



ICRC

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AFRICA

The ICRC response to the plight of girls caught up in armed conflict

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The ICRC implements an "all victims" approach when carrying out its mandate. However, it recognizes that armed conflicts have a different impact on different categories of the population, particularly women and children. Since 1999, the ICRC has been working towards a more systematic mainstreaming of the specific needs of women and girls needs into its programmes.
- As children, as females and as civilians, girls are entitled to a threefold protection under IHL. Although girls taking a direct part in hostilities lose the general protection afforded to civilians, they retain that accorded to them as children.
- The social, economic and cultural disadvantages often faced by females in African societies are compounded by armed conflict. A female child who becomes separated from her family and/or community during an armed conflict is at risk of falling prey to all manner of exploitation, including sexual, leading to physical and psychological damage, forced or early pregnancy and motherhood and, ultimately, social rejection. Girls associated with fighting forces represent an extreme example of what can happen to a female African child in a war. In countries like Sierra Leone, 60% of children associated with fighting forces were girls. In Liberia, 75% of demobilized women and girls reported they were sexually assaulted. To make matters worse, girls are often overlooked in Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) processes.
- The ICRC helps girls caught up in armed conflict through the promotion of legal norms, through mediation (with armed forces, caretakers, families, communities, national and local authorities and aid organizations), and by restoring family links and providing assistance.
- Examples of ICRC projects benefiting girls include special programmes for rape victims in ICRC-supported health facilities in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Darfur (Sudan). Economic security programmes are adapted to the specific needs of women and girls and most water projects contribute directly to their protection in conflict situations. In general, the ICRC regularly monitors the situation of unaccompanied children and of those formerly associated with fighting forces. Such is the case in the DRC, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Sudan, in particular. In Liberia, it implements individual projects in order to facilitate their reintegration into community life. In Sierra Leone, the ICRC supports a child advocacy and rehabilitation programme, run by the Sierra Leonean Red Cross Society, which provides



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trauma counselling, literacy classes and vocational training benefiting particularly vulnerable demobilized children. The ICRC also provides special attention to the conditions of detention of women and girls, focusing in particular on their accommodation (i.e., dedicated cells and sanitation facilities) and on their access to health services. Rehabilitation and sanitation projects implemented in places of detention often benefit women and girls directly, as was the case in 2006, particularly in Burundi, Cote d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Guinea and Uganda.

- Aware of the importance of building a gender perspective into its protection and assistance activities, the ICRC will continue to strengthen specific areas benefiting women and girls, such as the continuous promotion of the rule of law, specific protection measures for displaced women and girls and those involved in DDR processes, and the restoration of family links.

GENERAL SITUATION

As already mentioned, the ICRC implements an "all victims" approach when carrying out its mandate of protecting and assisting people caught up in armed conflicts or internal violence. However, recognizing that armed conflicts have a different impact on men, women, children and the elderly, and that the needs of women are often overlooked, the ICRC pledged in 1999 to better assess and address the specific needs of women and girls, and to promote the respect that must be accorded to them, with a particular focus on sexual violence. The ICRC has since endeavoured to implement a more systematic mainstreaming of women and girls' needs and perspectives into its programmes and activities¹.

The ICRC also tries to ensure that the specific protection afforded to girls under IHL is widely promoted. As children, as females and as civilians, girls are entitled to a threefold protection under IHL. The specific protection afforded to women relates primarily to their distinct health, hygiene and physiological needs and to their role as mothers. That afforded to children, especially orphans and children separated from their families, relates primarily to care and education and the prohibition on recruiting children under 15. Moreover, like any other civilians, girls are entitled to respect for their right to life and to their physical and mental integrity. If girls take a direct part in hostilities, they lose the general protection afforded to civilians but are always entitled to specific protection as children.

HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

In many societies, women and girls are often disadvantaged, socially, economically and culturally, a fact exacerbated by armed conflict. Lack of marriage possibilities, because of an absence of men or social rejection of girls who were abused or were associated with fighting forces, can have severe implications in a society where unmarried women have little or no status. Conversely, armed conflict can lead to early and/or forced marriages to "protect" girls from sexual harassment or recruitment by armed groups.

RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH SEPARATION

As children, girls may lose the protection afforded by their families and communities as they become displaced and separated during situations of conflict and violence. They may end up alone or with a caretaker in a camp for refugees or displaced persons, or may even become street children. As separated children, they become exposed to abuse and exploitation by any individual in a position of power, including their caretaker. They may, for example, be forced to work while the biological children of their caretaker attend school, or fall prey to a prostitution network. As girls,

¹ See ICRC Update of 14 June 2006 *The Impact of Armed Conflict or Internal Violence on Women and the ICRC's Operational Approach* for an in-depth discussion of the issue, available on the ICRC Donors' Site: [http://extranet.icrc.org/extranet/rexdonors/content.nsf/htmlall/6QRJ3K/\\$FILE/UpdateWomenWar_REX06_46_0.pdf?OpenElement](http://extranet.icrc.org/extranet/rexdonors/content.nsf/htmlall/6QRJ3K/$FILE/UpdateWomenWar_REX06_46_0.pdf?OpenElement)

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they are at risk of sexual abuse, leading to physical and psychological damage, pregnancy, early motherhood and social rejection.

In a study carried out in March 2005 on unaccompanied girls living in camps in Guinea, the ICRC conducted a survey involving 22 girls aged 14 to 19. Eleven had a child and four were pregnant. Seven admitted to having been raped by armed groups as they fled the conflict. The study showed that lack of parental care was a prime cause of early exposure to sexual relations. When assistance delivered in camps was insufficient, unaccompanied girls suffered more than other children, especially if they were mothers themselves. To make up for the shortfall in assistance, some caretakers did not hesitate to make them work long hours instead of letting them attend school. They were also more likely to accept sexual relations with a boy or man who could support them financially, especially if their relationship with their caretaker was unsatisfactory. Most of the girls were unaware of or did not understand how to use contraceptive methods. Even those who attended reproductive health sessions in the camp were not able to attend all the sessions, because they had to look after their babies or to work.

Surveys conducted by a variety of organizations, including the ICRC, consistently show that older unaccompanied and separated children rank school attendance or vocational training as their top priority, above family reunification.

GIRLS ASSOCIATED WITH FIGHTING FORCES

Between 1990 and 2003, girls served as active combatants in armed conflicts in 10 African countries, forced to become fighters as well as spies, messengers and sexual and domestic slaves. Girls were among the primary targets of armed forces and armed opposition groups, making up 60% of the children abducted in Sierra Leone, for example. In Liberia, 75% of demobilized women and girls reported they had been sexually assaulted. Girls formerly associated with fighting forces in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Uganda (and interviewed by the ICRC), recounted being beaten. Those caught trying to escape were killed or told that their families would be punished. The first assignment of a new recruit was usually to attack her own village or execute a member of her own family to make desertion impossible or turn her into a killer. Beyond the obvious trauma caused by such experiences, girls associated with fighting forces are deprived of a family, an education and all the other advantages that would help them prepare for adulthood.

GIRLS AND THE DISARMAMENT, DEMOBILIZATION AND REINTEGRATION (DDR) PROCESS

The effectiveness of DDR processes are usually measured by the number of weapons collected rather than the successful reintegration of former combatants into society. Because many formal DDR programmes are narrowly conceived as opportunities to disarm factions (one man, one gun), with the surrendering of a weapon as a criterion of eligibility, the process often excludes children, especially girls. In October 2000, the international community, through a Security Council resolution², recognized unanimously that women and girls were not sufficiently included in peace and reconciliation processes, including DDR programmes. The fact that girls associated with fighting forces are easily overlooked in DDR processes stems from several factors. These include a reluctance by weapon bearers to acknowledge involvement in the unethical practice of recruiting children, discrimination and lack of gender analysis in armed conflicts, the perception of female soldiers as outcasts, poor planning and implementation of DDR processes and the fact that it is easier for communities to deny or hide the problem.

When there is no formal demobilization process, girls can leave fighting forces by escaping, being captured or being released. In such cases, it is difficult to gain access to them to offer protection

² UN Security Council Resolution 1325 represented a watershed political framework encouraging women to become relevant actors in negotiating peace agreements, planning refugee camps and peacekeeping operations, participating in post-conflict elections and rebuilding their societies.

and assistance. Even with a DDR process in place, girls may shy away from the options offered because of the stigma attached to being a female combatant. In other cases, they stay away either because they have not been released by their partners or abductors or because they believe — rightly or wrongly — that they do not meet the admission criteria. They may also feel daunted by the insecurity prevailing in gathering centres and quartering areas.

ICRC ACTION

THE ICRC'S OPERATIONAL APPROACH

The ICRC can help girls caught up in armed conflict through the promotion of legal norms, through mediation (with weapon bearers, caretakers, families, communities, national and local authorities and aid organizations), by raising awareness, restoring family links and providing assistance (food and essential supplies, medical and psychological support and the implementation of individual or group projects).

PROMOTION OF LEGAL NORMS

Ensuring the promotion and implementation of IHL is a core ICRC activity. Encouraging States to ratify the Optional Protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and support the adoption of specific measures to implement it is part of this process. The ICRC also runs educational programmes on IHL and applicable humanitarian norms for armed, police and security forces and other weapon bearers, decision makers and opinion leaders. It endeavours to incorporate the needs of women and girls and the prohibition on child recruitment and sexual violence in training sessions aimed at weapon bearers, emphasizing in particular that sexual violence is a grave breach of the law, involving individual criminal responsibility.

The ICRC conducts Exploring Humanitarian Law programmes, designed to teach teenagers the basic rules and principles of IHL, including those designed to protect women and girls, in 16 countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The ICRC also cooperates with the UN Institute for Training and Research and the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations to ensure that the specific needs of women and children are included in the training of civilian personnel involved in peacekeeping missions.

PRESERVING FAMILY UNITY OR RESTORING FAMILY LINKS

Family unity is a basic tenet of IHL. As discussed above, it is crucial to the survival of girls affected by armed conflict. To restore contact between dispersed family members, the ICRC carries out specific programmes to protect and assist children separated from their parents as a result of war. ICRC services include:

- interviewing children and communities to identify vulnerable children
- registering vulnerable children and monitoring and protecting them while their relatives are being traced
- active and passive tracing³ of the parents or closest relatives and the exchange of Red Cross messages; new tracing methods include publishing gazettes with the names and pictures of children, putting up posters in strategic places and broadcasting information on the radio
- mediating between children and their host families if problems arise and with parents, after reunification
- carrying out reunification and regularly monitoring the child's situation thereafter

³ active tracing involves active research in the field through the National Society or the ICRC while passive tracing involves the gathering of names and their publication on the ICRC familylinks website or in a gazette.

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- advocating on behalf of children and referring them to other aid agencies should tracing results remain negative or reunification prove problematic

ICRC activities to restore family links are mostly concentrated in Africa. In 2005 and 2006, the organization monitored some 5,000 unaccompanied children, including girls, and reunited more than 1,300 with their families. In the DRC, 42% of active tracing cases concerned girls. In Liberia, the figure was 44.8%. As in other countries, including Guinea-Conakry, the ICRC set up transit centres for separated children waiting to be reunited with their families. In Angola, Burundi, the DRC, Rwanda and Sierra Leone, it distributed assistance kits to separated children. Elsewhere, it supported agencies caring for unaccompanied children.

PROTECTING CHILDREN IN DDR PROCESSES

Although the ICRC cannot be part of a DDR negotiation process, it can facilitate agreements between parties, contribute to their content, and support their implementation. In general, the ICRC recommends:

- immediately releasing children associated with fighting forces, without waiting for a peace agreement to be signed or a DDR process to be launched
- including the release of children and their reintegration into society in peace agreements
- making the specific needs of released children, especially girls, a priority in DDR processes, whether the process is a formal one or not
- including children who escaped, who were captured or detained, and those who did not bear weapons, in DDR processes

The ICRC conducts individual monitoring of demobilized children to ensure they are not recruited again and to ease their reintegration. In recent years, the ICRC was involved in DDR processes in Angola, the DRC, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. The ICRC is currently preparing to be involved in the upcoming DDR process in Nepal.

ASSISTANCE

ICRC assistance programmes focus on water and habitat, economic security and health. Although they target the population as a whole (the "all victims approach"), they can target specific groups who are more affected or who have particular needs.

EXAMPLES OF ICRC PROGRAMMES AND ACTIVITIES BENEFITING GIRLS

ECONOMIC SECURITY

In **Liberia**, the ICRC has set up a market-gardening project to give boys and girls formerly associated with fighting forces an additional income and help them resume normal lives. Although girls were encouraged to participate in these programmes, boys still outnumbered girls. Special efforts were made to include girl heads of household in registration and census exercises to ensure they are issued documents in their name entitling them to assistance for themselves and other children in their care.

In rural areas of Darfur, **Sudan**, a specific programme was set up in 2006 to enable the worst off among the beneficiaries of ICRC food aid – households often headed by women or girls – to access arable land as a means of restoring their livelihood. They received the necessary inputs to boost their production, including a combination of staple- and cash-crop seeds, together with hoes and weeders, donkey ploughs to lighten their physical workload and explanatory leaflets. A July evaluation showed that 99.5% of the seeds had been planted according to recommendations and some beneficiaries were cultivating over 50% more land in comparison with 2005.

Women and girls heads of household are the main beneficiaries of emergency economic security assistance. Such is the case, for example, in **Somalia, Sudan** and **Uganda**. Whenever possible, assistance packages are adapted to their specific needs and include, for example, hygienic material and fabric to make clothing.

WATER AND HABITAT

Many water and sanitation projects target mainly women and girls by providing safe access to a source of water for household purposes, thus diminishing the risk of attacks and/or harassment. Apart from serving a security purpose, such projects also ensure better sanitation practices for the whole family, reducing the frequency of illnesses caused by inadequate hygiene, while allowing more time for tasks other than fetching water.

Examples of important ICRC water and sanitation projects can be found in **Chad, Sudan, Somalia** and **Uganda**.

HEALTH CARE AND COUNSELLING PROGRAMMES

In eastern **DRC**, the ICRC set up a special programme for rape victims in ICRC-supported health facilities. Doctors and nurses specially trained to care for women and girls provide preventive treatment for sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, and unwanted pregnancies within 72 hours of a rape having been committed. If needed, the ICRC arranges for the transfer of rape victims to hospitals with specialized surgical units to deal with the complications of sexual violence. In 2005, 219 women and girls who were victims of sexual violence were treated in ICRC-supported health centres in the DRC. In 2006, 592 victims were treated, 81 within 72 hours of being raped. During the same period, 1,317 victims were counselled by ICRC-trained volunteers.

Similar health programmes exist **elsewhere in Africa**. In the **Sudanese** region of Darfur, the ICRC supports five primary-health-care centres in conflict-affected areas, providing sexual and reproductive health care.

Very often, health programmes also include expanded immunization programmes benefiting in particular women and girls of child-bearing age. In 2006, such programmes were supported by the ICRC in **Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda** and **Zimbabwe**, for example.

CHILD ADVOCACY AND REHABILITATION PROGRAMMES

In Sierra Leone

The ICRC has been providing financial support to a programme started in 2001 for war-affected children. The programme, run by the Sierra Leone Red Cross Society (SLRCS) with support from the International Federation and partner National Societies, seeks to modify the behaviour and attitude of such children through a process involving trauma healing, literacy classes, vocational training and help in resuming normal family and community life. In addition to learning new skills to ease their reintegration into society, children receive counselling (individually or in groups) and are given the opportunity to engage in sports and other recreational activities. Taking part in theatre performances and cultural shows helps them express their feelings and come to terms with the terrifying acts they were subjected to or forced to commit.

Participants are selected from among the most vulnerable children between the ages of 10 and 15; at least half of them are girls. The majority of the girls were associated with fighting forces and rejected by their families and communities after the conflict. Many were traumatized and/or raped. Some centres have facilities for babies, making it easier for girls with children of their own (many of whom are breastfeeding) to concentrate fully on the centre's activities.

Children attend the programme five days a week over a 10-month period. They are provided one meal a day as well as transport to the centre. Apart from basic literacy, girls are taught tie-dyeing, sewing, weaving and construction. After their training, they return to their communities with a start-

up kit to help them find a job, start their own business or help their families. The SLRCS monitors the girls' reintegration over a period of six months after graduation and conducts awareness-raising to ensure that the children return to child-friendly communities.

In other countries

Similar programmes exist in **other war-torn African countries**, including **Liberia**. A survey conducted in Liberia and Sierra Leone revealed that 30% of the girls involved in these programmes had babies conceived during the war.

ICRC INDIVIDUAL PROJECTS IN FAVOUR OF UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN

In Liberia

In 2006, the ICRC developed a handbook to help field delegates in Liberia implement such projects. The beneficiaries are unaccompanied children registered by the ICRC for tracing purposes. Some have been reunited with their families in Liberia; others require alternative solutions to family reunification as tracing was unsuccessful. Children who may benefit from individual projects are either facing protection problems or an economic situation that places them below the economic level of the rest of the community. Protection issues include exploitation (e.g. sexual exploitation or forced labour), recruitment or risk of recruitment into armed forces, problems in being accepted by the community and/or family, sexual violence, other types of violence perpetrated by family members or other members of the community, physical or psychological handicaps or other medical problems (including trauma from having participated in the conflict). Lack of school attendance is also considered a risk factor for the child. Specific situations that raise alarm bells in terms of the child's potential level of vulnerability include a child reunified with step-parents, a pregnant girl or a young mother, a girl living alone or a child-headed household.

Each case is examined individually by ICRC field and protection delegates, and, if necessary, by a delegate specializing in economic security to determine whether an individual project is required. Projects are adapted to each particular case and can take the following forms:

- mediation
- referral to the services of another organization (with ICRC payment, if necessary)
- insistence on schooling (with ICRC paying for school-related expenses or mediating with parents/caretakers and education authorities where public primary school is free)
- apprenticeship/training (with ICRC paying for training and materials if not already provided by another organization)
- distribution of material goods
- setting up an income-generating project for the child's household
- medical support

Sometimes, a community-based approach is the best option, especially when the child and household are in a similar situation as the rest of the community. A community-based response can take the form of persuading another organization to include a specific community in their programmes, setting up an economic or income-generating project for the community, or supporting an existing community structure or programme. In Liberia, 20 such community-based projects in favour of war-affected children are planned in 2007.

In other countries

In general, the ICRC regularly monitors unaccompanied children and those formerly associated with fighting forces, either by visiting their families after reunification or their host families if tracing is still ongoing. Apart from **Liberia**, the ICRC closely monitors children in other countries, including

the **DRC, Rwanda, Sierra Leone** and **Sudan**. In Sudan, such activities have been conducted for many years in the South and only more recently in the Darfur region. In 2006, working closely with community leaders and representatives of the Sierra Leonean Ministry of Social Welfare, the ICRC secured the release of a few girls from former caretakers-- ex-commanders unwilling to let them go in spite of the girls' stated wish to be reunited with their families after their parents had been traced.

GIRLS IN DETENTION

While visiting people deprived of their freedom, ICRC delegates pay special attention to the conditions of detention of women and children, focusing in particular on their accommodation (i.e., dedicated cells and sanitation facilities) and on their access to health services. Whenever rehabilitating prison sanitation facilities, the ICRC takes into consideration the needs of women and girls. The same is true for ICRC assistance to prison medical/health services.

In 2006 the ICRC supported projects to set up separate areas for women in places of detention, in particular in **Burundi** and **Ethiopia**. Projects to rehabilitate prison sanitation facilities were implemented in **Burundi, Cote d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Guinea** and **Uganda**, for example.

CONCLUSION

Aware of the importance of building a gender perspective into its protection and assistance activities, the ICRC will continue to strengthen specific areas benefiting women and girls, such as the continuous promotion of the rule of law, specific protection measures for women and girls in IDP camps, during DDR processes and in detention, and the restoration of family links.

Promotion of the rule of law

The ICRC will continue to work to ensure that prohibitions on rape and all other forms of sexual violence are included in the military codes, training manuals and instructions of all weapon bearers, along with enforcement mechanisms. Recent developments in IHL, including the establishment of international criminal tribunals, denote progress in the way that crimes against women and girls are being recognized and redressed.

Assistance and protection measures in favour of conflict-affected girls

The ICRC will continue to pay attention to issues such as security and the provision of adequate reproductive health care (including counselling for victims of sexual violence and other abuses) in IDP camps. It will pursue its economic security programmes adapted to women and girls and will also push for full and equal participation of girls in educational programmes.

Protection measures for girls in DDR processes

The ICRC will continue to advocate in favour of specific recommendations adopted by the international community regarding girls in DDR processes, including the need to register girls as full persons (not as family members or dependents), whether or not they surrender weapons. It will also continue to provide advice and recommendations on the subject in specific DDR settings.

Protection measures for girls in detention

The ICRC will continue to pay special attention to the conditions of detention of any women and girls being held, focusing in particular on their accommodation (dedicated cells and sanitation facilities) and on their access to health services. Its findings will continue to directly impact its recommendations and assistance programmes for detainees.

Restoring family links

In view of the fact that war-affected girls, especially those formerly associated with fighting forces, may be stigmatized when reunited with their families (especially if they are pregnant or have a child, or were forced to kill a family member), or may have been forcibly married to a "caretaker" during the conflict, the ICRC will continue to take special care to assess and evaluate the emotional and social consequences of reunification for girls. It will also be attentive to the fact that girls may not want to be reunited with their families to avoid losing the schooling and training opportunities they may have in a refugee or IDP camp.

We hope that this information is useful to enhance your comprehension of ICRC working methods.

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With our best wishes and best regards,



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