



# WOMEN AND WAR



ICRC



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Dominic Sansoni/ICRC

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War and violence today spare no one, but they affect men, women, boys and girls in different ways. More conflicts are now fought internally between rival ethnic, religious or political groups over the control of resources, territories or populations. But whether the violence is internal or cross-border, civilians are all too often caught in the firing line, directly targeted or endangered by the proximity of the fighting. Women and girls in war-torn countries are therefore faced with unimaginable risks, threats and challenges.

Women are not a homogeneous group, and they experience war in a multitude of ways – as victims, combatants or promoters of peace. War can mean violence, fear, loss of loved ones, deprivation of livelihood, sexual violence, abandonment, increased responsibility for family members, detention, displacement, physical injury, and sometimes death. It forces women and girls into unfamiliar roles and requires them to strengthen existing coping skills and develop new ones.

Despite all the hardship 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 may be found in military dress or lining the perimeters of prisons to visit relatives. They may be found queuing for food parcels or clearing debris from their shelters in transit camps. Many also play a proactive role post-conflict in peace-building and social reconstruction. On a daily basis in conflicts around the globe, women demonstrate their resilience by caring for family members and by holding communities together.

Much of war's impact on women depends on how a woman's personal safety is affected, how well equipped she is to ensure her survival and that of her family, whether she suffers injury or loss and, if so, how she deals with it. It is also often a consequence of what happened to the men of her family.

Protection for women in wartime is enshrined in international humanitarian law (IHL), which is binding on both States and armed opposition groups. This body of law, which includes the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their two Additional Protocols of 1977, provides protection for women as civilians and as captured or wounded combatants. Many of its rules constitute customary law and are therefore binding on parties to an armed conflict whether they have ratified the relevant treaties or not.

Women benefit from the general protection afforded by IHL. Along with the rest of the protected population, they must be able to live free from intimidation and abuse. In addition, IHL includes a specific protection regime for women, primarily in respect of their health and hygiene needs and their role as mothers. Human rights law and refugee law provide further protection for women in times of violence. Hence, the tremendous difficulties women continue to face in today's conflicts do not arise because of gaps in the law, but rather because the law is not sufficiently respected, implemented or enforced.

The following chapters look at the major risks and challenges that women and girls face during war, and some of the ICRC's responses. For the purposes of clarity and simplicity, this brochure relates primarily to situations of armed conflict. However, the ICRC has similar concerns and takes similar action in other situations of violence, such as disturbances.





Nick Danziger/ICRC

## ARE WOMEN MORE VULNERABLE THAN MEN?

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.

The real question is not who is more vulnerable but rather who is vulnerable to which particular risks. Women and men are often exposed to different risks. While men make up the vast majority of those killed, detained or made to disappear during war, women are increasingly targeted as civilians and exposed to sexual violence in times of conflict. They also generally bear all the responsibility for ensuring the day-to-day survival of their families.

Men do not always take up arms; they, too, may be part of the civilian population. Likewise, women may take part in hostilities. Female soldiers have been known to commit violent acts or incite others to perform them, sometimes proving to be crueller than their male counterparts.

Obviously, it is simplistic to judge vulnerability based on stereotypes. That is why the ICRC carries out a thorough needs assessment for every situation, in order to identify who is most vulnerable and why.

## WHAT THE ICRC DOES

As the guardian and promoter of international humanitarian law, the ICRC takes measures to minimize the consequences for civilian populations caught up in conflict and those hors de combat. The specific protection afforded to women under IHL is widely promoted. The organization reminds combating parties of their obligations as well as documenting violations and reporting them to the relevant authorities with its recommendations. Thus the ICRC's first objective is to prevent (or at least mitigate) the consequences of armed conflict for civilian populations and those no longer taking part in the fighting.

The ICRC recognizes that armed conflicts have a different impact on men, women, children and the elderly, and that the needs of women are often overlooked. At the 27th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in 1999 the ICRC made a pledge to assess and address the specific needs of women and girls more effectively in its programmes, and to promote the respect that must be accorded to them, with a particular focus on sexual violence. The ICRC therefore strives to incorporate the needs and perspec-

tives of women and girls in all its activities, and where necessary creates separate programmes to respond to their specific requirements – whether these are social, psychosocial, medical, economic or protection-related. By developing a more sensitive and thorough understanding of the roles, responsibilities and experiences of men and women, the organization can more appropriately respond to their needs in times of conflict. Gender analysis is therefore used to better appreciate the respective sociocultural roles attributed to men and women when it comes to the division of labour, productive and reproductive activities, and access to and control over resources and benefits. The ICRC also endeavours to send mixed teams to the field so that direct dialogue can take place with all victims, both women and men. This also allows the teams greater access to local networks and circles of influence. In addition, the organization aims for a balanced representation of women and men at senior management level, to ensure a broader outlook in programming decisions.

# DISPLACEMENT

**Millions of people worldwide have been brutally uprooted from their homes and livelihoods. As a result, they often find themselves living in difficult conditions with inadequate access to food, water, shelter and health care.**

**Displaced women may have to manage alone and assume extra responsibilities, which takes its toll on their health and puts them at greater risk of sexual violence and abuse.**



Majna Oumar, a Mutur villager in eastern Sri Lanka, recounts how she fled her home when the 20-year conflict between the Tamil militia and government forces descended on her village. “We had no alternative but to flee Mutur; there were explosions everywhere. We had to abandon everything, and during our journey to the south we did not eat for six days. My husband was stopped by a group of men while we were trying to escape from Mutur. I screamed at them but they beat me, my children and the other women that were with us. I lost my husband, and we arrived here with nothing.”

In the chaos and panic of displacement, which all too often takes place on foot, families may become separated. This creates a number of problems for women and exposes them to various hazards. In certain cultures they are not permitted to travel unless accompanied by their husband or a male family member. Many don't have the necessary personal documentation to cross checkpoints or international borders. They may be stopped, harassed, or subjected to humiliating body searches.

For many of the world's women, life is centred on the home and the community, so leaving their land and traditions is extremely traumatic. This upheaval can result in a loss of identity and status, especially when combined with the disintegration of the family unit.

## The forgotten needs of women in camps

Populations forced to uproot often congregate in camps, which presents a new set of risks and burdens for women. Women frequently shoulder all the daily responsibilities for ensuring their survival and that of their families, which absorbs huge amounts of their time and energy. This is particularly true for female heads of household, widows, elderly women, pregnant women or mothers with small children. They may be forced to rely on support from the local population, or on assistance from international and non-governmental organizations.

These women display tremendous strength and resourcefulness in their ability to adapt to their new surroundings in a camp and take on unfamiliar roles. One of them is Fatuma, a displaced woman in Darfur, who works as a builder's assistant to make ends meet. “Imagine – I stand here holding these bricks in the middle of the day. The heat is unbearable. But I have no choice. When my husband was alive I never did this kind of work. Now it is the only way to provide for my children.”

Women often have to travel long distances to find water, food, firewood, medicines, and all the basic necessities for trading or for their families' consumption. As they move around, they risk being raped or suffering injury from landmines and unexploded ordnance.

In the camps, a woman's voice often goes unheard, meaning their specific needs are overlooked. As women tend not to talk openly about their most personal needs, it is vital to create a space for true dialogue regarding their concerns. Involving them in the planning, implementation and evaluation of programmes is a good way to ensure they are neither ignored nor exploited.



**“I lost my husband, and we arrived here with nothing.”**





REUTERS/Abanem Abu Mustafa

Dominic Sansoni/ICRC

## WHAT THE ICRC DOES

- A primary objective of ICRC action is to prevent displacement. To this end, the ICRC urges all parties to a conflict to respect IHL and humanitarian principles and spare civilians so that they can remain safely in their homes. Moreover, it also provides material assistance so people who are not yet displaced can stay in their communities. Specific assistance is also available for communities receiving displaced populations to help them cope.
- The ICRC monitors the conditions of displaced people, documenting cases of IHL violations and reporting them to the competent authorities, urging them to investigate and address the situation.
- Where required, the ICRC provides food rations and household essentials such as blankets, tarpaulins, jerrycans, kitchen sets and hygiene kits so women can take care of their families. The ICRC also works to ensure an adequate supply of clean drinking water and to provide primary and reproductive health care. When distributing relief, the ICRC gives priority to the most vulnerable households in the greatest need, many of which have been deprived of their main breadwinner and are headed by women. In order to provide them with appropriate assistance, the ICRC maintains a dialogue with displaced women to better understand their circumstances, their experiences and their needs.
- The ICRC assesses women's coping mechanisms and resources to make sure that its assistance activities build on existing capabilities. When necessary, livelihood-support programmes are carried out to help women and girls become or remain self-sufficient. Via these programmes, the ICRC is able to distribute seed and tools, help replenish and vaccinate livestock, supply vouchers to hire tractor-ploughing services and set up income-generating projects, while also providing training tailored to the prevailing economic environment. All of this directly improves the standard of living of many women and their children.
- Displacement may cease with a return to the place of origin or local integration. The ICRC encourages the authorities to facilitate this, while monitoring any such activities to ensure that they take place safely, voluntarily and in dignified conditions. The ICRC may also provide essential practical assistance such as shelter materials to aid the re-establishment efforts of the most vulnerable returnees, mainly households headed by women, or offer incentives for community members to help women with reconstruction.

## WHAT IHL SAYS

**The displacement of the civilian population shall not be ordered for reasons related to the conflict unless the security of the civilians involved or imperative military reasons so demand. Should such displacements have to be carried out, all possible measures shall be taken in order that the civilian population may be received under satisfactory conditions of shelter, hygiene, health, safety and nutrition.**

**Article 17(1), Additional Protocol II, 8 June 1977.**

IHL prohibits parties to an armed conflict from arbitrarily displacing civilian populations. Where such displacements have to be carried out for the security of civilians or imperative military reasons, parties to the conflict must take measures to ensure that families are not separated. Displaced persons must be transferred back to their homes as soon as the hostilities in the area in question have ceased.

Displaced persons are part of the civilian population and therefore entitled to the full range of protection and rights appertaining to the civilian population. IHL requires parties to an armed conflict to ensure that persons hors de combat have the necessary means for survival. Where this is not provided by the parties to the conflict, IHL entitles humanitarian organizations to provide such assistance on an impartial basis.

# MISSING RELATIVES

**For hundreds of thousands of women, one of the worst consequences of armed conflict is the long and agonizing wait for news about their relatives.**

In wars around the world, countless people lose touch with their loved ones. The reasons for this vary. Families may become separated while seeking refuge from the violence. Displacement often prevents people from sending news to their next of kin. Civilians may be abducted or arrested and held incommunicado. Children may be forcibly recruited, imprisoned or even hastily adopted. While many attempts to restore contact between family members and establish the fate of missing relatives are successful, for others the uncertainty goes on. Anguish over the fate of missing family members is often a harsh reality for families long after a conflict has ended.

Since the vast majority of those who disappear or are killed are men (usually of a military age, although many have not taken up arms), the burden and pain of trying to ascertain their fate and whereabouts falls to their female relatives.

Sabita Nepali lives in the Bardiya district in western Nepal. She remembers the day when a group of armed men, fighting in the country's civil war, came to her home and took away her husband. "The last time I saw him he was blindfolded, arms spread and tied to a stick, beaten so badly he could barely walk as they led him into the jungle." Traumatized, her body stopped producing milk and her baby son died of starvation. She now lives in a shack with her mother and her one surviving child.

For those like Sabita who are left behind, not knowing the fate of a relative is emotionally devastating. They are suspended in limbo, suspecting their loved ones are dead, yet unable to go through the mourning pro-

cess. Many spend years, and their life savings, on a fruitless search. But for large numbers of those searching for a missing child, husband or father, peace brings no peace of mind. To stop searching would seem like a betrayal.

The right of families to know the fate of a missing relative is provided for under international human rights law and international humanitarian law. States have an obligation to take the necessary measures to establish the fate of missing persons and inform the family.

However, all too often parties to an armed conflict do not do enough to determine the fate of people missing in conflict, failing for instance to exhume gravesites and identify the mortal remains.

## **Economic hardship**

When the missing person is the household breadwinner, wives and mothers have to find ways to support the family, often facing a life of poverty – a situation that is exacerbated by the low social status and marginalization they suffer in many societies. Many lack a trade or source of income that would enable them to provide for their dependants.

Furthermore, their legal status is unclear, since they are no longer wives yet not officially widows. Some countries allow years to pass before declaring a person officially dead or absent. Without the proper documentation, women cannot claim an inheritance, seek guardianship of children, access property or even remarry. Women may not be able to seek help from the authorities due to financial constraints, safety concerns, cultural barriers or a lack of information.

**"The last time I saw him he was blindfolded, arms spread and tied to a stick..."**





Paul Smith/Panos Pictures

REUTERS/Stringer Afghanistan

But despite the adversity of war, women have proven ingenious at exploiting available resources to find food and shelter for their children and dependants. They organize themselves in associations and fight for access to information. Often mothers, wives, grandmothers or sisters of men who have disappeared continue long after conflict has ended to exert pressure on the authorities. For example, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo organized marches over many years in Argentina, demanding answers from the government as to the fate of their children.

It is the responsibility of the authorities concerned to support women in their struggle for their own survival and that of their families, if necessary with the help of organizations such as the ICRC.

## WHAT THE ICRC DOES

- ICRC action in relation to missing persons mainly benefits women as they are overwhelmingly the ones left behind after a loved one has disappeared during an armed conflict or other situation of violence.
- The ICRC and National Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies accept tracing requests from families who have had no news from their relatives during armed conflicts, and try to locate the person(s) by all possible means. This may include visiting places of detention, hospitals or morgues or asking the authorities to investigate. Where women are less visible or accessible for social and cultural reasons, awareness-raising sessions promoting existing tracing services are held specifically for women.
- Whenever possible, the ICRC works closely with the relevant authorities and organizations to accelerate the tracing process. It covers transport costs so families of the missing can visit mass graves or exhumation sites. It provides women with administrative help in dealing with matters of inheritance, pensions, legal status, custody of children and property rights.
- The ICRC organizes meetings with family associations, which often have a chiefly female membership, to ensure that their interests are represented in various forums and also provides the associations with financial and technical support.
- The ICRC contributes towards psychological support for the relatives of missing persons, principally women and their children, and towards their education and occupational training.
- It also encourages governments to enact or implement legislation that will ensure people are accounted for (by setting up an information bureau, for example), to ascertain the fate of missing persons and to protect and support the families of those who are missing, notably by making it easier for them to undertake legal proceedings.







Moises Saman/Panos Pictures

## WHAT IHL SAYS

**As soon as circumstances permit, and at the latest from the end of active hostilities, each Party to the conflict shall search for the persons who have been reported missing by an adverse Party. Such adverse Party shall transmit all relevant information concerning such persons in order to facilitate such searches.**

**Article 33(1), Additional Protocol I, 8 June 1977**

IHL seeks to maintain and restore family unity by preventing the separation of family members against their will. In situations where families have been separated (for example, because of internment, displacement or the participation of certain family members in the conflict), measures must be adopted that will facilitate reunification. This is mainly a matter of ensuring that a person's identity is registered.

Families have the right to know the fate of their missing relatives. In international armed conflicts, the parties to a conflict must search for persons reported missing and facilitate enquiries from family members dispersed during the conflict to help them restore contact with one another. They must also support the work of organizations engaged in this task. Furthermore, they are obliged to exchange lists showing the exact location and markings of graves, together with particulars of the dead interred therein. Similar treaty-based and customary rules apply to non-international armed conflicts.



# HEALTH

**War often overwhelms health-care systems and causes severe shortages of medical supplies and staff. This puts the lives of civilians at risk — with women and children particularly affected.**

When considering the impact of war on health, physical injuries come to mind first. But war also undermines access to food, clean drinking water, adequate shelter, sanitary facilities and health services; as a consequence, the risk of epidemics and nutritional problems is much higher.

Women's health often suffers in times of armed conflict, in particular their reproductive health. The age at which women or girls become sexually active, the frequency of their pregnancies and the quality of the care they receive during pregnancy are critical factors in determining their state of health. All of the above can be severely affected by armed conflict. Even if women normally have access to family planning services, they may be deprived of means of contraception if they are forced to flee, leading to a higher frequency of pregnancies. A sharp increase in rape, sexual exploitation and sex for survival during war may lead to more early pregnancies and put women at greater risk of HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted infections.

Pregnant women and nursing mothers may find that there is limited ante and postnatal care available, and little or no medical assistance for the delivery itself. This often results in higher maternal mortality rates. For Myriam, a young Iraqi mother, giving birth in her war-torn country was a terrible ordeal. "When I had my daughter, I had only a midwife to rely on since no maternity hospitals were functioning in Baquba. After the delivery, I had severe complications. I bled heavily for eight days. A transfusion was impossible and I kept losing consciousness. Eventually, I was taken to Baghdad despite all the risks and hazards of that journey. I don't know how I managed to survive."

Refugee and IDP camps may also be a source of health problems for women. Sanitary facilities with insufficient provision for safety and privacy increase the risk of sexual violence. Women may therefore prefer not to bathe, making it difficult for them to maintain good levels of health and hygiene.

## **Greater needs, fewer resources**

Armed conflict creates a greater need for health care, while simultaneously making it more difficult to obtain. Ordinary health services may be destroyed and violence often restricts freedom of movement. In addition, people typically have less money, meaning that essential medical attention can become unaffordable.

When normal patterns of living are disrupted in times of conflict, cultural barriers can take on added importance and make it even harder for women to access or receive appropriate health care. They may not be permitted to travel in search of treatment unless accompanied by a male relative. In specific cultural environments men and women have to be treated separately, or treatment has to be provided by medical personnel of the same sex as the patient. However, there may be few female staff working in wartime which impedes women's access to health care.

In developing countries, pregnancy and childbirth are major causes of death, illness, and disability among women. For all women, reproductive health care is essential and normally covers the following areas: antenatal, obstetric and postnatal care, family planning, and the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections (including HIV/AIDS). If some or all of these services are not available in times of conflict, problems may go untreated, which can have severe consequences. It is especially common for maternity services to be neglected. The immunization of pregnant women and children is another very important facet of maternal and child health services; yet all too often conflict disrupts national immunization campaigns.

Women play a vital role in maintaining the health and welfare of their family and community members, through practice or learned skills. This role in preventing and managing sickness and disease becomes paramount when access to health care is limited.

**"When I had my daughter, no maternity hospitals were functioning. After the delivery, I had severe complications. I bled heavily for eight days..."**



Giacomo Pirozzi/Panos Pictures



Marko Kokic/ICRC

## WHAT THE ICRC DOES

- The ICRC trains local nurses, doctors, and hospital staff, as well as female community health workers and traditional birth attendants/midwives, to enable them to treat female patients effectively. When women cannot access health services because of cultural or religious restrictions, the ICRC makes representations to the authorities in order to find a solution.
- For the ICRC, safe motherhood is a top priority. This includes appropriate antenatal care, safe delivery care (skilled assistance for delivery and suitable referrals for women with obstetric complications when feasible) and postnatal care.
- The ICRC supports the repair and construction of medical facilities such as hospitals, health centres and physical rehabilitation centres, taking the specific needs of women and children fully into account. In most cases, women and children are given special accommodation in line with local customs and international standards.
- ICRC support for hospitals focuses on emergency surgical, obstetric and paediatric care. This may include providing equipment, medical supplies and training (in obstetric surgery, for example).
- The ICRC supports immunization programmes such as EPI (Expanded Programme on Immunization), National Immunization days (for polio eradication) and measles campaigns run by governments. The benefits of this aid are greatest among women of child-bearing age and young children, who receive vital vaccinations against diseases such as tetanus and polio.
- Specially-trained ICRC teams of female health and hygiene promoters play a crucial role in raising women's awareness of malaria transmission, especially among those who are pregnant or have small children. The ICRC also distributes mosquito nets to help reduce the spread of the disease.
- In emergencies, the ICRC may also support therapeutic feeding centres to help malnourished children and provide support to their mothers.

## WHAT IHL SAYS

**The wounded and sick, as well as the infirm, and expectant mothers, shall be the object of particular protection and respect.**

**Article 16, Fourth Geneva Convention, 12 August 1949.**

One of IHL's basic principles, laid down in Article 3 common to the Geneva Conventions, is that "the wounded and sick shall be collected and cared for." On the preventive side, IHL protects civilians from the effects of hostilities or from abuse or violence, and guarantees them adequate food, shelter and clothing, all of which are important means of ensuring that the civilian population remains in good health.

Parties to an armed conflict are required to permit the free passage of consignments of essential food and clothing intended for children under 15, expectant mothers and maternity cases. They are encouraged to adopt practices to ensure the physical safety of pregnant women and may establish safety zones for pregnant women and mothers of young children.

An Occupying Power must, to the fullest extent of the means available to it, provide the population with food and medical supplies and maintain medical and hospital establishments and services.

# SEXUAL VIOLENCE

**Sexual violence is one of the most traumatic and also one of the most common violations women suffer in times of conflict.**



Mawazo, a 24-year-old girl from the village of Shabunda in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, is one of the countless victims of sexual violence. "I was working in the fields when seven thugs attacked me. They had knives and guns. I screamed and struggled. I was raped by all seven of them. I was torn and cut and there was a lot of blood."

Two years later, Mawazo was abducted by the same armed group and raped again. When she became pregnant, her abductors abandoned her to give birth alone in the forest. Her baby died, but she managed to make her way back to her village, where she needed surgery for her wounds.

Mawazo's story is not unusual. Wherever there is conflict, stories like hers can be found. However, the prevalence of sexual violence in armed conflict has long been underestimated. Only recently has it been recognized as a widespread phenomenon and as an appalling method of warfare, due mainly to increased media coverage.

Today, there are huge efforts to galvanize governments and civil society into action to put a stop to this crime and to provide those affected with support. But for hundreds of thousands of women, the emotional and physical trauma of this violation will be long-lasting.

## **Method of warfare**

Rape is considered to be a method of warfare when armed forces or groups use it to torture, injure, extract information, degrade, displace, intimidate, punish or simply to destroy the fabric of the community. The mere threat of sexual violence can cause entire communities to flee their homes.

By violating women, arms bearers are able to humiliate and demoralize the men who could not protect them. Where the integrity of the community and the family is perceived as bound up in the "virtue" of women, rape can be used as a deliberate tactic to destabilize families and communities.

As in many contexts a woman who has been raped is believed to have brought dishonour upon her family or community, victims may be abandoned or even killed to salvage the family's reputation, a so-called "honour" killing. Victims of sexual violence may also be rejected by their community on the assumption that they have been infected with HIV/AIDS.

**"I was working in the fields when seven thugs attacked me... I was raped by all seven of them."**





Wojtek Lembrzycki / RC

## Lasting scars

Rape may leave a victim with no visible injuries. And yet her trauma, both physical and mental, can be agonizing and enduring. Rape can have severe consequences for a woman's health, ranging from sexually transmitted infections to infertility or incontinence. In some countries affected by conflict, HIV/AIDS infection rates are rising due to the high number of rapes committed by arms bearers, a phenomenon that is often exacerbated by increased population displacement and vulnerability. Acts of sexual violence can cause long-lasting psychological trauma and severe depression. If the woman in question is the breadwinner, the economic life of her entire family may be affected; the trauma may make it impossible for her to care for her children and other family members who depend on her for their survival.

Raped women often have to deal with an unwanted pregnancy and may reject their children because they are a constant reminder of the horror they have suffered. However, in countless instances, women accept and take care of these children. "I took Khadija with me; God gave me this child. She is innocent," explains Sarah, a young victim of rape during the civil conflict in Sierra Leone.

If it becomes known that these children have been born of rape, they risk rejection, abuse and ill-treatment by the community. If they are the offspring of the enemy, they may be blamed for the misfortunes

of the family. The child may have no real surname or, worse, be stateless and have no social standing or inheritance rights in communities where the paternity determines the child's name and nationality. As a category of conflict victim, children born of rape are often forgotten, in spite of their obvious need for protection and assistance.

For fear of stigma or reprisals, most rape victims keep quiet. Rape is rarely addressed openly, as sex is often a taboo subject and the scars may be outwardly invisible. All these factors can make it very difficult, even dangerous, for humanitarian workers to access and assist these hidden victims. Furthermore, extreme care has to be taken to avoid stigmatizing women as "rape victims" in the eyes of their family or community.

Carrying on with their lives after the trauma they have suffered demands enormous courage and determination on the part of the victims of sexual violence. In many instances, women overcome their personal suffering through helping other victims or by taking up a new economic activity. Sarah in Sierra Leone explains how she survived her tragedy. "After the war I was taken to an organization which looked after girls with young babies. We talked to doctors about what had happened to us. They found us a place to live and gave us food. Now I am training to be a hairdresser. We are living as a family. Because we all had the same experience, we are giving each other support and encouragement."

“Because we all had the same experience, we are giving each other support and encouragement.”

## WHAT THE ICRC DOES

The ICRC has adopted a comprehensive approach which includes preventive action and assistance for victims. Depending on the country, the following action may be taken:

- Victims of sexual violence require medical attention as soon as possible to treat their injuries and to prevent sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. They can seek this treatment in health facilities which the ICRC supports by supplying drugs and other equipment, training medical staff and carrying out repair work.
- The ICRC works with community health workers, traditional birth attendants and healers, midwives and others to identify victims of sexual violence and refer them promptly to appropriate medical services.
- The ICRC provides volunteers at the community level with psychosocial training to enable them to counsel victims and mediate between victims and their families.
- The ICRC helps victims of sexual violence regain their ability to earn a living. Micro-economic initiatives provide those who have lost their livelihoods with social and economic support.
- Through campaigns, plays, posters, leaflets and other awareness-raising activities, the ICRC tries to prevent sexual violence, highlighting that it constitutes a serious crime with severe repercussions for the victims. The campaigns also aim to break the taboo surrounding this issue, bringing it out into the open, and to encourage the community to acknowledge that the victims of sexual violence are indeed victims. The community is also given information about the services available to victims and how such services may be accessed.
- In its IHL instruction and training programmes for armed forces and armed groups, the ICRC emphasizes the prohibition of sexual violence. Furthermore, it advocates inclusion of this prohibition in the laws or internal regulations of armed forces and groups.
- ICRC staff document alleged cases of sexual violence, report them to the authorities and urge them to take action.

## WHAT IHL SAYS

**Women shall be the object of special respect and shall be protected in particular against rape, forced prostitution and any other form of indecent assault.**

**Article 76 (1), Additional Protocol I, 8 June 1977.**

IHL prohibits outrages against personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment, enforced prostitution and any form of indecent assault against persons not taking a direct part in hostilities. Furthermore, IHL offers women specific protection by obliging parties to a conflict to protect them against acts of sexual violence.

Under the Statute of the International Criminal Court, rape and other forms of sexual violence constituting a serious violation of the Geneva Conventions are war crimes when committed in international or non-international armed conflict. It is not necessary to find that sexual violence takes place systematically or on a wide scale in order to prosecute the perpetrators for war crimes; a single rape is enough. When committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack against the civilian population, acts of sexual violence may also be prosecuted as crimes against humanity, regardless of whether they take place in the context of war or peace.





Nick Danziger/ICRC



# LANDMINES AND EXPLOSIVE REMNANTS OF WAR

**Women and girls account for a smaller percentage of casualties from landmines and unexploded munitions than men and boys. However, as a result of socio-cultural perceptions the consequences for female victims are different. They often suffer stigma and rejection and may also have less access to prosthetic and rehabilitation services.**



Anti-personnel landmines and other explosive remnants of war (ERW) strike blindly and senselessly, and the victims are usually civilians. Long after the fighting stops, mines continue to cause death and destruction and when they don't kill, the injuries they cause are particularly horrific, disabling survivors for life.

Most victims of mines and unexploded ordnance are men who were working outdoors at the time of the accident. Women and girls tend to remain in or around their homes, and are thus less likely to be exposed. Nevertheless, going about their daily routine can put them in harm's way. In many regions, women must venture beyond the perimeters of their town or village to find food, water and firewood. Populations fleeing violence and threats, mostly women and children, are particularly vulnerable to landmines in border areas. Higher rates of illiteracy and less contact with the public sphere mean that women and girls may not get enough information about the threat of mines.

## Limited care

The implications of landmine injuries for women are often worse than for men. Women are more likely to be valued for their physical appearance, meaning that if they are perceived to be disabled, they may be deemed unmarriageable, or deserted by their husbands and left to support their children alone. Their status in society and their self-esteem suffer when they can no longer carry out childcare or household duties. Destitution may reduce them to begging or leave them particularly vulnerable to ill-treatment, sexual exploitation or prostitution.

Rohafza Naderi considers herself lucky. Having suffered a mine accident when she was ten years old,

she nevertheless was able to continue her studies and now works as physiotherapist supervisor at an ICRC limb-fitting centre in Kabul. She knows that the situation of most female mine victims in her country is different from hers: "In Afghanistan, disabled women have a particularly difficult time, especially those who don't have a profession. For one thing, it becomes very difficult to find a good husband. Sometimes they might get taken on as a second wife by an old man. Those who are already married often get mistreated or neglected while their husband takes another wife." Women are less likely to know about the prosthetic and rehabilitation services available to them and may also have difficulty accessing them for various reasons. Generally women have less education, less mobility, less leisure time, fewer economic resources, less public influence and less access to health care. When a family's resources are limited and controlled by men, the cost of investing time and money in extensive rehabilitation programmes for women or girls may appear to outweigh the perceived benefits. Women may be unable to travel in search of medical care and rehabilitation unless accompanied by men, yet the travel and accommodation costs for multiple family members to attend may be prohibitively expensive.

In some cultures, it is taboo for women to be in the company of men they are not related to, even medical personnel. Consequently, if there are no female staff working in a rehabilitation centre, women might not be able to access treatment. Privacy often cannot be guaranteed during medical examinations, nor can sex-segregated accommodation during rehabilitation. Whereas male soldiers receive care through military hospitals, females rarely benefit from these services.

**"Disabled women maybe mistreated or neglected while their husband takes another wife."**



Marko Kolic/ICRC



Farzana Wahidy/ICRC



Sven Torfinn/Panos Pictures

## WHAT THE ICRC DOES

The ICRC's approach to reducing the impact of mines and ERW is both preventive and remedial. It includes the following initiatives:

- The ICRC provides assistance for emergency and hospital care and physical rehabilitation in mine-affected countries. ICRC specialists are on hand to help repair damaged prostheses and other appliances. Care is taken to ensure that women have the same access as men to rehabilitation programmes and to equipment such as artificial limbs, walking aids and wheelchairs.
- Where there are no female staff in a rehabilitation centre, the ICRC helps to train women, and may pay the transportation costs for women and their dependants to be treated in a centre with female staff.
- Education, vocational training and micro-economic initiatives help disabled women successfully reintegrate into society. Many are offered employment in ICRC-run or ICRC-supported physical rehabilitation centres.
- The ICRC focuses on water, habitat and protection, along with clearing key locations of mines and ERW to permit more effective relief work in emergencies. Where contamination poses a long-term problem, the ICRC supports the development of the capabilities and resources of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, working in conjunction with national authorities. Women often provide crucial information at the planning stage of many activities – when looking to establish safe alternative sources of water or fuel, for example. They also pass on information about dangerous areas and safe behaviour to others, particularly children. Local women play an essential role in grassroots incident surveillance and reporting networks, which link communities to national mine and ERW clearance teams.

## WHAT IHL SAYS

**Each State Party undertakes never under any circumstances [...] to use anti-personnel mines.**

**Article 1(a), Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction, 18 September 1997**

A fundamental rule of IHL is the principle of distinction, which requires parties to a conflict to distinguish between civilians and combatants at all times. IHL prohibits attacks of an indiscriminate nature which, while not intentionally targeting civilians, are of a nature to strike military objectives and civilians without distinction. Anti-personnel mines maim and kill indiscriminately long after hostilities have ended, therefore IHL restricts their use.

The 1997 Anti-personnel Mines Convention bans the use of landmines and requires their destruction. It also obliges States Parties to adopt a range of remedial measures dealing with the effects of landmines on civilians. These include raising awareness of the risks, removing the threat of mines already in the ground, and assisting the victims. The Protocol on Explosive Remnants of War to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons is the first international agreement that requires the parties to an armed conflict to clear all unexploded munitions that threaten civilians, peacekeepers and humanitarian workers once the fighting is over. It came into force in 2006.



# TAKING UP ARMS

**Although women have always played a part in conflict, in recent years they have become more actively involved in combat.**

Women today enlist more frequently and play a greater role in military combat and support operations. In the United States military, for example, around 15 per cent of service personnel are women. Similarly, an increasing number of women are fighting in armed groups: in Nepal, women reportedly make up about one third of the Maoist fighting forces.

Reasons why women take up arms vary. Some, like men, are recruited by the regular armed forces of their country. Others join government forces or armed groups for their own protection or that of their families, food, social standing, or for political reasons. Still others may join to gain equal status with men or because their husband is already a member and combatant of a particular group.

Women are generally more likely to take up arms when they have no family or are living in extreme poverty. Some are seeking revenge, such as “Black Diamond,” the leader of a group of Liberian women rebels, who decided to fight after being gang-raped at the age of 17 by armed men loyal to the government. “Anger makes you brave,” she explains.

Although women often assume many of the support roles, women fighters can be extremely useful to an armed group. The assumption that women are harmless and arouse fewer suspicions can make them the preferred choice when it comes to transporting munitions, gathering intelligence or as suicide bombers. And yet, the actions of female fighters in street attire – and thus not identifiable as fighters – can heighten distrust of all women and put civilian women at greater risk.

When women take a direct part in hostilities, they no longer enjoy the same protection against attacks that IHL accords civilians. Female fighters must comply with the rules of international humanitarian law like any other fighter and respect and protect persons who are not, or are no longer, participating in the hos-

tilities. They will be accountable for any atrocities or violations they commit, just as men are.


## Forced recruitment

Some women join armed groups completely against their will. A woman from Sierra Leone recounts how she was forced to fight. “I was abducted and forced to leave school. Anyone who refused to join had their hands amputated. Since I was among the few women who could read or write, I was forced to join [the armed opposition group]. In the rebel camp, there was a lot of harassment and sexual abuse. Hostile attitudes towards women were very common.”

Women and girls abducted by armed groups don’t always participate directly in the fighting; many end up as sex slaves, or cooking and cleaning in the camps. Forced recruitment is a way to terrorize civilians. It’s a vicious cycle, often turning abductees into hardened killers by forcing them to commit monstrous acts. In some armed groups the first assignment given to a new recruit is to attack her own village or murder a family member, so that desertion is not an option. The more violations they commit, including abhorrent crimes against civilians, the more likely they are to rise through the ranks. They may become dependent on the groups that recruited them. Many develop addictions to drugs and alcohol, supplied to induce aggression and fearlessness.

## Scars of conflict

When the fighting stops, female fighters often find it difficult to return to civilian society. In southern Sudan, one ex-combatant expresses her frustration at the uncertainty of her future. “It’s difficult to return to the community after demobilization and become a civilian again. We women fighters are wondering what our fate will be; we do not want to go home and sit around with nothing productive or meaningful to do.”



“Anger makes you brave.”





Martin Adler/Panos Pictures



Martin Adler/Panos Pictures



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Thomas van Houtryve/Panos Pictures



Tim A. Hetherington/Panos Pictures

Rejection by the community for having affronted female stereotypes and traditional values is one of the greatest obstacles to successful reintegration. Unlike men for whom military service is generally a source of pride, women are believed to be unsuited to such a role and thus risk marginalization.

In many societies, women attain economic and social status through marriage. After war, the scarcity of men or rejection of a girl who has taken part in the conflict, willingly or not, can limit or end her chances of finding a husband. And some women may return home as single mothers, with all the various issues this raises for many communities.

Girls recruited to fight face additional problems when the conflict ends, including the possible loss of their families, limited or no educational opportunities and little preparation for adult responsibilities.

Finally, women and girls are largely excluded from disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes. Women often don't have guns to turn in, which may be one of the criteria for inclusion in such programmes.

The biggest challenge for humanitarian organizations that aim to help women and girl fighters is finding them. Many countries deny the existence of child soldiers, especially girls. In addition, fearing they will be stigmatized by their family and community, many females don't register as former fighters, leaving them marginalized and unable to seek assistance in rebuilding their lives.

To overcome the numerous challenges of reintegration, many ex-fighters form or join associations to support one another in everything from childcare and education to finding alternative ways of making a living or ending their isolation.





Paul Smith/Panos Pictures



B. Heger/ICRC

“It’s difficult to return to the community and become a civilian again.”

### WHAT IHL SAYS

IHL protects women who are actively participating in hostilities by restricting the right of parties to a conflict to choose means and methods of warfare. IHL prohibits the use of weapons, projectiles and material causing superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering. It also prohibits attacking enemies who have surrendered or who have demonstrated their intention to do so, declaring that no quarter shall be given, and perfidy. Furthermore, IHL requires wounded, sick, shipwrecked and captured combatants to be treated humanely even when in the hands of the adversary.

According to the rules of IHL, children under the age of 15 must not be recruited nor allowed to take part in hostilities. The Statute of the International Criminal Court makes it a war crime to enlist children under the age of 15 or use them to participate actively in hostilities. The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, which entered into force in 2002, raises the minimum age and prohibits the compulsory recruitment of children under the age of 18.

### WHAT THE ICRC DOES

- Like their male counterparts, female members of armed forces or groups benefit from ICRC activities when they are detained or wounded, along with the ICRC’s programmes for disseminating the rules of IHL.
- The ICRC promotes the principle of non-recruitment and non-participation of boys and girls under the age of 18 in armed conflicts. The organization strives to dissuade children from taking up arms and to educate the general public to reject the practice.
- The ICRC incorporates the prohibition on child recruitment in IHL training for armed forces and opposition groups, and works to introduce the law into legal systems.
- The ICRC attempts to meet psychological and physical needs and to ease reintegration for boys and girls who have participated in armed conflicts. The ICRC supports several National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Africa in their work to set up centres to help former child soldiers deal with their deep-seated trauma.
- The ICRC does not get involved in DDR negotiations, although it is willing to assist with implementation and stresses the need to take women and children into account. The ICRC maintains that women must be eligible to enter DDR programmes as full participants, whether or not they have weapons, and that they should be involved in planning the programmes to ensure their specific needs are met.



# DETENTION

**Women deprived of their freedom are often extremely isolated, as they tend to receive fewer visits from family and friends than men. This in turn makes them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, particularly when male and female detainees are not detained separately.**



It is estimated that women represent only 4 to 5 per cent of the prison population around the world. The number of women held in relation to an armed conflict is even lower, which reflects the fact that women constitute a minority in armed forces and groups. Even when they are members, they may not be allowed to fight on the front line, which reduces the risk they will be captured. Also, male civilians are more likely to be perceived as combatants or potential combatants and hence detained or interned for security reasons.

While there are fewer women than men in detention, their conditions are no better. All detainees must cope with separation from their family and friends, but women may be particularly affected. Women's prisons are rare. Many women therefore end up far from their families and far from the court in charge of their trial. Alternatively, female detainees may be held in the same prisons as men, which can have a negative impact on their situation. Their access to fresh air may be compromised if the courtyard is communal – since mixing with men would put them at risk and also may not be permitted for cultural reasons. Likewise, women often remain locked in their cells if prison corridors are open to both sexes. If all detainees share the same sanitary facilities, female prisoners are vulnerable to sexual abuse from male prisoners, guards and prison management. In addition, women detained with small children have particular requirements, including separate quarters, which may not be available at all detention facilities.

During arrest procedures and/or while in detention, women may be subjected to various forms of degrading treatment, such as humiliating body searches. The absence of female guards in particular can lead to sexual harassment and violence.

Female detainees have specific health and hygiene needs. Menstruating women need more frequent access to sanitary facilities to keep clean and to wash

their clothes. Pregnant women and nursing mothers require dietary supplements and appropriate pre and postnatal care so that they and their babies remain in good health. All women in detention need regular medical check-ups, including gynaecological care. However, this is rarely available.

## Isolated and vulnerable

“In our cells we didn't have any water, we didn't have toilets. There was no contact with family members. This all changed when the ICRC came in,” explains Soha Bechara, a former female detainee in Lebanon. Like Soha, women prisoners often suffer from social isolation. They generally receive fewer visitors than men because families tend to regard their detention as more shameful. Male relatives may have been killed or displaced, or may have simply disappeared. Some men remarry. Others may be deterred from travelling by a volatile security situation. And yet visitors are essential for a detainee's psychological well-being and are a way to obtain food, medicine and other necessities when resources are scarce and adequate supplies are not being provided by the authorities. Females without a support system may turn to transactional sex and are at a high risk of sexual exploitation, risking disease, HIV infection and pregnancy. Lack of family contact can also compound any psychological and social problems, making reintegration into society more difficult upon release.

In certain countries women need a male guarantor to be released – hence, when a woman reaches the end of her sentence and no male relative comes to collect her, she will remain behind bars. Some women become victims of so-called honour killings after their release, to cleanse the family of the shame their detention allegedly caused – as families often assume that a woman has been raped in prison.



**“In our cells we didn't have any water, we didn't have toilets. There was no contact with family members.”**



REUTERS/Luis Galdamez



Jon Björguinsson/ICRC

## WHAT THE ICRC DOES

- The ICRC has a specific mandate under IHL to visit persons deprived of their freedom in connection with an armed conflict. It works to ensure that detention conditions meet international legal standards and to prevent ill-treatment.
- During its visits to detainees, the ICRC pays special attention to the conditions in which women and girls are being held - to their accommodation in particular, and to their treatment. Accommodation should comprise specific cells and sanitary facilities, supervision by female guards only and access to health services, including to female medical staff and gynaecological care when required. As far as possible, ICRC delegates and translators visiting places of detention do so in mixed teams as these are perceived to be more approachable and to be able to more thoroughly assess the needs of all persons detained. On the basis of its findings, the ICRC drafts confidential reports and submits its recommendations to the relevant authorities.
- ICRC family message services enable detained women to communicate with their families and detained men to communicate with their wives and mothers outside. This contributes to the psychological well-being of all concerned.
- ICRC assistance programmes for detainees are adapted to the specific needs of women and girls whenever necessary. For example, female detainees may be provided with female hygiene items, clothing and recreational materials for themselves and their children. Occupational training (in sewing, weaving and literacy for example) aims to break the isolation of imprisoned women and improve their prospects for successful reintegration into society after release.
- As part of its efforts to improve health conditions for detainees, the ICRC often carries out maintenance, renovation or construction work in places of detention. These projects always take the needs of women and children into consideration, for instance by creating separate accommodation for men and women, separate access to toilets and showers and adequate facilities for women with babies and/or small children.
- In societies where women are at a high risk of being ostracized or even abandoned by their families, the ICRC places special emphasis on their plight in its dialogue with the relevant authorities and in its assistance programmes.

## WHAT IHL SAYS

**Prisoners of war are entitled in all circumstances to respect for their persons and their honour. Women shall be treated with all the regard due to their sex and shall in all cases benefit by treatment as favourable as that granted to men.**

**Article 14, Third Geneva Convention, 12 August 1949.**

International humanitarian law protects those captured, detained or interned in situations of armed conflict – and dictates that they must be treated humanely at all times. Besides this general protection, to which women are entitled without distinction, IHL includes specific protection for women deprived of their freedom. Detaining authorities have an obligation to ensure that women are held in separate quarters from men and are provided with separate sanitary conveniences; that women are supervised by female guards; that they are permitted family visits and correspondence; and that they are searched only by women. In addition, the rules of IHL prohibit the use of the death penalty against pregnant women and mothers of young children.



## GIRLS AND WAR

**In addition to suffering from the same dangers as the rest of the community, girls must also cope with drastic and harmful changes in their lives that are specific to their sex and age.**



The hardship children endure during war strikes at the very heart of childhood. Conflict kills thousands of girls and boys and disables many more – through injury, disease or malnutrition. The experience of war often harms children's physical development while the violence they witness inevitably has a psychological impact. War frequently deprives girls and boys of family members, educational opportunities and health services, as well as carefree time spent with friends in the playground.

Girls per se are vulnerable in armed conflicts, but the younger they are, the more vulnerable they are. As children, they can be categorized as vulnerable by virtue of their age, their stage of development and their dependence on others for their well-being. As females, they may face the same discrimination, challenges and risks that women are exposed to.

Girls' safety depends largely on the traditional protection afforded to them by their families and communities. However, during conflict, communities and families are fragile. They may be forced to flee their homes, and in the chaos children may become separated from their parents. Girls alone are frequently exposed to threats, abuse or violence from members of military forces or armed groups, or other men, including those who were supposed to be protecting them. Arms bearers often abduct girls to fight or to serve as forced labour - to cook, clean and fetch water and firewood.

All of the above leaves girls vulnerable to sexual violence, which often has even more serious consequences for girls than for women. The violence of the act com-

bined with their physical immaturity increases the likelihood of physical trauma and of sexually transmitted infections such as HIV/AIDS. In some cultures, rape victims are considered unmarriageable, meaning that a girl's entire future in her community may be jeopardized.

Early pregnancy, often a result of rape or exploitation, poses a serious threat to a girl's health. Girls who become pregnant prematurely are at greater risk of complications and death, especially as medical services are often scarce in wartime.

Motherhood at a young age also has profound socio-economic implications, since girls encumbered by child rearing are generally unable to complete their education and are thus consigned to a lifetime of poverty. As 17-year-old Habasa from Rwanda explains in a media report, "I cannot go to school today because the baby is ill with malaria and diarrhoea. This is what happens every time he falls ill. I want to go to school. If there is anything I would like to have most now it is to have some help to lead a better life, maybe build a house for us to let and provide us with some income, instead of begging all the time."

When men are absent – participating in the fighting, detained, fleeing or dead – the burden of providing for the basic needs of their families falls to women, with various spillover effects for their daughters. They are compelled to take on new responsibilities, often including heavy chores, and additional roles within the family and the community – roles which often challenge and redefine their cultural and social iden-

**"Girls' safety depends largely on the traditional protection afforded to them by their families and communities."**



REUTERS/Darren Whiteside



Dominic Sansoni/ICRC

tities.

These changes in the roles ascribed to 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 economic and social status through marriage. The lack of marriage prospects – because there are too few men or because society rejects girls who have been abused or have played a role in hostilities – can have huge implications.

Despite all the hardship they endure, to speak of girls solely in terms of vulnerability would not do justice to the courage and ingenuity they display on a daily basis in the face of armed conflict. At a very young age, they have often already taken on all the duties and responsibilities incumbent upon them as older sisters, daughters and sometimes as mothers.

## WHAT IHL SAYS

**Children shall be the object of special respect and shall be protected against any form of indecent assault. The Parties to the conflict shall provide them with the care and aid they require, whether because of their age or for any other reason.**

**Article 77(1), Additional Protocol I, 8 June 1977.**

Girls and boys are entitled to the full protection afforded by the rules of IHL concerning the protection of civilians, combatants and persons hors de combat. Outrages upon their personal dignity and any other form of indecent assault against them are prohibited.

Recognizing their particular needs and vulnerability, IHL also grants special additional protection to civilian girls and boys. Parties must ensure that children receive an education and must facilitate the reunion of families who have been separated. In international armed conflicts, parties are furthermore obliged to ensure that children orphaned or separated from their families are not left on their own and must permit free passage of consignments of essential food-stuffs and clothing intended for children under 15.



## WHAT THE ICRC DOES

Because children are safest with their families, the impact of war on children is closely linked to its impact on adults – both men and women. Protecting the whole civilian population in times of war, especially keeping families together, helps to protect all children – both boys and girls. With this in mind, the ICRC works in the following manner:

- ICRC action aimed at prevention of violations of IHL targets political authorities, armed forces, other weapon bearers and civil society to emphasize the need to respect the physical integrity and dignity of all people who are not, or are no longer, participating in armed conflict. Such groups are made aware that women and children often form the majority of the protected population, and that their position in society may make them particularly vulnerable. Activities may include highlighting the existing provisions of IHL that focus on women and children, examining legal and practical measures to protect them from abuse and meet their specific needs.
- Boys and girls who have become separated from their parents, including those who have formerly been associated with fighting forces, are registered by the ICRC and their mothers and fathers, or their closest relatives, sought. Family reunifications are organized according to the best interests of the child and only if all parties – the child and the family – want to be reunited.
- Owing to their vulnerability, households headed by women and girls are often the main beneficiaries of ICRC relief provided to internally displaced people, returnees and residents.
- The ICRC also helps destitute or very poor families, often headed by women and girls, to regain their ability to earn a living through livelihood support and micro-economic initiatives.
- Water, sanitation and habitat projects provide safe drinking water for family members. This reduces the risk of illness and means that women and girls no longer have to make long journeys to water points, risking abduction and rape.
- The majority of people treated in outpatient departments and referral hospitals in conflict-affected areas are women and children. They are thus the main beneficiaries of ICRC support for these medical facilities, which provide comprehensive reproductive health and delivery services and care for children under five. Girls who have been raped also benefit from the ICRC's medical and psychosocial assistance for victims of sexual violence.
- The ICRC helps National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to develop their training, first aid and emergency preparedness services, so that staff and volunteers are better able to meet the specific needs of women and children in situations of armed conflict and internal violence.

**“Girls do mature more quickly when faced with armed conflict and acquire new levels of responsibility and independence.”**





## **MISSION**

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 war and internal violence and to provide them with assistance. It directs and coordinates the international relief activities conducted by the Movement in situations of conflict. It also endeavours to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles. Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.







ICRC