



ICRC

Check against delivery

UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY

64<sup>th</sup> Session

Third Committee  
Item 62

Advancement of women

Statement by the  
International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)  
New York, 14 October 2009



Mr. Chairman,

For several years now, and to a significant and increasing degree, the international community has increasingly been working to recognize the needs of women and to improve their lives. The most recent example of this is the initiative launched by the General Assembly to consolidate different entities within the UN system, aimed at promoting the rights and well-being of women worldwide.

For its part, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) recognized some ten years ago that its operational activities needed to take better account of and respond to the specific needs and vulnerabilities of women and girls in armed conflict. Accordingly, at the 27th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in 1999, the ICRC adopted a Plan of Action to better address the protection and assistance needs of women and girls affected by armed conflict. It further pledged to emphasize throughout its activities the special respect accorded to women and girls by international humanitarian law. Significantly, this includes actively pressing all parties to an armed conflict to respect the categorical prohibition of all forms of sexual violence.

Today, the ICRC has developed a multidimensional approach to identifying and addressing the needs of women and girls affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence. First and foremost, this recognizes the wide-ranging impact that conflict has on their lives. War, in addition to exposing them to the risk of bodily injury, may also compromise their access to health care, force them to flee their homes, separate them from their family members, or affect their ability to access clean drinking water or food. It may also deprive families of their main breadwinner, leaving women responsible for supporting their families on their own. At the same time, cultural and social restrictions may limit their mobility and render them less visible, making them less likely to receive humanitarian assistance.

Given these realities, the ICRC adopts a multidisciplinary response to addressing specific vulnerabilities as well as supporting women in the essential and varied roles they assume in their communities. The resilience and capacities of women, enabling them to participate in their own solutions including self-protection mechanisms or livelihood programmes, have to be recognized. Illustrative examples of ICRC's approach are as follows:

In certain contexts, alarming numbers of women and girls have been subjected to sexual violence, particularly rape. ICRC support programmes examine the various levels of causality and the impact of sexual violence and as such, cover medical, psychological, social and economic needs. The most innovative of these programmes involves the creation of ICRC-supported counselling centres. These serve as places where victims of sexual violence or other traumatic situations can meet with a local psychosocial assistant trained by the ICRC. This provides them with an opportunity to talk about their trauma, identify their needs, and discuss possible courses of action. If necessary, the counsellors can refer women to medical or legal services and may also mediate between the victim and her family to reduce the risk of stigma or rejection.

Decades of fighting can leave large numbers of men missing, detained or killed. Many women become separated from their husbands and are left without financial or emotional support. Furthermore, cultural traditions may preclude women from engaging in economic activities, making it difficult for them to put food on the table. The ICRC responds to the needs of these female-headed families by providing them with food, hygiene articles and essential household items. In cooperation with local NGOs, we also support income-generating projects so women can regain their economic independence. Finally, we often work with government bodies to

make it easier for the many women who qualify to access social welfare programs.

Numerous conflicts have forced families to flee their homes, leaving them in even greater poverty than before. Without easy access to land, many women and girls have no choice but to resort to casual labour or prostitution in order to survive. The ICRC assists civilians through a broad range of activities including water projects, vaccination campaigns, and support for income-generating activities such as market gardening. These market gardens are managed entirely by women, who form an economic interest group, tend the gardens, and share the costs and revenues. The ICRC also supports the training of traditional midwives who often represent the sole source of reproductive health care for women and their newborns. Finally, we facilitate women's participation in community meetings to ensure that they have the opportunity to express their views and stay informed.

Mr. Chairman,

We would like to take this opportunity to reaffirm the importance of incorporating the needs, perspectives, and capacities of women and girls in all operational decision-making. While the ICRC continually strives to improve the protection afforded to women and girls during armed conflict, it also recognizes the need to create separate programmes to respond to other specific requirements— whether these are social, psychosocial, medical, or economic -related. Moreover, we will continue to support women as they lead their families and communities in coping with the devastation caused by conflict and rebuilding their lives in the aftermath of violence.

In closing, we would like to further emphasize the urgency to put a stop to sexual violence committed in connection with armed conflict. We stand ready to work with all State parties to the Geneva Conventions that are committed to suppressing this war crime and punishing its perpetrators.

Thank you for your attention.