



ICRC

check against delivery

66th session of the United Nations General Assembly

Third Committee

Agenda item 28

Advancement of Women

Statement by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

New York, October 2011

This statement will soon be available, in all six official UN languages,

on the ICRC website:

www.icrc.org

Mr Chair,

Over the last decade, the international community has come to recognize, without equivocation, that women are among the persons most affected by armed conflict in very specific ways. Steps have been taken by States to promote the rights and well-being of women throughout the world, in particular in situations of armed conflict, where they are exposed to a wide range of issues in an insecure environment.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is engaged daily with such women, whose experience of conflict is far from homogeneous and, in fact, extremely varied. They demonstrate great resilience in circumstances often of the most daunting adversity. Women and girls suddenly propelled to head their households are the embodiment of this.

Armed conflicts and other situations of violence often lead to displacement and the separation of family members. Large numbers of men are engaged in hostilities, detained, killed or go missing. This leaves many women no choice but to assume sole responsibility for the welfare of their families. In Iraq alone, it is estimated that over one million women head their households. These women face extraordinary difficulties. In times like this, when money is a pressing need, these women's ability to pursue economic activities may be hampered not just by their limited education and lack of professional skills, but also by cultural traditions that prevent them from running businesses or doing paid work.

As a neutral, independent and impartial humanitarian organization that focuses on strictly humanitarian concerns, the ICRC has developed a wide range of programs to help meet some of the needs of households headed by women. Relief distributions and microeconomic initiatives address immediate material needs and enable these women to regain some economic independence.

Their precarious situation is often exacerbated by lack of access to a wide range of basic services. In some countries where they are legally entitled to support or compensation, women find themselves without either. In many contexts, the wives of missing men do not have a clear legal status – because they are neither wives nor widows. Consequently, besides despairing over the fate of their loved ones, these women may find that their rights to property, inheritance or even the guardianship of their children are in jeopardy. States have an important role to play in resolving these issues, but the efforts needed will result in women becoming more independent and economically self-sufficient. Therefore, ICRC programs also provide for

psychosocial support and guide the wives of missing men, and widows, through the administrative procedures involved in applying for legal advice. The families of missing persons have a right to know what has become of their loved ones. It is the authorities who are responsible for ascertaining their fate and letting the families know. The ICRC seeks to heighten awareness among authorities and provides support for the training of government staff in forensics and the management of human remains, as well as in the collection of ante-mortem data.

In spite of these efforts, women and girls at the head of their families continue to come up against many obstacles that can seem insurmountable at times – for instance, difficulties in accessing vital health-care services. Women's access to health-care services, far too often, is restricted by general insecurity or violence. This can take a number of different forms, from attacks on health-care personnel and facilities and medical vehicles to arbitrary obstruction of medical vehicles at checkpoints. It may also include harassing, threatening or punishing health-care personnel for performing activities compatible with medical ethics. Acts of this sort, which are often in violation of applicable international humanitarian law and human rights law, have severe consequences: they drastically limit access to life-saving services which are essential for women and their families, such as vaccination and maternal and child health-care programmes. In response to this, in 2011, the ICRC launched its *Health Care in Danger* project, which aims to address the widespread and severe impact of difficult access to health services, during armed conflicts and other situations of violence.

Mr Chair,

In closing, we would like to emphasize the importance for all persons, but especially for women and girls, of improving access to and delivery of health care in armed conflict and other situations of violence. The health-care community cannot address these challenges alone. It is imperative that States, their armed forces and all others exercising authority recognize that violence that disrupts the delivery of health care is a serious and widespread humanitarian challenge, one that requires more focused attention from States throughout the world.

Thank you.

