



Actions must match the words

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Finding an appropriate response to the scourge of sexual violence remains a major concern for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Reflecting on the past three years, I am grateful to be able to share the ICRC's perspective in this white paper.

The ICRC is a neutral, independent and impartial humanitarian organisation whose work aims to provide protection and assistance to victims of armed conflict and other violent situations.

The ICRC works in an increasingly complex and fragile environment, where armed conflict overlaps with chronic poverty, weak governance and destabilising global challenges such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. Affected people have increased vulnerabilities due to factors such as a lack of access to health care, clean water, and quality sanitation, as well as insecure food supplies and the destruction of livelihoods.

Gender-based inequalities are exacerbated during armed conflict, generating and supporting harmful social practices and power dynamics. The risk of sexual violence against women and men also rises when war leads to the erosion of community fabric and, particularly if there is impunity. All of this increases the risk.

The ICRC works at the front line of the world's conflicts, so it faces regularly harrowing accounts of the devastating effects of sexual violence. These range from physical, potentially life-threatening impacts, through to the heavy mental health burden placed on those bearing the invisible scars of trauma. **The social consequences can also be considerable, with shame and stigma often forcing survivors into isolation out of fear of rejection and reprisals.**

The growing demand for the ICRC to support survivors – especially with the provision of health care services – is evidence of the wide prevalence of the phenomenon.

When the ICRC acts, we place survivors at the centre of our considerations. We use operational, legal and diplomatic approaches; all of which are complementary and mutually reinforcing.

An operational approach - response and prevention

The ICRC's operational approach can be seen in eighteen countries where we have implemented programmes to address the problems associated with sexual violence. This work includes collaboration with national representatives of the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement and other partners.

In all situations featuring armed conflict and detention where the ICRC is present, its staff systematically reverse the burden of proof: we consider that acts of sexual violence are taking place unless the contrary can be proven.

« *The social consequences can also be dramatic* »

The ICRC thus takes a proactive stance on sexual violence, working to prevent it through dialogue with the authorities and parties to each conflict. It also addresses the stigma surrounding this phenomenon, while focusing on the needs of survivors.

The ICRC uses an integrated and multidisciplinary operational response. It is rooted in the ICRC's mandate of protection, which aims to preserve the physical integrity and dignity of people affected by armed conflict and other violent situations. This mandate is illustrated, for example, in the ICRC's confidential dialogue with those who are party to conflicts, with us addressing violations of international humanitarian law (IHL). Our approach is also apparent in our work in places of detention.

The ICRC's operational response includes the provision of primary health care, clinical case management and psychological/psychosocial care for survivors of sexual violence. It is accompanied by community-based awareness-raising activities regarding both access to these services and on the stigma surrounding sexual violence. It supports the socio-economic reintegration of survivors, as finding other ways to boost resilience. This can be through the provision of financial support for immediate needs, or assistance with the creation and maintenance of longer term income-generating activities. It aims to reduce communities' exposure to risk by the deployment of housing, water and sanitation programmes, while addressing

vulnerabilities through capacity building.

This operational approach is supported by a strong institutional commitment to increasing our accountability to those affected. This framework strengthens the participation of survivors in the humanitarian responses which are designed to address their specific needs. It is essential to have such an inclusive response which takes these requirements into account.

Indeed, the needs of certain groups are often overlooked in humanitarian programmes designed to offer support to survivors of sexual violence. We must not forget that men, boys and LGBTIQ+ people are also victims and survivors of sexual violence. Barriers to accessing necessary services, as well as stigmatisation, are often particularly pronounced for these people.

The ICRC promotes respect for international law, precisely with the aim of preventing the occurrence sexual violence. This goal requires the implementation of complex behavioural, attitudinal and legal change.

In 2022, the ICRC launched a new multi-year, multi-country initiative to prevent sexual violence: the Sexual Violence Prevention Programme. This works with members of conflict-affected communities and weapon bearers, addressing the attitudes and behaviours that enable the devastating prevalence of sexual violence.

Understanding the attitudes of perpetrators, or those who may become perpetrators, is essential work. In 2022, the ICRC published the results of operational research (funded by the Luxembourg government) on men's and boys' perceptions of sexual violence in the Central African Republic and South Sudan. These results directly inform ICRC operations by supporting the continued use of survivor-centred approaches, intergenerational dialogue and addressing those cultures which can tend to blame survivors and grant impunity to perpetrators.

These initiatives also aim to foster reflection within a community of experts and practitioners. They are part of a process of sharing experience among actors involved in preventing and responding to sexual violence in conflict situations.

A legal approach

Operational proximity to survivors, perpetrators, parties to conflict and the authorities is essential to the ICRC's legal approach. International human rights law (IHRL) is a living body of law, the interpretation and application of which reflects contemporary challenges.

IHL remains as relevant as ever, such as prohibiting sexual violence in all its forms in armed conflict situations. Sexual violence is also prohibited by other bodies of international law, including international human rights law (IHL) and international criminal law (ICL).

For several years, the ICRC has been engaged in consultation and analysis that aims to reflect the diversity of experiences of all people in armed conflict. The ICRC incorporates an intersectional point of view into the interpretation and

application of IHL, thus recognising the different factors that structure an individual's identity: age, social class, disability, religion, origin, sexual orientation and, of course, gender.

Pre-existing inequalities based on gender (such as unequal access to resources and low representation in decision-making bodies (including in the military)), are likely to exacerbate the direct and indirect consequences of the damage suffered by civilian populations in conflicts. The structural inequalities to which women and girls may be subject – for example in their access to health care – can expose them disproportionately to the consequences of military operations: either death or injury. Unfortunately, sexual violence is not the only trauma that survivors suffer because of their gender.

Taking gender into account when applying and interpreting IHL is an essential step towards reducing harm to civilians in armed conflict. This was one of the main conclusions of a consultation conducted with legal and humanitarian experts by the ICRC in 2021.

The ICRC also remains committed to the implementation of IHL at the national level. Its legal experts help the competent authorities to implement laws that prohibit sexual violence by, for example, providing them with checklists of relevant IHL, IHRL and ICL provisions.

Through its operational presence, the ICRC remains aware of difficulties that may arise in the implementation of certain additional rules not otherwise provided for in IHL. For example, the ICRC believes that policies that require health workers and other professionals to report sexual violence in armed conflict to the responsible authorities (usually law enforcement agencies) may discourage survivors from approaching health service providers. Furthermore, this obligation may increase the risk of reprisals against survivors and the medical facilities themselves. While these rules aim to ensure that perpetrators face justice, the ICRC considers them to be incompatible with IHL and a survivor-centred approach.

A diplomatic approach

The ICRC's humanitarian diplomacy works through official channels to strengthen operational humanitarian action, as well as the development and implementation of the law.

In 2019, a broad coalition of actors working to provide responses to sexual violence in armed conflict met several times. Survivors, states, UN agencies, the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, and national and international NGOs all agreed that we all need to do more.

In February 2019, I joined Antonio Guterres, Secretary General of the United Nations, and Julienne Lusenge, a women's rights activist in the

Democratic Republic of Congo, in denouncing the failure to address the damage caused by sexual violence.

We have three demands: the eradication of sexual atrocities as a tactic of war; changing the attitudes that lead to survivors being blamed rather than perpetrators, and better protection for communities at risk. These have been amplified in key forums, such as the Speak, Stand Rise Up! initiative launched in March 2019 by Her Royal Highness the Grand Duchess of Luxembourg, and also the Oslo Conference (May 2019) on combating sexual and gender-based violence in humanitarian crises. In the same year, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2467, that seeks to put a stop to sexual violence while recognising the essential role played by survivors.

While 2019 has been a year of remarkable activity, joint efforts are needed more than ever. Sexual violence is strictly prohibited and preventable.

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