



ICRC

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Advancement of women

Statement by the
International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)
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Mr Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The ICRC takes this opportunity to address the protection of women and girls in armed conflict. One of the most frequent and greatest traumas they suffer in wartime is sexual violence – a brutal violation of their person as well as a violation of the law. Not only does it have disastrous effects on the physical and mental well-being of the individual victims, but also on their families and communities. Sexual violence committed in connection with armed conflict is a war crime prohibited by international humanitarian law. Sexual violence must not be considered an unavoidable 'by-product' of war. On the contrary, it can and must be prevented.

The ICRC therefore welcomes resolution 1820 of the UN Security Council, which demands, that all parties to armed conflict take immediate steps to cease and to prevent crimes of sexual violence, to protect women and girls from such acts, and to prosecute those suspected of having committed them.

Furthermore, the ICRC calls for the following concrete preventive measures.

First, the ICRC encourages States to adopt legislation and other measures to implement humanitarian law at the national level, in particular steps to criminalize sexual violence in all its forms. This is consistent with their legal obligations as States party to the Geneva Conventions and, where applicable, to the Protocols of 1977 additional thereto as well as other relevant international instruments.

Second, the ICRC reminds all parties to conflict that weapon bearers, be they members of government armed forces, of organized non-State armed groups or of peacekeeping forces, must receive suitable training and strict orders to refrain from and prevent crimes of sexual violence. However, knowledge of the law is not enough. It must be translated into appropriate conduct. To this end the ICRC promotes the systematic incorporation of humanitarian law into military doctrine, education and training.

Third, the ICRC stresses the need to ensure that the perpetrators of sexual violence do not go unpunished. Every single rape committed in connection with armed conflict constitutes a war crime and should be prosecuted as such. Sexual violence is often linked to a prevailing climate of impunity. Mechanisms must be set up to ensure that the perpetrators of sexual violence are held to account and punished. There must be effective sanctions in the event of failure to obey humanitarian law. Women and girls are more vulnerable to sexual attack when potential perpetrators know that victims face difficulties in reporting crimes to judicial or traditional authorities. The responsible authorities should facilitate that process so as to allow women to file complaints without being exposed to stigma, lengthy procedures or even the risk of reprisals.

Fourth, the ICRC urges States and humanitarian actors to help potential victims avoid exposure to risk. Women in conflict areas are often exposed to risk as they struggle to meet the daily needs of their families. For example, women may have to leave the secure boundaries of their village or camp to gather water, food or firewood. Installing wells within the perimeter or providing women with seed to grow crops close to their houses, or with fuel-efficient stoves that reduce the need for firewood – as the ICRC does in Darfur – can reduce women's exposure to risk.

Public authorities and humanitarian actors should involve women in the assessment of assistance and protection needs and in programme implementation and monitoring. This can help to ensure that humanitarian action and its secondary effects do not put women and girls at risk.

Communities should know about the existing risks, and the importance of not rejecting and stigmatizing women and girl victims. The community's coping and self-protection mechanisms should be identified and assessed to strengthen them or, conversely, to heighten awareness of the risks they may entail.

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Sexual violence in armed conflict can and must be prevented. The law is clear and universally accepted. We must all ensure that this law is respected and that those who violate it are punished. Such is the responsibility of each State party to the Geneva Conventions. The ICRC is ready to continue working together with States to help them discharge this vital responsibility.

Thank you for your attention.