food and other vital supplies may force female juveniles who receive no support from their families to resort to prostitution for survival. This puts them at high risk of gynaecological problems, HIV infection and pregnancy.

A juvenile mother in detention may be forcibly separated from her child, who may be given into the custody of her husband's family. As a result, she may lose all contact with the child.

IV. Consequences of armed conflicts for girls

A. Girls separated from their families and unaccompanied girls

A girl who is referred to as 'separated' is a girl under the age of 18 or the legal age of majority who has been separated from both parents but who may be accompanied by other relatives.

An 'unaccompanied' girl is a girl under the age of 18 or the legal age of majority who has been separated from both parents and is not being cared for by an adult responsible for doing so by law or custom. Orphans are children whose parents are both known to be dead. When an armed conflict or disaster occurs, many girls become separated from their parents or other caregivers. Because their status is seldom immediately clear, they are referred to as ‘separated’ or ‘unaccompanied’ rather than as orphans.

As part of a study on the situation of unaccompanied girls living in camps in Guinea, the ICRC interviewed 22 subjects aged between 14 and 19. Of these, 11 had a child and four were pregnant. The study identified specific risks of abuse and/or factors of vulnerability affecting these girls. Lack of parental care was seen as a prime cause of early exposure to sexual relations. When assistance delivered in camps was insufficient, these girls faced more difficult material conditions than accompanied children owing to lack of parental care further compounded by neglect and/or abuse from their caregivers, especially when these girls were mothers. To supplement the assistance they received, these girls worked long hours during the week and weekends, and were at risk of being exploited by their caregivers, caregivers they found in camps and which are not customary primary care-giver. Insufficient assistance may also push a girl into accepting sexual relations with a boy who can support her financially (either out of interest or love). However, among the sample group, this was not seen as a factor in girls' involvement in prostitution networks. The study also revealed that unaccompanied girls who had difficulties with their caregivers were more likely to form a couple with a man in the hope of gaining support and protection. Lastly, these girls were found to be at greater risk of becoming pregnant or contracting an STI because they were unaware of or did not understand how to apply contraceptive methods or any means of preventing STIs (some girls said that they had heard about condoms but did not know how to use them and did not know how to avoid STIs; others said that they were ashamed to ask their partners to use a condom or that the partners refused to use one). Regarding available sexual and reproductive health services in camps, most girls said that they had been able to attend information sessions held at school or organized by Action for the Rights of the Child (ARC) but they were not able to attend the whole sessions (because their babies were crying, because they had work to do…) and hence lacked part of the information (how or why to use a condom for example). The study also highlighted the fact that becoming pregnant was considered the result of deviant behaviour for young girls and that most fathers refused to recognize their offspring and abandoned the mothers. Most of the girls had free access to medical care but had not been properly checked or treated (lack of medicine, disease uncured, etc.) and very few (including those who had been sexually abused) had access to psychological support.

B. Health care

The trauma of being uprooted from their homes and forcibly recruited and the high levels of stress caused by difficult living conditions and heavy physical demands all take their toll on girls. Their situation is further exacerbated by food shortages, which result in hunger and malnutrition, and reduced access to health facilities.

The lack of medical care has an enormous impact on girls, whose needs include not only treatment for war wounds and endemic diseases such as malaria, cholera, diarrhoea and parasitic infections but also attention to sexual and reproductive health. In countries where FGM is practised, the threat of complications is magnified. Sexual activity increases for many girls in armed conflicts, owing to early or forced marriages, prostitution or policies of systematic rape and abuse that result in early pregnancy and a substantial increase in STIs, in particular HIV/AIDS. The lack of reproductive and antenatal health care for pregnant girls can lead to severe gynaecological complications, such as vasico-vaginal and vasico-rectal fistulas, and a heightened risk of infant and maternal mortality[26] and illness. The stressful conditions of war also contribute to complications in pregnancy and childbirth. Reproductive health care is vital to saving lives and preventing or reducing illnesses and disabilities due to complications during and after pregnancy and labour. In addition to needing care themselves, girls can play an important role in promoting and maintaining the health of their siblings. They know, or can learn, how to prevent illnesses and care for sick family members and should be supported and assisted in these efforts. Reproductive health education is limited for girls who have been separated from their parents as this type of information is usually passed on from mother to child.

The breakdown of the family unit and the loss of social support are contributing factors driving young girls into prostitution or early sexual relationships and leading to the rise in STIs and pregnancies among such girls in many parts of Africa. At the same time, it should be pointed out that displaced girls sometimes have better access to health care and education within camps than they would have had at home.

[26] According to Sierra Leone government sources, forced early marriage is one of the factors contributing to the country's high maternal mortality rate, which stands at 1,800 per 100,000 live births (source: *The Status of Women and Girls in Sierra Leone*).

C. Psychological trauma

Many girls experience the trauma of seeing family members, friends or neighbours injured or killed before their very eyes. Some lose one or both parents during an armed conflict and others are left with no surviving family members. The psychological scars children bear after witnessing such attacks have long-term effects.

Child soldiers, in particular, suffer deep-seated trauma that persists long after the fighting has ended. Community leaders and counsellors emphasize that psychotherapy is a vital step in helping these children return to normal lives. Through efforts such as the Child Advocacy and Rehabilitation Project (CAR) set up in Sierra Leone and Liberia by the National Red Cross Societies of those countries, boys and girls formerly associated with fighting forces are being offered psychological support that is designed to take into account their brutal experiences.

A growing body of research[27] has shown significant correlations between child sexual abuse and a host of unhealthy outcomes, including behavioural and psychological problems, sexual dysfunction, relationship problems, low self-esteem, depression, suicidal thoughts, deliberate self-harm, alcohol and substance abuse, and sexual risk-taking. Women who were sexually abused in childhood are also at greater risk of being physically and sexually abused as adults. Since girls associated with fighting forces have usually been the victims of sexual violence, they need appropriate and comprehensive gender-specific support that can meet their physiological, psychological and spiritual needs and help them reintegrate into society.

D. Mine victims

Despite all the efforts that have been made to rid the world of anti-personnel mines and unexploded ordnance, these weapons remain a menace and cause untold suffering among civilians in many parts of Africa. The percentage of mine victims is frequently much higher among men (90-95%). In Angola, however, women and girls account for more than 20% of the total number of casualties (data collected by the ICRC between 1995 and 2001). This is because they habitually work in the fields and forests and move around and between villages to attend markets. For girls, becoming a mine victim can have further dramatic implications; in many countries, mine-injured girls have little opportunity to get married as their disability lowers their status in society. Some may have difficulty gaining access to medical care and

[27] *Multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence Against Women: Initial Results on Prevalence, Health Outcomes and Women's Responses,* WHO, November 2005.

physical rehabilitation if they are not accompanied by a male relative and treated by female health staff. They may also be abandoned by their relatives after the accident and may have to support themselves in addition to coping with the trauma they have suffered.

E. Education

Children's right to education is enshrined in International Humanitarian Law, human rights law and refugee law. The Rome Statute considers intentional attacks against school buildings as war crimes. The destruction of schools, often the result of indiscriminate attacks, is the most visible sign of violence against children in armed conflicts. Schools are also used by arms bearers as strategic places from which they can launch attacks or in which they can stock arms and ammunition. In such cases, they lose their status as protected buildings and are exposed to attack. Schools are also targeted as such, because they are a symbol of State authority (they are often, along with medical centres, the only public buildings in rural areas) or of national, religious or ethnic values. In some countries, such as Sudan, teachers are targeted because they are perceived as State agents. For all these reasons, schools are dangerous places for children in wartime. Aside from being vulnerable to attack, they are sometimes also used as places to recruit children. The most famous such case involved the abduction of 139 girls in northern Uganda by the LRA in October 1996. While 100 of the girls were freed the next day, most of the others still remain in the hands of their abductors despite numerous efforts by local people (including an association of concerned parents) and the international community to obtain their release and considerable media involvement. [28]

The impact of violence on education is also, indirectly, the result of the deep economic and social turmoil and the collapse of the national and local economy that often accompany protracted fighting. In such situations, large numbers of children drop out of school. For displaced or refugee children, future prospects are thus further compromised.

Where education services still exist, schooling is very often seriously disrupted by armed conflict and numerous obstacles stand in the way of attendance. Even in peacetime, education is often considered a luxury for girls, who play an essential role in performing housework and caring for the family. This is all the more true in times of armed conflict, when insecurity and distance from school put girls at a particular disadvantage. Attendance

[28] Els De Temmerman, *Aboke Girls: Children Abducted in Northern Uganda*, Fountain Publishers, Kampala, 2001.

may also come down to whether or not the girl has a uniform to wear or money to pay the school fees. Early marriage is another reason why girls drop out of school.

For girls and young women who escape fighting forces or are demobilized, reintegrating their communities poses further challenges. Most have less education or professional training than men and many have missed out on their chance for an education altogether. Yet studies have shown that girls accord great importance to education and skills that could enable them to sustain themselves economically. Where education is included in the demobilization process, girls are provided with other options than remaining with a former abductor or a husband or partner who has been forced on them.

Women who had been fighting since they were young girls in southern Sudan confirmed[29] that lack of education was one of the reasons why it was more difficult for them than for men to become involved in the peace process and the transitional government. These women felt doubly victimized because, in the first place, their own rights had been violated by the State and, in the second place, the sacrifice they had made by fighting for the armed opposition was not "rewarded" by their inclusion in peace-building or the DDR process. They said that their sacrifice was not valued in the same way as that of men, that joining the cause had not allowed them to receive an education and that this had prevented them from getting involved in the political process after the conflict had ended. Yet men who had no more formal education than they did had somehow managed to become members of the new government and use their status as former fighters to gain credibility as politicians.

The fact that women and girls generally have a lower level of education and professional training than men makes their reintegration into society after an armed conflict more difficult. In Liberia today, where illiteracy levels continue to hover around 70% and no more than 33% of primary-school students reach the fifth grade, only 12% of girls graduate from secondary school and fewer than one in five teachers working in public schools are female.[30]

F. Girl mothers

[29] Dyan Mazurana, *Women in Armed Opposition Groups Speak on War, Protection and Obligations Under International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law*. Report of a workshop organized in Geneva by Geneva Call and the Program for the Study of International Organizations, Geneva, 26-29 August 2004.
[30] *Humanitarian Action Liberia*, Donor update, UNICEF, 9 May 2005.

In some societies, it is very difficult for girls who become pregnant as a result of rape to marry and for those who lose their husbands in an armed conflict to remarry. Consequently, they often have no legal or social status, economic security or access to resources.

A recent report by UNICEF estimates that out of 25,000 children abducted in northern Uganda since the conflict began 19 years ago, 7,500 (30%) were girls, 1,000 of whom had conceived during captivity. The question of the lineage and inheritance rights of the children fathered by rebels is a growing concern and increases the stigma attached to girl mothers, many of whom may also be infected with HIV from the systematic sexual abuse they endured.[31] In a programme for girls associated with armed groups in Sierra Leone, 32% reported having been raped (because of the stigma attached, sexual violence tends to be under-reported) and 66% were single mothers.[32]

One of the main problems of girls who give birth after having been repeatedly raped is the fact that the father cannot be identified. In a patrilineal society where one's social identity comes from the father, the children of rape are social outcasts. Access to land, which often depends on the father as well, is impossible for these children. In addition, the inability of girls to complete an education in many cultures, owing not only to childcare duties but also to the stigma attached to being a girl mother and perhaps single, has serious socio-economic implications for them and for their children. Another obvious problem is that child mothers already have parental needs and duties at an age when they still need support, education and training. Furthermore, participation in decision-making processes that directly affect them may be limited by the fact that they are both minors and women.

In addition to the health risks that early pregnancy entails for girl mothers, large numbers of girls deliver babies with a low birth weight, increasing the health risks for the child. Girl mothers usually lack any knowledge of how to care for or breastfeed their babies. They themselves may suffer from a lack of food or appropriate nutrition following delivery, which can lead to severe anaemia and/or malnutrition.

V. ICRC approach and activities

[31] Alison Cole.
[32] *Forgotten Casualties of War: Girls in Armed Conflict,* Save the Children, 2005.

In the Plan of Action for Children Affected by Armed Conflict, adopted by the Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in 1995 and reiterated in 1999, the Movement made the following general commitments:

1. to promote the principle of non-recruitment and non-participation of boys and girls under the age of 18 in armed conflicts;

2. to take specific steps to protect and assist boys and girls who are victims of armed conflicts.

Six objectives were set as a means of implementing these commitments. The first three, which focus on prohibiting the recruitment and participation in armed conflict of children below the age of 18, are:

- to promote national and international legal norms (such as those contained in the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child) that prohibit the recruitment into armed forces and armed groups and the participation in hostilities of individuals under the age of 18, and to promote the recognition and application of these norms by all armed groups (governmental and non-governmental);

- to discourage children from joining the armed forces or armed groups by providing them with choices other than enlistment;

- to persuade the general public of the need to ensure that children do not join armed forces or armed groups.

The remaining three objectives, which relate to the Movement's commitment to implementing specific measures to protect and assist child victims of armed conflict, are:

- to meet the psychological and physical needs of children living with their families,
- to meet the psychological and physical needs of 'separated' children;
- to facilitate the reintegration into society of children who have participated in armed conflicts.

A. Promotion of legal norms

Ensuring the development, promotion and implementation of International Humanitarian Law is a core ICRC activity. As part of this activity, the organization encourages States to ratify the Optional Protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and support the adoption of specific measures to implement this treaty.

The ICRC spreads knowledge of humanitarian law and promotes the full range of humanitarian principles with a view to preventing or, at the very least, limiting the excesses of war. To that end, it runs educational programmes targeting, in particular, groups that are in a position to influence the situation of conflict victims, in particular by obstructing or facilitating ICRC action. These groups include armed forces, police and security forces and other bearers of weapons, decision makers and opinion leaders at both the local and international levels.

The ICRC also encourages States to comply with their treaty obligations to raise awareness of legal norms among their armed forces and to support the promotional work of the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

The ICRC specifically endeavours to incorporate the needs of women and girls and the prohibition on child recruitment and sexual violence into its training session on humanitarian law for members of the armed forces and armed opposition groups. In particular, it emphasizes the fact that sexual violence is a grave breach of the law involving individual criminal responsibility.

If they are to have the desired impact, humanitarian rules must be introduced in the legal systems governing the conduct of the armed forces and in the internal regulations of non-State armed groups. They must also be incorporated into their procedure and training (or equivalents). Weapons bearers should receive strict orders in this respect, backed up by effective sanctions in the event of violations. The implementation of these measures is strongly encouraged by the ICRC.

As a means of prevention, the ICRC has launched an educational programme called "Exploring Humanitarian Law (EHL)" designed to teach teenagers the basic rules and principles of that law, including those designed to protect women and girls. The primary aims of this programme, which is active in 16 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, are to help young people:

- embrace the principles of humanity in their daily lives,

- develop more effective life skills,
- make choices that steer them clear of violence and high-risk behaviour,
- understand the concept of global citizenship.

Thanks to two recent workshops organized by the NGO Geneva Call, the ICRC had the opportunity to explore how women combatants from armed opposition groups can contribute to the promotion of humanitarian law and human rights law and help prevent violations by members of their groups. The first workshop, held in August 2004 in Geneva, brought together 32 women from armed groups in 18 war-torn countries around the globe. A regional follow-up workshop held in Addis Ababa in December 2005 was attended by 40 women currently or recently involved in armed groups from a dozen countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Even though some of these women later hold positions of leadership, nearly all joined as girls.

These workshops allowed the ICRC to gain a better understanding of the experiences of girls and women associated with fighting forces, some of which are highlighted in this document. They also showed that girls and women were generally unfamiliar with the rules of humanitarian law and human rights law, in particular those designed to protect them. According to the participants,[33] armed groups persuaded girls to join up by telling them that they would be safer as members of the group than as civilians. None of the participants saw the presence of children in armed groups as a violation of the law. On the contrary, many saw it as the best alternative for children trying to escape abusive government forces. Armed groups claimed to protect girls by relegating them to roles that limited their exposure to direct fighting, but this was seen as ineffective since any girls captured by government forces would be treated "as if they were fighters." Nevertheless, most of the participants felt that limiting women's roles within armed groups was a sufficient form of security. The workshops highlighted the importance of continued efforts to ensure that States meet their obligation to protect children and that armed groups refrain from recruiting them.

The ICRC cooperates with the UN Institute for Training and Research and the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations with a view to ensuring that the special needs of women and children are included in the training of civilian personnel involved in peacekeeping operations. The purpose of this training, which is given two to three times a year in countries where peace-support operations are being carried out, is to raise peacekeepers' awareness of the immeasurable and invisible effects of armed conflict on

[33] Dyan Mazurana, *Women in armed opposition groups speak on war*, *op. cit.*

women and children and of the special needs of these groups during repatriation and resettlement. Another purpose is to publicize and support the UN's "zero tolerance" policy towards acts of sexual exploitation and abuse committed by peacekeeping staff and to encourage them to address women's and girls' concerns in their daily work.

B. Preserving family links

International Humanitarian Law seeks to maintain and restore family unity by prohibiting the separation of family members against their will and requiring the adoption of measures that facilitate family reunification and the restoration of family ties, in particular the collection and distribution of information and personal messages. Under that law, parties to a conflict are duty-bound to assist with enquiries regarding the whereabouts of dispersed family members and to encourage the work of organizations involved in tracing activities.

Families caught up in situations of armed violence run a high risk of being split apart. Separation might be accidental (when running away from danger or during an evacuation) or deliberate (as a result of pressure exerted by the authorities or armed groups or in the case of parents who abandon or leave their children with others in the hope that they will have a better chance of survival). Approaches made by the ICRC to the relevant authorities and other parties with a view to reducing the risk of separation or promoting reunification is therefore based on a clear understanding of the causes of separation.

As part of its efforts to restore contact between dispersed family members, the ICRC carries out specific programmes to protect and assist children who have been separated from their parents as a result of war. The ultimate aim is to reunite them with their parents, nearest relatives or customary caregivers, preferably in the country of origin. ICRC services under the programmes include:

- interviewing children and communities to identify vulnerable children;
- registering vulnerable children (in camps, host communities and transit or interim care centres);
- monitoring and protecting children while their relatives are being traced;

- active and passive tracing[34] of the parents or closest relatives and restoring family links through Red Cross messages;
- mediating between children and their host families where problems arise in connection with reunification once the parents have been traced;
- reunifying children with their parents, other relatives or customary caregivers;
- follow-up monitoring after family reunification;
- advocating on behalf of children and referring them to other aid agencies should reunification prove unsatisfactory.

The ICRC has tested and developed new methods of resolving cases, such as publishing gazettes with the names and pictures of children, putting up posters in strategic places, broadcasting information by radio and sometimes using websites. These activities clearly require time and long-term commitment.

The ICRC's activities to restore family links are mostly concentrated in Africa. In 2005, the organization registered 3,349 'separated' children, including girls, and reunited 1,575 with their families. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 285 out of 677 (42%) active tracing cases concerned girls, and in Liberia, 259 out of 578 (44.8%).

The ICRC also sets up transit centres for 'separated' children waiting to be reunited with their families (Guinea/Conakry), distributes assistance kits (Sierra Leone, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, Angola) and supports agencies that care for unaccompanied children (Rwanda, etc.).

C. Protecting children in DDR processes

The ICRC cannot be part of a DDR negotiation process. However, it can help facilitate agreements between parties and contribute to the implementation of those agreements. Whether or not the ICRC becomes directly involved in the planning and implementation of a DDR process will depend on its analysis of the given context. In any event, the ICRC does not step in without the agreement of all the parties concerned. As a priority, the ICRC stresses the need to adopt a regional approach and to ensure that women and children are taken into account in the DDR process.

[34] Active tracing is when a research request is handled through active research on the field through the National Societies or the ICRC. Passive tracing is when a research request is not handled through active tracing by National Societies or the IRCR on the field, but rather through gathering of names and publication in the web site or in gazette (Angola).

The rights of children in armed conflict should be respected at all times, not just once a DDR process has been launched. Children associated with armed forces and armed groups should not have to wait for such a process to begin before they are demobilized. However, in view of the potential risks to the children, the ICRC will not advocate their demobilization unless the parties have formally committed themselves to protecting children against future recruitment. To that end, the ICRC may urge the parties to make a unilateral declaration renouncing the recruitment or use of children and to take practical implementation measures.

In general, the ICRC recommends:

- immediately demobilizing children associated with fighting forces (CAFF), without waiting for a peace agreement to be signed or a DDR process to be launched;
- including in peace agreements the demobilization of CAFF and their reintegration into society;
- making the specific needs of CAFF, especially girls, a priority in DDR processes;
- including in DDR processes CAFF who escaped, those who were captured or detained and those who did not bear weapons.

DDR processes require an integrated approach and effective coordination among all those involved. To that end, the ICRC encourages partnerships between components of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and among humanitarian agencies. It also emphasizes the need for dialogue with children at risk, demobilized children, parents, child-protection networks (teachers, social workers, etc.) and communities in order to understand their views and identify existing protection mechanisms that could be strengthened or measures that could be taken to cope with or put an end to the problem of CAFF. The ICRC takes poverty into account in its assistance programmes wherever it is a root cause of the problem. The organization also promotes or carries out individual monitoring of demobilized children in order to ensure that they are not recruited again. The monitoring includes measures to help children settle back into their families and communities or, when that proves impossible, to implement other durable solutions.

In recent years, the ICRC has been involved in DDR processes in Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Angola. In 2004, as part of this effort, it registered 1,300 demobilized children, 1,200 of whom were reunited with their families. It is currently handling an additional 1,000 cases.

D. Assistance

The ICRC provides assistance for persons affected by armed conflict in order to preserve their physical integrity and dignity and to help them regain their autonomy as quickly as possible. The organisation endeavours to ensure that the consequences of armed conflict – disease, wounds, hunger, displacement and a difficult physical and/or psychological environment – do not deprive the victims of a viable future. ICRC assistance programmes target the population groups most in need, in particular children, and focuses primarily on water and habitat, economic security and health. These programs target the population as a whole (all victims approach), or can target specific groups being more affected or having particular needs.

The ICRC's water and habitat programmes are designed to ensure access to safe water (for both drinking and household use) and to a safe living environment. They generally concern public or community infrastructure (water-treatment plants, hospitals, medical centres, prisons, camps for displaced people, etc.) In Kenya, for example, the ICRC has rebuilt schools in cooperation with the National Red Cross Society and the American Red Cross. It has also provided school supplies for children displaced by internal violence in Ethiopia.

The ICRC's economic security programmes focus mainly on preserving or restoring the ability of households affected by armed conflict to meet their basic needs. In acute crises, the ICRC's priority is to support and bolster the means of production through programmes tailored to the local economy. Emphasis is placed on reviving agriculture, ensuring livestock health and management, launching micro-economic initiatives and providing relief supplies such as food and basic household items. In 2005, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the ICRC provided 14,142 families (70,710 people) affected by the conflict with household items and agricultural equipment and supplies. In Liberia, the ICRC has set up a market-gardening project to give boys and girls formerly associated with fighting forces an additional income and help them resume normal lives within the community. Although girls are encouraged to participate in these programmes, their numbers are lower than those of boys. Special efforts are being made to include girl heads of household in registration and census exercises so as to ensure that they are issued documents in their name entitling them to receive the assistance they need for themselves and any siblings in their care.

As for the ICRC's health-care programmes, they are designed to ensure access to basic preventive and curative care. The organization provides support for essential health services, pre-hospital care (first aid and medical evacuation) and emergency hospital care. Its services include mother and child care (e.g. family planning), expanded immunization campaigns (e.g. the ICRC vaccinated 49,000 children against measles in Darfur, Sudan, in 2005), programmes to fight communicable diseases, efforts to promote health and hygiene, health education (in cooperation with teachers, traditional birth attendants, community health workers, etc.) and programmes to deal with the consequences of sexual violence.

In Liberia, for example, a community approach has been taken involving the training of 200 traditional midwifes whose support is crucial for women and girls living in towns and villages where few health facilities are available. Not only do the midwives provide assistance in delivering babies, they also play a significant educational, promotional and referral role as they are the ones other women and girls feel they can talk to. They deal with STIs and refer cases to clinics if need be, they help young mothers when it comes to basic care and feeding their babies, they hear of and may be called on to handle domestic violence and rape cases and they can raise awareness of HIV/AIDS prevention. Because they are trusted by women and girls, traditional midwives are in a good position to pass on preventive and health-education messages.

A special programme for rape victims, dealing with both the psychosocial and medical aspects of the problem, has been introduced in ICRC-supported health facilities in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. The programme includes preventive treatment against possible infection with STIs, including HIV/AIDS, and unwanted pregnancies within 72 hours of the act. The nurses and doctors in these centres have been specially trained to care for the women and girls who come for help. Working with traditional practitioners has also facilitated the referral of victims to health facilities.

Where necessary, the ICRC arranges for the transfer of rape victims to hospitals with specialized surgical units dealing with the complications of sexual violence. A team of specialized surgeons operates on such cases at the Panzi hospital in Bukavu. In 2005, 219 women and girls victim of sexual violence were treated in ICRC-supported health centres, including 26 cases within three days of the act, and 119 health workers were trained in providing welcome, orientation and listening services for victims of sexual violence.

The ICRC also helped train one surgeon in Addis Ababa to repair fistulas, a common consequence of pregnancies in very young girls.

E. Psychosocial support and reintegration

For the ICRC, "reintegration" refers to the process that allows former combatants and their families to adapt, economically and socially, to a productive civilian life.

In keeping with its Action Plan, and in a coordinated Movement approach to supporting the rehabilitation of children affected by war, the ICRC is currently providing financial support for the CAR programme run by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the Liberia National Red Cross Society**.** The programme, which was originally developed in Sierra Leone in 2001 with initial funding from the British, Swedish and Canadian Red Cross Societies, was replicated in Liberia after it proved successful across the border. The Sierra Leone Red Cross Society now has five CAR centres, all but one funded by the ICRC and a number of sister Societies through the Federation.

The goal of the CAR programme is to modify the behaviour and attitude of children affected by war through a process involving trauma healing, literacy classes, skills building and help in resuming normal family and community life. In an effort to prepare children for their future role in society, CAR teaches them skills that will be useful in rebuilding their communities and enable them to contribute to the family income.

In addition to learning new skills, children involved in CAR programmes receive counselling (individual or group) and have the opportunity to engage in sports and other recreational activities. They also take part in theatre performances and cultural shows, which helps them to tackle the most difficult task they face: expressing their feelings and coming to terms with the terrifying acts they were forced to commit.

The participants are selected from among the most vulnerable children between the ages of 10 and 18 and half of them are girls. Each training cycle involves 150 children and lasts between nine and 11 months, at the rate of five days a week. The children are provided with one meal a day and their transport to the centre is ensured.

CAR programmes strive to ensure that demobilized children are not stigmatized by their families or the community at large. In Sierra Leone, a survey conducted by the National Society showed that girls formerly associated with fighting forces were the most vulnerable members of society and tended to be rejected by their families and communities alike. In Sierra Leone and Liberia, 30% of the girls involved in CAR programmes had babies conceived during the war, which made them even more vulnerable. Meeting the special

needs of these girl mothers, who are still children themselves, is an integral part of the programmes. The CAR centre in Kabala, Sierra Leone, run in cooperation with the Spanish Red Cross, has a nursery in which community members take care of the babies while their mothers are involved in the activities of the programme.

To discourage the stigmatization of CAFF, especially girls and girl mothers, and to promote their reintegration into their communities, CAR staff endeavour to raise awareness of issues such as children's rights and HIV/AIDS and to promote development activities in the areas of agriculture, health and hygiene.

Another example of psychosocial support and reintegration activities is provided by the Algerian Red Crescent Society, which has traditionally run workshops for destitute girls, teaching them sewing, embroidery, cooking and, more recently, computer skills. In 2002, following years of conflict in Algeria, the ICRC offered to cooperate with the National Society in introducing psychosocial support for the victims of violence, who are difficult to reach because of the taboo and shame associated with sexual violence. A network of trained psychologists now holds weekly group discussions within the workshops, providing girls with a safe environment in which they feel free to talk and listen to others. In addition, the training they receive through the workshops provides them with the prospect of employment and regained self-esteem.

VI Strategies and way forward

A. Continuous promotion of the rule of law

International Humanitarian Law makes it clear that the physical and psychological integrity and dignity of women and girls must be protected in all circumstances. Yet despite the existing legal framework, sexual violence against girls remains prevalent in wartime. It is therefore essential to raise knowledge of humanitarian law among all those affected by or involved in armed conflict.

Prohibitions on rape and all other forms of sexual violence must be included in the military codes, training manuals and instructions of all arms bearers. Those who commit acts of sexual violence must be brought to justice.

Many steps have been taken by the international community to deter breaches of humanitarian law and to ensure that civilians receive the protection to which they are entitled. Recent developments in international law and the establishment of enforcement mechanisms such as international criminal tribunals denote progress in the way that crimes against women and girls are being recognized and redressed.

The ICRC, like other humanitarian organizations, is making increased efforts to build a gender perspective into its protection and assistance activities. However, this in no way alters the obligations of the parties to armed conflict, who bear the ultimate responsibility for ensuring that girls are not recruited and that those who are not or are no longer fighting are respected, protected and spared the effects of hostilities. While at the normative level the needs of girls in armed conflict are adequately addressed in international law, the challenge lies in ensuring implementation of and respect for the existing rules.

B. Specific protection measures in the event of displacement

- The location and layout of camps and settlements for people displaced by conflict should be designed to maximize the protection of all those – including girls – whose physical security is most at risk.

- Measures should be taken to monitor security in camps through law enforcement personnel and/or camp committees made up of members of the displaced communities, and to establish appropriate mechanisms for addressing instances of violence and other violations perpetrated against girls.

- The civilian character of camps situated in conflict areas should be maintained.

- Once the immediate emergency phase is over, camps set up by armed forces or groups should be turned over to civilian authorities or organizations and the armed forces or groups involved should play only a limited and well-defined role.

- Special attention should be paid to the health needs of girls, including access to health-care providers and services in the fields of reproductive health and STIs such as HIV/AIDS, as well as appropriate counselling for victims of sexual and other abuses.

- Special efforts should be made to ensure the full and equal participation of girls in educational programmes.

C. Restoring family links

An ICRC study undertaken to evaluate the results of the organization's work to restore family links in the Great Lakes region of East Africa showed that reuniting separated children with their families was the best option for 80% of the children involved. The study helped the ICRC to improve its approach to such work by highlighting and elucidating the concept of "a child's best interest" and ensuring that gender-specific factors were better integrated into the relevant programmes.[35]

It is often assumed that it is in the best interests of children to be reunited with their families. Yet this is not always the case. In weighing a child's best interest, it is important to bear the following points in mind:

- While parents are usually thought to be more loving and caring towards their children than other people would be, blood ties do not always guarantee bonds of affection.
- Given the weight of parental authority, it may be difficult for some children to refuse their parents' request to be reunited with them.
- There are many reasons why children may not to want to be reunited with their parents, the most common one being so as to benefit longer from the education offered to them in camps.
- Parents should not be pressured into accepting a child's return if they are not truly willing to do so.

Special attention must be paid to girls, who are faced with specific problems both as a result of being separated from their families and as a result of being reunited with them.

- As mentionned above, given the discrimination from which girls suffer in terms of access to education in traditional families, those who have been to school in camps are unlikely to be allowed to do so once they return to their native villages. This might increase a girl's reluctance to go home.
- Girls are sometimes forcibly married by or to their caregivers during separation, which may pose an obstacle to reuniting them with their families.

[35] "Bilan interne des programmes de réunions de familles en faveur d'enfants non accompagnés ou séparés dans la région des Grands Lacs, Recherche au Rwanda et en République Démocratique du Congo," ICRC, 2005

- Both former girl combatants and pregnant girls or girl mothers may face stigma and shame when they go back to their families.

In view of the above, reunification programmes must take into account the need to prepare children and their parents for reunification and to monitor the situation of children after they have returned home. It is essential both to assess (before the event) and to evaluate (after the event) the emotional and social consequences of reunification.

D. Specific protection measures for girls in DDR processes

When considering the needs of girls in DDR processes, it is important to remember that in cultures where women and girls are habitually subjected to discrimination and violence, conflict will simply make matters worse. Moreover, account must be taken of the fact that girls may play different roles within armed forces or armed groups. In particular, they may play the roles of:

- simple family members, either wives (forced or not; married according to traditional customs or not) or daughters of male combatants;
- providers of logistical support to male combatants – voluntary or forced;
- sexual partners to male combatants – voluntary or forced;
- combatants themselves – voluntary or forced, discriminated against or not by their male colleagues.[36]

On the basis of these observations, the key international actors involved in DDR processes have drawn up and adopted specific recommendations regarding girls. These recommendations are summarized below.

- Girls must be eligible to enter a DDR process as full persons (not as family members or dependants), whether or not they surrender weapons.

[36] Discrimination is especially likely to occur when female combatants do not have official rank and have to rely on men to confirm their grade and status.

- More particularly, girls in the company of male combatants must not be considered as dependents, even if they did not bear weapons or engage in violence.

- It is essential to ensure that girls have the possibility of being interviewed separately from men so that the roles played by the girls and their wishes for the future can be better understood (for example, abducted girls might not wish to resettle with their partners).

- At the very least, separate facilities must be set up for boys and girls to ensure the safety of girls in transit centres. Girls suffer constant harassment, stigmatization and sexual aggression when living in transit centres, which prevents them from starting a healing process, attending school, going to medical centres, performing their daily tasks and so forth.

- Specific counselling programmes are needed for girls who have suffered trauma (including sexual abuse), become addicted to drugs or alcohol or engaged in prostitution and efforts should be made to inform them of the existence of these programmes.

- Specific support programmes must be set up for girls to reduce the risk of their being isolated or rejected for any of the following reasons:
  - for being a former arms carrier;
  - for having had an "inappropriate" sexual life;
  - for having married in non-traditional ways;
  - for being denied recognition of their participation in the war effort;
  - for having experienced non conventional ways of living (when associated with fighting forces) ; girls may be at risk when forced by the community to conform to expected gender roles when back in a very traditional civilian society

- The payment schemes set up under reintegration programmes should not focus exclusively on former male combatants, since this would have the effect of trapping girls who have been forcibly married but wish to start their lives anew.

- Reintegration programmes should provide assistance directly to the families concerned. (If benefits were paid directly to former male combatants, the funds might be misused instead of being shared with these families.) For the benefit of the whole

community, girls must have fair access to the reinsertion package granted to former combatants.

- Training in economically profitable skills must be undertaken as soon as encampment begins. Girls should not be confined to "gender-related training" in low-paid skills such as soap manufacturing or hairdressing, which simply perpetuates gender discrimination. They should also have access to training in traditional and/or non-traditional skills such as masonry, carpentry and business. A suitable timetable must also be drawn up so that girl mothers have time to take care of their babies.

- Finally, to ensure that the specific needs of women and girls are adequately addressed, women should be systematically involved in defining and planning DDR processes and be represented on the relevant supervisory bodies and on the teams of military and civilian personnel in charge of disarmament areas and demobilization centres.

E. Understanding the situation of girls: the need for disaggregated data

It is essential to establish appropriate monitoring mechanisms if the rights of girls affected by armed conflict – including internally displaced girls – are to be effectively protected. When statistics are disaggregated by sex and age, they can be used to assess the extent to which the lives of women and girls are affected by war and to identify the most vulnerable members of a given population. However, such knowledge will be of little value in itself unless it leads to a more accurate understanding of the socially constructed roles and specific experience of each demographic group both during and after a conflict. More specifically, disaggregated statistics could be used to provide the designers of DDR policies and programmes with essential information on the participation of girls in fighting forces.

VII. Conclusion

Although a number of national and international organizations are working in the field of child protection in Africa, the needs are enormous and concerted efforts must be made to achieve greater complementary if girls and children in general are to be better protected.

The existing legal instruments and policies are adequate to protect girls in the many different situations they face in armed conflict. Yet while the legal provisions are clear, they are often difficult to apply. Today the debate has largely shifted from a critique of the law itself to a discussion of how we can bridge the gap between the law on paper and the law in practice. After all, the law is a tool and like any tool its effectiveness depends on how it is used. If girls continue to suffer in wartime, it is not because there is no law to protect them, but because the law is not adequately enforced.

The issue of women and girls in armed conflict has led the ICRC to a fundamental question: how can we secure respect for the distinction between civilians and combatants in future wars and thus prevent the scope of violence from expanding ever further? The challenge has become all the more pressing today given the security risks that even neutral and impartial humanitarian organizations such as the ICRC face when trying to bring protection and assistance to those in need.

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