

Victim identity and respect for human dignity: a terminological analysis

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Abstract

The use of the term 'victim' as an identity can have different implications, depending on who is using it, claiming it, rejecting it or attributing it to others. Its negative connotations may have an impact on the person or persons concerned. This implies that the term should be used with some care and insight. The article analyses the use and function of the word 'victim' at different levels in the work and actions of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Noting the extent to which the term is or is not used with caution, it points to the evolution in awareness from a certain institutional discourse to the current careful wording displayed in research and publications. The article stresses the importance of aid workers being able to recognize

* The author takes an external point of view in composing this text and writes about aid workers in the third person; the arguments in it are, however, influenced by her personal experiences as an aid worker with the International Committee of the Red Cross. As the sole author of this article she obviously takes full responsibility for its content, which expresses her own views and not those of the organization or her colleagues. She wishes to thank Mr Daniel Glinz, trainer responsible for the Integration Programme at the ICRC's Human Resources Department, and Mme Laurence de Barros-Duchêne, health co-ordinator in charge of psychological support programmes at the ICRC's Assistance Division, for their time and fruitful discussions.

the potential and active identity of a person beyond the institutional label as ‘victim’, as this constitutes an important step in respecting that person’s human dignity.



Understanding different uses of the term ‘victim’

When reading or talking about victims, does one take the time to understand to what the word actually refers, to whom it refers in a particular context, and what message it carries? The term ‘victim’, in the singular or the plural, has different functions depending on who is using it, when and with what intentions; it should not be used lightly. It can be used in various circumstances and contexts, where it can reflect different standpoints and perceptions.

Victimhood

First, in the adjectival sense the word can refer to the fact that a person is or has been the direct or indirect victim of some harm, caused intentionally or due to an unintentional event. A ‘victim’ is therefore commonly understood as someone who is or has been affected, injured or killed as a result of a crime or accident, or who has been cheated or tricked. Certain attributes are often associated with the state of victimhood (or ‘being the victim of something’), resulting from the harm experienced. They include suffering (physical and/or psychological), vulnerability (when certain capabilities are weakened as a result and therefore in turn render the person more likely to be harmed again in the same or other ways), weakness and passivity (as opposed to the active element or person inducing harm, momentarily in a dominant position), distress, discouragement and helplessness. All these attributes suppose, on the one hand, the existence of needs – medical, psychosocial, material, financial or other – as a result of the harm experienced, and on the other hand the total or partial inability of the person harmed to meet them on his or her own. Among other dimensions of the state of victimhood, there is sometimes the feeling of not being responsible for what has happened and therefore being innocent, as opposed to the perpetrator, who is by extension considered responsible and guilty.

Victim identity

Second, the term ‘victim’ can as a noun refer to an identity or status. The identity of ‘victim’ in the sense of a label or status can be used either by people affected by a crime or an accident to describe themselves, or by others when they refer to such people in their discourse.¹ Rather than indicating the actual vulnerable state of a

1 A discourse can be understood as the combination of the various statements and practices that come from a certain position of enunciation, and in turn reflect it. A discourse is more than simply language, as it encompasses the written, oral, imaginary and practical dimensions that together express, assert and

person or group and their needs, the term 'victim' when used in this way relates to a much more abstract and contestable dimension, involving self-perception (as a victim or not), identity (understood as the different ways in which one relates to oneself and presents oneself to others), and feelings (e.g. of self-worth, self-respect, confidence and dignity, or on the contrary demoralization, depression, hurt and loss of confidence). Finally, it can also involve interests: the desire to gain social recognition, to seek justice, to benefit from reparations, to influence public opinion, to highlight the guilt of perpetrators, etc. It can also motivate either the harmed person to claim victim status or another person to attribute this status to others. Uses or rejections of the term 'victim' as an identity can be illustrated by the following cases, to mention only a few. There is for instance the girl who, seriously injured by a landmine in Cambodia like many others, has become an anti-landmine campaigner, vindicating her rights as a 'victim' and demanding forms of justice through her presence and slogans in front of the United Nations in Geneva. Or the teacher from a village in Darfur who lost several members of his family in the conflict there, and now comes to work every day at one of the international aid organizations. He keeps a low profile, never giving his colleagues any idea of the suffering he has gone through, but instead appearing content enough to be considered as an active colleague rather than as a 'victim of the conflict' – the category of people he himself is helping. Or lastly there is the government that will seek to reshape its world image as a 'victim' after being the target of terrorist attacks, whereas another state that has experienced similar deadly events will integrate the sombre episode in its history but will not seek to include the aspect of victimhood in a new national identity.

The attributes linked to the term 'victim' when it refers to a state of vulnerability may remain present when it is claimed or attributed as a status, though sometimes not so evidently. The negative connotation of those attributes may, however, affect the people they are meant to describe, by devaluing them. This impact is not always taken into consideration. On the contrary, the term 'victims' is often used and understood in a straightforward way as referring to the state of victimhood, when in fact its impact is more that of labelling a group of individuals. The enunciator might not always be aware of the underlying devaluing connotations mentioned above and their effect on the people concerned.

defend the interests, sets of values and ideas, frames of reality, that are shaped by the position of enunciation (or standpoint). Discourses compete in social reality. Some are dominant while others are marginal, but according to Michel Foucault, all discourses involve and produce power. (See e.g. Jenny Edkins, *Poststructuralism and International Relations: Bringing the Political Back In*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, London, 1999, p. 59. A discourse produces subjects as well as a 'legitimation of power'.) In contrast to languages, which are 'groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations), [...] [discourses are] practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak.' (Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, transl. A.M. Sheridan Smith, Routledge, London, 1989, p. 49, quoted in Edkins, *ibid.*, p. 47.) Some of the work of the sociologist Michel Foucault has concentrated on understanding what the conditions of existence of dominant discourses are. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, transl. Alan Sheridan Smith, Penguin, Harmondsworth, UK, 1991; and *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, transl. Richard Howard, Routledge, London, 1989.

Exclusion of other identities

The ‘victim’ identity is one of several identities by which subjects can define themselves. When someone refers to a person as a victim in their discourse, they are potentially excluding other identities that may better define that person, at least in his or her own eyes. Deliberately or not, the enunciator may run the risk of excluding the other identities the individual persons possess that would reflect other attributes or states they define themselves by, for example their nationality, their profession, their cultural or religious beliefs, their motivations, their role or position in their family. Arguably, it is not a harmless or insignificant event to bring any particular identity of a person or group to the fore at the expense of others. As a poststructuralist theorist² puts it, ‘... naming is not just the pure nominalistic game of attributing an empty name to a preconstituted subject. It is the discursive construction of the subject itself. [...] The essentially performative character of naming is the precondition for all hegemony and politics.’³ Naming oneself, another individual, or a group ‘a victim’ can therefore become a performative act that has the power to validate, and therefore ‘produce’ a subject with this particular identity and the attributes that go with it (vulnerable, passive, helpless etc.). Such a discourse may be sending powerful messages and reflecting particular motivations meant to achieve certain goals, but the latter are not always easy to ‘decode’.

Victims in the social space

The use of the word ‘victim’ in a particular context, or by contrast its deliberate absence, are worth noting and reflecting upon in order to better understand some of the issues and interests at stake. In the first case, for example, consider the president of a country telling the world: ‘We’re among the victims. I’m a victim. [Our] state [...] is a victim. We are victims of this war ...’⁴ One is prompted to ask

2 Poststructuralist theories about the subject provide a useful perspective on identity formation. Each in turn, theorists like Saussure, Freud and Lacan participated in what is sometimes called ‘decentering the subject’, a move aimed at challenging the Enlightenment’s Cartesian subject – conscious, rational – by questioning its sense of rationality and completeness. For Lacan, the subject is neither full nor the master creator of its identity; rather, it is always incomplete and subject to the meanings, structures and power relations existing within social reality. Social reality is understood as a symbolic realm that already exists when an individual enters it at birth. The discourses making social reality form the baby individual into a subject: giving it an identity (starting with a name), a gender, and a language structure carrying meanings and values. The subject is thus created through its confrontation with social reality. In turn, it identifies itself as ‘itself’ through this passage (Lacan’s mirror stage), following the assertion by the external Other (parents, authority) that the reflected creature it gazes at (in a mirror or in external discourses) is none other but itself, a full, complete subject. Both the interpellation by the Other, and its validation of the subject’s identification with itself are done through systems of signs, such as language. See namely Slavoy Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, London/New York, 1989, pp. 100–102 and 113, and Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, transl. Alan Sheridan, Routledge, London, 1980.

3 Ernesto Laclau, preface in Žižek, above note 2, p. xiv.

4 President Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan, quoted in Syed Irfan Raza, ‘Indian misstep to hit war on terror, US told: US military chief meets Zardari, Gen Kayani’, *Dawn Internet Edition*, 4 December 2008, available at: <http://www.dawn.com/2008/12/04/top1.htm> (visited 18 March 2009).

what message he is sending, why the recognition of his country as a victim is so crucial, and in what ways this desire for a particular identity or status reflects a national interest. When the victim concept is used in political discourse, it may have a strong impact because of its emotive content.⁵ Moreover, people and groups who describe themselves as victims do not always share the same reasons for this identification or interests in it (e.g. survivors and perpetrators, for in some circumstances the latter can also perceive themselves as, and actually be, victims). One should also ask what underlying message is conveyed by a discourse that claims that ‘my [or our] sufferings were different, greater than those of others, and cannot be compared with them’. A critical understanding of this type of discourse could help to identify the stakes and values dominant in a particular social space.⁶

In contrast, to give examples of the second case, news articles announce daily how ‘a suicide bomber has killed at least eight people ... seven civilians who happened to be passing by at the time were killed ... at least 49 people were injured ... two drivers were killed in a grenade and gun attack ... killing at least 15 people, injuring dozens more ... bodies strewn across the ground ... explosives killing a woman, a doctor and his wife ... the blasts took place ... the explosions happened ... a female suicide bomber detonated her explosives ... security forces stormed the house dragging out some 250 settlers who barricaded themselves inside and hurled rocks, eggs and chemicals at their evictors ... 20 people on both sides were hurt ... TV images showed two young girls punching and hitting soldiers.’⁷ In this journalistic discourse, people who are killed or injured are not described as victims. Instead, the stories are told as though captured through the objective eye of a telephoto lens and describe the scene coldly, in an insensitive and unemotional way. The lens saw ‘individuals’ and ‘bodies’, where others such as the people involved and their relatives would probably see ‘victims’. It all depends on the point of view and the aim of the discourse. The practice of avoiding the term

5 See e.g. ‘La victoire des victimes’, *Le Temps*, No. 3261, 1 December 2008, p. 1; and Denis Masméjan, ‘Pédophiles: Justice sans pardon’, *Le Temps*, 1 December 2008, p. 2, on the Swiss people’s vote in favour of the non-prescription of punishment for paedophiles: ‘... le scrutin [...] met en relief la difficulté de combattre une revendication qui nourrit sa légitimité en prenant, directement ou indirectement, le parti des victimes. Celui-ci est politiquement une valeur sûre.’

6 See e.g. Amitav Ghosh, ‘India’s 9/11? Not exactly’, *The New York Times Online*, Op. Ed., 2 December 2008, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/03/opinion/> (visited 4 December 2008). Ghosh writes: ‘Since the terrorist assaults began in Mumbai last week, the metaphor of the World Trade Center attacks has been repeatedly invoked. From New Delhi to New York, pundits and TV commentators have insisted that “this is India’s 9/11” and should be treated as such. [...] But [...] [n]ot only were the casualties far greater on September 11, 2001, but the shock of the attack was also greatly magnified by having no real precedent in America’s history. India’s experience of terrorist attacks, on the other hand, far predates 2001...’

7 Quotes taken from three articles: ‘Deadly bombings strike Iraqi city’, *BBC News Online*, 4 December 2008, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7764576.stm (visited 18 March 2009); ‘Car bomb kills several in Pakistan’, *Al Jazeera News Online* (Al Jazeera.Net), 1 December 2008, available at: <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/asia/2008/12/200812164740256637.html> (visited 18 March 2009); ‘Israel completes forcible evacuation of disputed Hebron house’, *Haaretz News Online*, available at: <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/1043612.html> (visited 1 December 2008).

‘victim’ is arguably intended to safeguard the standards and values that define journalism, among them that of projecting an ‘objective’ and ‘neutral’ point of view, which should allow the reader or viewer to interpret the story independently. The above examples help to show that use of the term ‘victim’ should not be considered harmless and insignificant.

In recent years, academic circles have highlighted a rapidly increasing use of the term ‘victim’ in the social space and have called for a better co-ordinated study and greater understanding of this rhetorical and social phenomenon. Scholars and international specialists met at a conference in Geneva in spring 2006 to analyse the source, development and impact of the growing attention given to categories of ‘victims’ today, as well as the stakes involved.⁸ Recent research and literature on this topic have shed light on the unfixed nature of the signifier ‘victim’, discussing its different uses as an identity or status (which is, at different times and for different reasons, sought, claimed, begging for recognition, attributed or denied).⁹ This perspective promotes an informed but critical, and therefore engaged but cautious, reading of discourses about victims. As such, it helps to understand the dynamics of social relations and identify some of the stakes involved, as well as the groups or individuals who either defend and claim the victim identity for themselves, reject it, or attribute it to others. More broadly, it encourages a critical reading and understanding of social, political and other discourses competing in social reality, which may seek to impose their meanings as ‘true’ meanings and then influence subjects into adopting their ‘truth’.

8 Irène Herrmann, ‘La revanche des victimes’, *Revue Suisse d’Histoire (RSH)*, Vol. 57, No. 1, 2007, Société suisse d’histoire, p. 5. Underlying this meeting was the hypothesis that the plights of the individuals and groups referred to in victim-discourses could potentially be levelled and thus minimized, because of the more and more common use of the word in many different discourses (pp. 5, 9–10). This hypothesis is certainly interesting when it is read in parallel to the arguments presented within the same debate about the ‘forgotten victims’, or how victims were visibly ‘forgotten’ in the recording of history until the late twentieth century. The tendency to read history as having forgotten about victims, in the sense of having neglected them as a social group, occulting them before finally recognizing them, is arguably based on the belief that ‘victims’ as a collective identity has always existed, but was ignored for some specific reasons. It is a different matter to argue that, because individuals or groups were not recognized as ‘victims’ in the discourses of the time, including in their own, they did not ‘exist’ as such (as subject-victims) in discursive reality and therefore in the social frame. The argument about the ‘forgotten victims’ seems to say that the plights of the individuals were being neglected, as reflected by the fact that their recognition as victims did not exist. The twin arguments thus appear to take the following shape: on the one hand, the plight of individuals was forgotten because they were not identified as ‘victims’ until now; while on the other hand, their plight now risks becoming minimized and forgotten because today too many people are identified as ‘victims’!

9 For this article a number of pieces of work were reviewed at the Library and Research Service of the ICRC in Geneva and the library of the University of London School of Oriental and African Studies (as an independent visiting researcher), as well as on the Internet. Without being exhaustive, the review provided a good basis to detect the direction(s) of current research about victims. For an overview, see all the essays in *RSH*, above note 8); Jean-Michel Chaumont, *La Concurrence des Victimes*, Editions La Découverte, Paris, 1997; Denis Salas (ed), *Victimes de Guerre en quête de Justice: Faire entendre leur voix et les pérenniser dans l’Histoire*, Editions L’Harmattan, Sciences Criminelles, Paris, 2004.

‘Victims’ in the humanitarian discourse of the ICRC

Victims are omnipresent in the humanitarian discourse. This is hardly surprising since at face value the presence of the former justifies the existence of the latter. ‘Everything that humanitarian organizations such as the Red Cross do must be undertaken with the sole aim of helping the victims – and potential victims – of armed conflicts and other situations of violence, and of respecting their rights.’¹⁰ Looking at the use of the term ‘victim’ at different levels in the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) – in the legal framework of international humanitarian law, official texts defining and presenting the institution, the humanitarian principles, the activities of the ICRC in the field, the role of aid workers (especially delegates), communication, and finally internal publications and research – it is interesting to note how each level proves to be more or less aware of the care required when using the term. For example, official documents constituting the identity of the organization appear to be using the word ‘victim’ on the assumption that it is a simple and straightforward term, the use of which does not require particular precaution or at least a certain awareness of its broader implications. By contrast, recent publications show a clear disposition to take care when using the word, and an awareness of its possible impact in devaluing the people concerned.

Analysis of different dimensions

There are various reasons why it is important that ICRC representatives should be aware of the potential implications when using the term ‘victim’. One is that they would have a greater capacity to distinguish between the victim identity promoted, somewhat simplistically, at certain levels of the institutional discourse and other identities a person might in fact be projecting. Thanks to this discernment the aid worker could see beyond the ‘victim’ label and recognize other identities projected by a person, such as ‘teacher’, ‘community leader’ or ‘parent’. To make this act of recognition is particularly valuable because it forms an important part of the humanitarian duty to respect a person’s human dignity. As human dignity is related to the sense of identity that is part of us as human beings, to respect and protect someone’s dignity implies identifying that person in the way they define themselves, be it as a victim – or not. Recognition of a person by the identity they personally claim, and not mistakenly or deliberately by another identity attributed to them (especially if that identity has some negative and devaluing connotations), is an important expression of respect for their dignity.

The notion of ‘victim’ has been discussed from three different perspectives: international law, criminal law, and the humanitarian discourse.¹¹ In

10 Cornelio Sommaruga, in Daniel Thürer, ‘Dunant’s pyramid: Thoughts on the “humanitarian space”’, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 89, No. 865, March 2007, pp. 47–61 and 57.

11 See ‘Editorial’, *International Review of the Red Cross*, No. 851, September 2003, pp. 465–466.

outlining the definition of the term in the latter, the editor usefully considers three important dimensions: the legal structure, in this case the Conventions and Protocols that constitute international humanitarian law; the action, encompassing the various activities that make up humanitarian assistance (and protection); and the guiding narrative, provided by a set of humanitarian principles. In the humanitarian field, victims can accordingly ‘be understood as [...] all persons whom humanitarian law seeks to protect in the event of international or non-international armed conflict. It is well known that armed conflicts often affect – directly or indirectly – the entire population of the country or countries at war, and that any person may be harmed physically or mentally, be deprived of their fundamental rights, suffer emotional distress or lose their property. Humanitarian assistance for all victims of war, within this meaning of the term, is intended to attenuate as far as possible the harmful effects of conflicts. [...] [and] must be given to the victims impartially and without discrimination. At the end of hostilities, humanitarian action should conform to the same principles [i.e. the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent.]’¹² The term ‘victim’ is used in a particular way in each of these three dimensions, and also at the levels of institutional presentation – the role of the delegate, communication, internal publications and research.

In relation to the legal structure, the term ‘victim of armed conflict’ refers to a person who meets the criteria defined in the relevant legal framework, i.e. international humanitarian law.¹³ This means that many people will be considered to belong to the ‘victim’ category, with little consideration for other attributes that could be central to their perception of themselves. The link between the use of the term ‘victim’ and the development of legal frameworks that provide it with a definition (many of which are much debated), and give individuals and groups an interest in claiming it, is a key point in the current academic discussion surrounding the victim concept.¹⁴ One argument holds that subjects as victims are

12 *Ibid.*, p. 465. The International Committee of the Red Cross, like the other components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement – the National Societies and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies – must ensure that its work conforms at all times to the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, namely humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality.

13 Criteria laid down in the Geneva Conventions as to who, in case of need, can or should benefit from protection and assistance from the ICRC, include the wounded, sick, shipwrecked, prisoners of war whether they are members of the armed forces or other militias – medical personnel, chaplains and in general all civilians and other persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of the armed forces who have laid down their arms and those placed *hors de combat* by sickness, wounds, detention, or any other cause.

14 Several pieces of work consider how the position of the victim concept has changed in the discourse of international law and show how it has gained greater space, importance and centrality over the last few years, parallel to developments in those bodies of law. See e.g. Annie Deperchin, ‘Victimes du premier conflit mondial et justice’, in Salas, above note 9, p. 29. Deperchin writes: ‘La Grande Guerre constitue un précédent historique dans la mesure où elle voit apparaître l’idée de responsabilités liées à la guerre et cela suppose qu’émerge le concept même de victime de guerre. [...] Cependant, les victimes civiles n’étaient pas assez nombreuses et n’avaient pas suffisamment conscience de l’être pour constituer le vecteur des progrès de la justice de guerre qu’elles deviendront par la suite.’ Deperchin therefore argues that the self-perception of civilians as victims was crucial in constituting their discourse, whose power helped shape the legal discourse. Some research, by contrast, argues that it is the discourse of justice and

‘produced’ by being recognized as such, through evolutions of legal discourse. Arguably, the same process occurred in international humanitarian law: the history of the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols¹⁵ pertains to how different categories of people were officially recognized as victims over time.¹⁶ This way, only the people who match the appropriate legal criteria and definition at a certain point in time can officially benefit from the ICRC’s protection and assistance, and by extension are the ones generally referred to as victims of armed conflict. This group of people is sometimes understood, as cited above, as ‘the entire population of the country or countries at war’. It is crucial, however, to consider that some of the people affected by war might actually not define themselves as victims,¹⁷ whereas certain people not meeting those criteria (e.g. perpetrators of crimes) might personally define themselves as victims (e.g. of central authority, of the ‘system’) and claim some form of recognition of that identity.¹⁸ Instead, the organization has embraced the all-encompassing term ‘victims’ to refer to a group of people that is certainly not homogeneous in terms of their perceptions of themselves.

its legal counterpart that shapes and validates the identity of victim. In Salas, above note 9, it is pointed out that: ‘C’est ainsi seulement au terme de ce travail de justice, qui débute avec l’enquête, et s’achève à l’heure du verdict, qu’elles seront reconnues pour telles et définitivement investies de leur statut de victimes’, Bénédicte Chesnelong, ‘Victimes et justice des crimes de guerre et contre l’humanité’, in Salas, above note 9, p. 31; ‘C’est avec la guerre en Bosnie que le viol en temps de guerre a été reconnu comme “acte de guerre”, et qualifié de crime, “crime contre l’humanité” par le Tribunal Pénal International pour l’ex-Yougoslavie (suivi en cela par le Tribunal Pénal International pour le Rwanda). C’est donc la première fois que les femmes qui l’ont subi se voient reconnaître comme des victimes’, Gisèle Donnard, ‘Les victimes de viol ‘arme de guerre’: Crime contre l’humanité’, in Salas, above note 9, p. 111; ‘Si le mot “victime” avait un sens, ce terme s’appliquerait à juste titre aux Cambodgiens. Il faudrait avoir subi les pertes des êtres chers, dans des conditions injustes, atroces et tragiques qui vous marquent à vie, pour pouvoir comprendre vraiment la douleur qui vous ronge et qui vous brûle. Chaque être, même un animal, a un besoin inné de justice. [...] Nous les victimes insistons et demandons la création d’un tribunal pénal international ...’, Billon Ung Boun Hor, ‘Les victimes du génocide des Khmers Rouges: Un cri contre l’oubli et pour la justice’, in Salas, above note 9, p. 164.

- 15 The original Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field, of 22 August 1864, followed by the four Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949.
- 16 See Annette Becker, ‘Les victimes entre oubli et mémoire’, in *RSH*, above note 8. As Becker writes: ‘... toute victime est bonne à secourir [...] du moment qu’elle rentre dans les mesures conventionnelles. Or, les civiles, nouvelles victimes à partir de 1914, n’avaient pu être placés sous la juridiction conventionnelle comme les prisonniers militaires et les blessés’ (p. 18).
- 17 For comments on this point, see e.g. Joanne Dover, ‘The impact of the Northern Ireland “trouble” on victims in Britain’, in *Proceedings of the Study Days held in October 2005: Promotion of Resources for Victims of Terrorist Acts and Their Families*, Eureka.org, European Resources Terrorism, Belgium Red Cross, European Union, 2005, available at http://www.eureka.org/userfiles/files/texteng/Joanne_DOVER_les_actes_ENG.pdf (visited 15 April 2009). Based on her work and research with people who experienced violence from acts of terrorism, the author observes that, ‘It is important also to remember the resilience of human beings. We have the ability to cope with the most demanding and horrendous circumstances, something I see in my work every day. People come through these experiences and come out the other side with a good quality of life, having integrated the experiences and losses into a new existence’ (p. 53).
- 18 For more on this subject, see e.g. Daniel Muñoz-Rojas and Jean-Jacques Frésard, *The Roots of Behaviour in War: Understanding and Preventing IHL Violations*, ICRC, Geneva, October 2004, pp. 8, 9, 11; Jacques Sémelin, ‘Quand les bourreaux se présentent comme des victimes’ and Sophie Wahlich, ‘La confusion des victimes, des héros et des bourreaux: Un symptôme d’amoralité?’, both in *RSH*, above note 8.

In texts defining the ICRC, the term ‘victims’ (or more specifically victims of armed conflict or war victims) is therefore relatively broad in that it can include the entire population of a war-torn country, but it is also restrictive in that it can seem to apply the identity of ‘victim’ invariably to a large group of people. The ICRC’s Mission Statement reads: ‘The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance.’¹⁹ This is the discourse that most people will be familiar with and will come across when they hear about the ICRC or even start working as a delegate in the field. Such a use of the term that does not suppose any ambiguity or implications is perhaps fundamental to the ICRC’s institutional presentation. However, the absence of discussion at this level as to these implications fortunately stands in contrast to more careful uses of the term ‘victim’, and its link with the concept of ‘human dignity’, in other areas of the organization.

As for humanitarian action, the objective of each of the ICRC’s protection and assistance activities is to respond to the needs of people or communities affected by conflict or other situations of violence, as defined in international humanitarian law. That those people have needs is often taken for granted, since they have already been ‘labelled’ with the term ‘victims of armed conflict’ in the institutional language, underscoring their vulnerability. However, the nature and extent of their needs have to be determined, and the individuals or community concerned are in theory best placed to know what they are. It is up to the aid workers representing the organization to respond to those needs accordingly without any further detrimental effects. In doing so, they may decide to target one group in particular of the people understood to be ‘victims of armed conflict’ if an impartial assessment of their needs indicates that some are more vulnerable than others. Medical care, water supplies and sanitation, food, economic aid or material forms of assistance are services that aim to help in a concrete and direct way the individuals who suffer most. The protective measures adopted, the time and attention devoted to vulnerable persons whose rights are threatened or violated, who are either in detention, in danger in their homes or alone and unable to fend for themselves, also aim to transcend the simplistic consideration of the group’s collective status as unquestioned victims by responding to and alleviating individual and family suffering. Thus at the level of humanitarian action, the term ‘victim’ refers to the entire population or group that is considered to be a legal beneficiary thereof, but aid workers have some margin of manoeuvre, in accordance with the principle of impartiality, to ‘bypass’ the institutional label

19 ‘The ICRC’s Mission Statement’, 19 June 2008, available at <http://icrc.org/web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/icrc-mission-190608?opendocument> (visited 5 December 2008).

and orientate relief work among all the ‘victims’ towards those with the most urgent needs.²⁰

The humanitarian principles²¹ are the guiding spirit of the ICRC’s humanitarian action. At this level the notion of ‘victims’ is directly related to the principle of humanity²² and the notion of human dignity. As a humanitarian practitioner of the Red Cross Movement wrote, ‘Meeting critical human needs and restoring people’s dignity are core principles for all humanitarian action.’²³ If on the one hand the humanitarian mission of the ICRC is to ‘protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict’,²⁴ on the other hand ‘Humanity is the exclusive goal of the Red Cross and defines its sphere of competence. Indeed, it constitutes the basis for its values and *raison d’être*.’²⁵ The act which expresses the attitude of humanity is that of giving help without discrimination to those who are suffering. It is noteworthy that the word ‘victim’ does not appear in any definitions of the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, nor does it seem to have been used at all in the wording of the Geneva Conventions. The overarching term appears to have been used much more systematically in the ICRC’s institutional definitions, such as its Mission Statement (as seen above), as well as in its Statutes.²⁶

Incidentally, regarding the relationship between the victim concept and the principle of humanity, it is very interesting to observe that those who have discussed this principle and its sister notion of ‘dignity’, such as Jean Pictet, an eminent scholar and authority on international humanitarian law, and former ICRC Presidents Max Huber and Cornelio Sommaruga, have highlighted the empathy motivating this attitude – an empathy felt not for the subject as victim, but more deeply for the human being behind all subjective (or externally

20 The principle of impartiality of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement reads: ‘It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.’ See ‘The Fundamental Principles: Extract from the XXVIth International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent’, 1 January 1995, available at <http://www.icrc.org/web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/57jmf?opendocument> (visited 27 April 2009).

21 See above note 12.

22 The principle of humanity states that: ‘The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, co-operation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.’ See ‘The Fundamental Principles’, above note 20.

23 Peter Walker, ‘Victims of natural disasters and the right to humanitarian assistance: A practitioner’s view’, *International Review of the Red Cross*, No. 325, December 1998, p. 615.

24 ‘The ICRC’s Mission Statement’, above note 19.

25 Thürer, above note 10, p. 57.

26 Art. 4(d): ‘The role of the ICRC shall be in particular [...] to endeavour at all times [...] to ensure the protection of and assistance to military and civilian victims of such events and of their direct results.’ Available at [http://icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/statutes-movement-220506/\\$File/Statutes-EN-A5.pdf](http://icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/statutes-movement-220506/$File/Statutes-EN-A5.pdf) (visited 11 March 2009).

attributed) identities.²⁷ Calling to mind the parable of the Good Samaritan, Thürer asks: ‘Is there a model for the idea of humanity (embodied in the Red Cross and elsewhere) – that is, the idea of helping those who suffer, whoever they may be? [...] What is interesting is that the person who helped [i.e. the Good Samaritan] was an outsider and that the identity of the victim is not a matter for discussion; as [Max] Huber says, it is the human being as such who is being helped, the human being as he is and not because he is like this or like that.’ Why? ‘Because, as Huber says, in an emergency “the duty is to act, not to talk”.’²⁸ Therefore the humanitarian duty, understood as the attitude of humanity, would be to look, see, reach out beyond all attributes of a person, visible or invisible, and touch the human core of the individual in distress. In other words, the humanitarian gesture is motivated by the human being in distress, whether or not that person is considered or considers himself or herself as a ‘victim’. The action thus transcends the discourse, because it stretches beyond rhetorical structures.

Emphasis on human dignity

The notion of human dignity is central to the discourse of the ICRC and what it wants for the victims of conflicts – to protect their dignity.²⁹ There are various facets to human dignity. They include a sense of self-worth involving self-perception and arguably a recognition of worth and a sense of belonging bestowed by others, be it the family or the wider community. In this regard, human dignity relates partly to one’s own sense of identity and worth.³⁰ The act of recognizing the identity projected by a person is thus an act of respect for that person’s dignity and should therefore, in theory, be part of any humanitarian gesture. The failure to do so (in the sense both of recognition denied and of misrecognition as

27 See Thürer, above note 10, pp. 56–57: ‘Max Huber described humanity as the “unconditional recognition of the value of whatever has a human face, in particular where people are helpless, weak, sick, imprisoned, endangered, deprived of their rights and impoverished”.’

28 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

29 See Marion Harroff-Tavel, ‘Do wars ever end? The work of the International Committee of the Red Cross when the guns fall silent’, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 85, No. 851, September 2003, pp. 471ff. The author explains this ambition clearly and defines in her own words the notion of dignity: ‘[T]he ICRC wants the victims of armed conflicts to feel that their dignity is respected. The essence of dignity is a universal notion that is rooted in cultures, religions, value systems, ideologies and education. Its content varies from one context to another. Everywhere in the world, however, certain attitudes are basic to meaningful dignity: respect for life and for every person’s physical and spiritual integrity; protection against arbitrary acts, abuse of power and discrimination; recognition of others as people able to find solutions; support for people who have been so humiliated that they have lost their self-esteem and no longer trust in their own capacities. The ICRC’s ultimate goal is to help people or communities affected by armed violence to live in conditions that they consider respectful of their dignity. To that end, their fundamental rights must be respected, the needs they deem essential, in their cultural context, to a dignified life must be met, and they must play an active part in the implementation of lasting solutions to their humanitarian problems as identified by them.’ *Ibid.*, pp. 471–472.

30 Another definition of human dignity is found in Thürer, above note 10, p. 57: ‘... The general principle of respect for human dignity [...], the very *raison d’être* of international humanitarian law and human rights law, [...] is intended to shield human beings from outrages upon their personal dignity, whether such outrages are carried out by unlawfully attacking the body or by humiliating and debasing the honour, the self-respect or the mental well being of a person.’

something one is not) can have a negative impact on the person concerned.³¹ The act and its impact are arguably the same whether it is a recognition of oneself (one's own identity and humanity), thereby preserving one's sense of dignity, or of the identity and the humanity of someone else, thereby giving that person respect and valuing their sense of dignity.

The idea that humanitarian action is centred not only on improving a person's living conditions, but also on restoring a person's dignity, informs all ICRC activities. It is expressed clearly in key documents and guidelines.³² First, for example, it is stated that activities on behalf of prisoners should '[create] the necessary conditions for safeguarding or restoring personal dignity: [...] restoring personal dignity does not depend merely on improving material conditions or trying to eradicate torture. It is in this sense that ICRC visits to prisoners have an extremely important "side-effect", and can contribute in various ways to alleviating the consequences of stress.'³³ Second, a guideline for the services working to re-establish family links explains that the essence of those activities is to: '[alleviate] the suffering of people who have no news of their families. Relationships with our families are an essential element of our human identities. [...] Respect for the unity of the family is an integral part of a broader respect for human dignity.'³⁴

Restoring and respecting a person's dignity is therefore mainly achieved through the combination of the various activities of protection and assistance.³⁵ However, this ambition should also be encouraged in different ways, through

31 For studies that discuss the importance of the inter-social act of recognition of a person's identity and its perception as an act acknowledging and respecting her humanity, see for example: Rona M. Fields, 'Impunity versus healing', *Ko'aga Rone'eta*, se.iii, v. 3, 1996, paper presented at the International Conference on 'Impunity and its Effects on Democratic Processes', Santiago de Chile, 14 December 1996, available at: <http://www.derechos.org/koaga/xi/2/fields.html> (visited 14 November 2008). From a psychological point of view, the author explains that: 'The vindication and validation requisite to social and psychological wholeness, can only be provided through public acknowledgment. When the victim's suffering continues exacerbation by his/her pariah status vis à vis the social political system, torture is extended in perpetuity', p. 5. See also Jean-Michel Chaumont, *La Concurrence des Victimes*, above note 9, pp. 36–37. An important point Chaumont touches on is that the gaze of the Other (external discourses, the public, the authority) in recognizing Jews who survived the Nazi concentration camps as 'victims', as opposed to other identities such as 'survivors', is the necessary condition for many of them to feel that they exist in social reality. To be denied recognition as a victim by the Other is described by those people as a second death.

32 See for example: ICRC, 'Assistance: General Introduction', available at http://www.icrc.org/web/eng/site-teeng0.nsf/html/assistance_general_intro (visited 24 April 2009).

33 Pascal Daudin and Hernan Reyes, 'ICRC action on behalf of prisoners', in *International Responses to Traumatic Stress*, Yael Danieli, Nigel Rodley and Lars Weisaeth (eds), Baywood Publishers, United Nations, 1996, p. 16. This section was handed over to delegates during their integration course (2006).

34 'Report on the Restoring Family Links Strategy (and Implementation Plan) for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (2008–2018)', CD/07/4.1, prepared by the ICRC Central Tracing Agency, Geneva, October 2007, following the Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, Geneva, 23–24 November 2007, p. 4.

35 See David P. Forsythe, 'The ICRC: A unique humanitarian protagonist', in *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 89, No. 865, March 2007, pp. 63–96, for a discussion of the debate whether '... the ICRC, with its limited mandate, and tied as it is to states and the state system of international relations, can really do very much to protect human dignity' (p. 64).

the act of recognizing a person's identity. So far, there are visible attempts to encourage people who are external to the conflict (those in the field such as ICRC representatives, or the general public) to feel less remote from people who suffer in conflicts. At certain levels within the organization there appear to be efforts to draw attention to individual sufferings, individual plights and stories – as opposed to generalized collective suffering, a viewpoint that inevitably creates a distance between the people observing (in the field or from their living-rooms) and the people affected.

Encouraging sensitivity towards individual plight

On the one hand, ICRC representatives in the field are today trained by the organization – through role-playing exercises, discussions and lectures on humanitarian ethics and cultural sensitivity – to try their best to understand what a person who is in any way affected by conflict might feel, and conversely how that person perceives the humanitarian worker. In its human resources policy the ICRC lays down specific guidelines and codes of conduct for all its staff, among them the requirement that: 'ICRC staff work constantly to promote respect for human beings and their dignity, in all their activities, at all times and in all circumstances. They abstain from any discrimination based on origin, race, ethnic group, sex, birth, wealth, religion or belief, political or other opinion, or any other consideration related to the individual.'³⁶ The process of training, awareness-building and encouraging sensitivity towards each individual's plight and story is fundamental to creating and preserving a respectful relationship with someone who is suffering or has suffered in the past. It is also valuable in order to understand how to 'promote respect for human beings' and what exactly is meant by their 'dignity', for these are not the simplest concepts to put into words, let alone into action. What is expected of ICRC staff can be summarized by a statement from guidelines laid down for visits to places of detention: 'Thanks to their training and especially the experience accumulated in a variety of geographical, cultural and political environments, ICRC representatives learn not to merely rely on outward appearances, but rather to interpret any signs and hints, and to decode gestures, body language, and speech. The expression of suffering takes on very different forms, and this aspect must not be neglected or overlooked.'³⁷

On the other hand, the ICRC also addresses the general public through press conferences and public statements in a way that highlights the unique character of each individual person in distress.³⁸ In the words of Pierre Krähenbühl,

36 'Working for the ICRC: Values and principles', 5 September 2003, available at: <http://icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/html/5R4JLY> (visited 5 December 2008).

37 'Applying culturally appropriate solutions', above note 33, p. 10.

38 See e.g. ICRC Iraq Delegation 'Women in war: The International Committee of the Red Cross in Iraq' (newsletter), March 2009, available at [http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/iraq-women-newsletter-050309/\\$File/iraq-women-in-war-eng.pdf](http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/iraq-women-newsletter-050309/$File/iraq-women-in-war-eng.pdf) (visited 15 April 2009). 'The voices of women affected by the war in Iraq, such as those we have collected here, need to be better heard.' (p. 1)

Director of Operations: ‘Beyond the statistics, there are the individual destinies and tragedies. Every injured person we speak about after a suicide attack or an aerial bombardment has a name, a family, a history.’³⁹ Giving a voice, space and particular attention to suffering individuals is undoubtedly a sign of respect for them. Yet there is another step towards respecting a person’s sense of dignity that the humanitarian discourse can take. The ICRC has to date taken this step in some research papers and publications. Apart from recognizing individuals on account of their suffering, it aims to recognize individuals on account of their potentialities and therefore avoids referring to them as ‘victims’ without also carefully qualifying this term.

In one of her articles published in a previous issue of the *Review*, Marion Harroff-Tavel provides such a focus when she briefly examines aspects of the term ‘victims’ as used in the conduct of humanitarian action in post-conflict contexts.⁴⁰ The observations she makes are intended to explain the work of the ICRC in such situations to outsiders, but insiders can also always benefit from clarifications and guidelines. Whereas the content of the text is inspired by an official guideline, the form is obviously her input.⁴¹ She recommends remaining aware of the nuance between subjects who consider themselves as victims, and subjects whom the humanitarian discourse identifies as such. The author draws attention to the possible misuse of the term ‘victims’ without having a clear idea who is using it to refer to whom and why, and to the importance of recognizing other identities that an attributed victim identity may wrongly overshadow. It is worth quoting her at length:

‘The use of the word “victim”, for lack of a better term, must not obscure the fact that during periods of transition the people who were affected by the armed conflict or internal strife have many other identities. They may, for instance, be members of a local association or religious community that comes to the aid of the destitute. Many of them have resources and capacities. They should not be perceived as mere victims. Indeed, they may reject that position in spite of their dire circumstances and not, for example, register as displaced persons, thus depriving themselves of the aid provided to that category of people. Some of them develop their own ways of improving their plight, having come up with survival mechanisms during the combat phase. Sometimes called “survivors”, these people are also agents of change.

This is especially true of women, who often did not take part in the fighting and whose experience of the war is therefore different from that of the men. They are the driving force behind the improved psychological health of those around them. By recreating identity-based groups (women’s associations, local non-governmental associations) and thereby meeting the need

39 ‘Civilians increasingly at risk in Afghanistan’, press briefing, 2 March 2009, available at <http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/afghanistan-press-briefing-020309> (visited 4 March 2009).

40 Harroff-Tavel, above note 29.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 467, note 2.

every individual feels to belong, by giving the members of their families the feeling they have a home, by showing concern for the plight of others, in particular children, they demonstrate that it is possible to manage suffering and to look to the future. Hence the importance of sparing them the social exclusion, stigmatization or discrimination of which they are all too often the victims ...⁴²

The thoughts expressed above contribute to the current academic discussion about the implications inherent in the use of the term ‘victim’. They also point to the need for a more careful analysis of the context in order to identify emergent capabilities and initiative within a group of people experiencing hardships because of a conflict or other situations of violence. Recent ICRC publications show that this approach is gaining ground: the term ‘victim’ is questioned, qualified when necessary and applied with due consideration for its implications, namely the negative attributes that are generally associated with it. In its study on the roots of behaviour in war and violations of international humanitarian law, the ICRC for example discusses the fact that some combatants may have been victims of harm themselves, and how their self-perception as having the status of victims influences their behaviour in engaging in more violence.⁴³ As a second important example, the recent study on women and war⁴⁴ also shows a commitment to caution when using the term ‘victim’ coupled with a clear desire to keep the concept in its place, leaving enough room for all the other identities that people living in a conflict environment (women in this case) can have and perceive themselves as having. The first page of the study sets the tone: ‘Women are not a homogeneous group, and they experience war in a multitude of ways – as victims, combatants or promoters of peace. [...] Despite all the hardships women endure in armed conflicts, the image of women as helpless victims of war is flawed. Women are playing an increasingly active role in hostilities – whether voluntarily or involuntarily. [...] Women are often portrayed as helpless victims and as a particularly vulnerable group in situations of armed conflict. However, women are not vulnerable as such. On the contrary, many display remarkable strength and courage in wartime, protecting and supporting their families, or perhaps taking on the role of combatant or peace activist. They often find ingenious ways of coping with the difficulties they face.’

To sum up, the ICRC’s institutional use of the term ‘victim’ at the level of official definition and presentation currently takes little account of its implications. Conversely, the use of the term and its connotations are discussed at other levels. At the practical level – in training, the ICRC’s various activities and public communication – people are highlighted as individuals with their different ways of

42 *Ibid.*, pp. 470–471.

43 Munoz-Rojas and Frésard, above note 18, pp. 8, 9.

44 *Women and War*, ICRC, Geneva, February 2008, available at [http://www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/p0944/\\$File/ICRC_002_0944.PDF](http://www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/p0944/$File/ICRC_002_0944.PDF) (visited 15 April 2009); see also the first study on this subject: Charlotte Lindsey, *Women Facing War*, ICRC, Geneva, 2001.

suffering and the impact it has on their particular lives. Nonetheless, each person is still to some extent considered as a victim, given the focus on their vulnerability, suffering and weakness. Recent research and publications have, however, prominently acknowledged the many positive attributes including leadership displayed by active, enterprising and courageous people despite, and sometimes as a result of, the harm and violence they have experienced. The change in approach is visible, as are the current gaps between the different uses of terminology within the organization. Among other contemporary challenges, the proliferation of the word ‘victim’ in society and the sensitivity with which it should be used and is received – and is indeed sometimes strongly denounced by people who experience conflict but do not want to be perceived as ‘poor victims’ – could be a legitimate concern for a humanitarian organization such as the ICRC, whose public image (institutional presentation and discourse) is as important as its work.⁴⁵

Human dignity and the responsibilities of the humanitarian worker

Aid workers at field level would benefit in many ways from a policy that promotes a careful use of the term ‘victims’. They already have partly learned to do so through carrying out relief activities, and from the training they may have received. With these and other tools⁴⁶ that enable them to exercise caution in their use of the word ‘victim’, aid workers could contribute in an even more personal and psychologically effective way to promoting respect for the sense of dignity of all people with and for whom they work. How? By a willingness to recognize the identity projected by the person helped, and above all to do so whether it is the victim identity or not, for this act is a recognition of their humanity and endorses their sense of dignity.⁴⁷ It is important here to acknowledge that some aid workers, especially local staff, may already possess a baggage of experience, including that of having been a conflict victim. As such, they are examples of people once affected by violence and

45 See ‘ICRC Strategy 2007–2010: Committed to meeting new challenges through action’, 7 February 2007, available at <http://icrc.org/web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/strategy-2007-2010?opendocument> (visited 5 December 2008).

46 See e.g. the practical guide relating to the ICRC study *Women Facing War* (2001): ‘Addressing the needs of women affected by armed conflict: an ICRC guidance document’, ICRC, Geneva, 2004. According to the executive summary, ‘[b]oth the study and the guidance document itself endeavour to show that while women may be placed at risk by the outbreak of hostilities, they are not necessarily and inevitably victims.’ (p.1, available at [http://icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/p0840/\\$File/0840_002_Executive_summary.pdf](http://icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/p0840/$File/0840_002_Executive_summary.pdf), visited 27 April 2009).

47 For a similar and very interesting argument, see Gilbert Holleufer, ‘Le sentiment d’humiliation dans les guerres contemporaines’, in Philippe Cotter et Gilbert Holleufer, *La Vengeance des Humiliés: les révoltes du 21^e siècle*, Editions Eclectica, Geneva, 2008. He writes about the need to ‘... restituer la nature de l’impératif humanitaire et d’identifier un paradigme d’empathie qui permettrait d’inclure non seulement les victimes mais aussi les hommes ordinaires, détruits par la violence sans avenir des guerres infra-étatiques. Et, ainsi, de s’occuper des nouveaux besoins des communautés en conflit, qui, dans le long cheminement vers le retour à la normale, dépendent peut-être davantage de ressources psychologiques et morales que matérielles.’ (p. 98)

war who today are respected for their active role and valuable work within their own or other war-torn societies.

Such a tool can be found in *Reconciliation after Violent Conflict: A Handbook*. A short text that perfectly summarizes all the main challenges that can arise when using the term ‘victim’, the chapter entitled ‘Victims’ covers many dimensions of the concept and reviews its use as an identity in different discourses.⁴⁸ The Handbook was published with the specific aim of providing ‘practical tools and lessons from experience to inspire, assist and support all those who struggle for reconciliation in different contexts around the world’, to quote the foreword by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The understated argument conveyed by the mere presence of such a chapter is that an awareness of the multiple uses of the term ‘victim’ and their implications is crucial for ‘policy-makers and practitioners, to assist them in designing the most suitable reconciliation process for their particular needs.’⁴⁹ This awareness is in fact essential for anyone who wishes to understand better not only the facts but also the underlying statements and power relations that exist in the social realm, and in particular for those who, like aid workers, are working directly with victims and groups labelled as such. Understanding the implications of the use of the term ‘victim’ is important not only at the time of reconstruction and reconciliation, but before and during a conflict as well. As one scholar writes, ‘...victim rhetoric [...] is a powerful tool. It taps into our essential human compassion for those who suffer, and raises our indignation; and these two emotions can move people to action.’ He further considers that, ‘As a strategy of analysis, the focus on victimhood is useful because it promises to reveal the underlying political interests and, if the analytical results are brought into the political arena, shift the terms of debate in which opposing sides are entrenched. [...] [The exercise of] revealing the ideologies of power, that is, the parameters that circumscribe our comprehension of others’ victimhood, enables us to transcend them.’⁵⁰ Sergio Vieira de Mello, then UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, wrote of the Handbook that it ‘should be required reading for the blue helmets and international civil servants of the next UN operation and, indeed, for all concerned actors, including local community leaders, in nations beset by conflict.’⁵¹ As a concise summary of the ways the term ‘victim’ is used in contemporary discourses, and which are discussed by many academics and specialists, the aforesaid chapter of the Handbook should certainly be required reading for all aid workers as well, who are also ‘concerned actors’ in such situations. In general, aid workers could benefit from any tools helping to give

48 Luc Huyse, ‘Victims’, in David Bloomfield, Teresa Barnes and Luc Huyse (eds), *Reconciliation after Violent Conflict: A Handbook*, Handbook Series, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Stockholm, 2003, pp. 54–66.

49 Karen Fogg, preface in Bloomfield, Barnes and Huyse (eds), above note 48.

50 James J. Orr, ‘Victims and perpetrators in national memory: Lessons from post-World War Two Japan’, in *RSH*, above note 8, pp. 55, 57.

51 Bloomfield, Barnes and Huyse (eds), above note 48, back page comments.

them a more informed and critical insight into the social, political, economic, humanitarian and other dimensions surrounding their work.

Conclusion

Humanitarian workers would be doing the best they possibly can for those in their care by carrying out their protection and assistance duties, within the humanitarian framework, on behalf of people often perceived unquestioningly as ‘victims of armed conflict’, while simultaneously transcending this discourse to recognize the identity, and thus the humanity, of the individuals or groups with whom they interact. Perhaps it will be a victim identity, but chances are that it will not. One aid worker acknowledged this point when he wrote: ‘The burden of responsibility for providing humanitarian relief falls on many shoulders. The people directly affected by a disaster and their neighbours are always those who respond first in any crisis.’⁵² People affected by harm who uphold their identity as active players in their situation deserve to be recognized as such and not mistakenly categorized as ‘victims’, a label which, as mentioned above, primarily highlights weak and passive aspects such as vulnerability, distress, discouragement and helplessness.

The institution concerned is responsible for offering an appropriate and pertinent image of its humanitarian work. The aid worker, on the other hand, arguably shares the responsibility of keeping a critical eye on this image to which he or she inevitably belongs and therefore plays a part in consolidating and projecting. Within contexts, social paradigms and humanitarian practices that are dynamic and evolving, it is hoped that observations and points of view of this kind will benefit the humanitarian community and the ICRC in particular. Questioning assumptions is a good step towards helping the spirit of humanity to prevail and flourish.

52 Walker, above note 23, p. 616.