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Women in Armed Opposition Groups Speak on War, Protection and Obligations under International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law

**Report of a workshop organized in Geneva
by Geneva Call and the Program
for the Study of International Organization(s)
August 26 – 29, 2004**

By

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We know that the role of women as actors in armed conflict has traditionally been neglected and undervalued. Has their potential in the promotion of international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHR) within armed opposition groups also been overlooked? Additionally, we recognize that in a number of ways women and girls experience and respond to armed conflict differently than men and boys. Would these differences make women within armed opposition groups potentially more receptive to supporting and promoting IHL and IHR? In seeking to learn more about the experiences of women and girls within armed opposition groups and to answer questions about their potential roles in promoting IHL and IHR, a unique workshop was held in August 2004, in Geneva, Switzerland, organized by Geneva Call and the Program for the Study of International Organization(s) of the Graduate Institute of International Studies¹

During the four day workshop, 32 women from 18 armed opposition groups met with a small group of peace and human rights activists, humanitarian actors, and scholars.² The 32 women were members of armed opposition groups currently in armed conflict in Aceh/Indonesia, Burundi, Nagaland/India, Kurdistan/Iraq, Iran, the Philippines, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, and Turkey, as well as women who were members of

¹ The report was authored by Dyan Mazurana, PhD, Director of the Youth and Community Program, Feinstein International Famine Center, Tufts University, USA. The meeting was held from August 26-August 29th in Geneva, Switzerland.

² Representatives from the following organizations were present: Association of War Affected Women, Sri Lanka; Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, Switzerland; the Center for Peacebuilding, Swiss Peace Foundation, Switzerland; Conciliation Resources, United Kingdom; Department of Criminology, University of Ottawa, Canada; Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, Switzerland; Feinstein International Famine Center, Tufts University, United States; Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway; the Suzanne Mubarak Women's International Peace Movement; Swiss Foundation for Landmine Victims Aid, Switzerland; United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research; Women and War, International Committee of the Red Cross, Switzerland; Women Peacemakers Program, the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Netherlands.

armed opposition groups that had recently been engaged in armed conflicts in Colombia, El Salvador, Equator, Guatemala, Kosovo, and Northern Ireland.

This report covers the key protection and obligations for women and girls in armed opposition groups under IHL and IHR. Drawing on the voices of the 32 women present from 18 armed opposition groups as well as previous relevant studies, the report then investigates the ways in which women and girls enter into armed opposition groups and their active participation within the groups. It documents and analyzes the ways women experience empowerment in armed opposition groups, and the ways they are disempowered. It examines the reasons girls under 18 years of age enter into armed opposition groups, their roles, and the threats to their rights and physical and mental integrity from forces both outside and within their armed group. The report then moves to cover key disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) issues raised by the women participants. It concludes with an investigation into the potential gains and obstacles facing women and girls within armed groups and those wishing to work with them in promoting and enforcing IHL and IRL within armed opposition groups. Each section is followed by key lessons learned from discussions with women in armed opposition groups.

This report draws upon the information, insights, and recommendations that came out over the course of the workshop by participants within the four working groups. The first working group dealt with issues regarding women and girls in armed opposition groups, their roles as leaders, their agency, and the challenges they face in trying to implement IHL or IHR. The second working group investigated the roles and experiences of women and girls within armed opposition as victims, perpetrators, and

resisters of violence. The third working group focused on women and girls in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs. The fourth working group focused on the specific roles and experiences of girls within the various armed opposition groups. The report also draws upon recent relevant secondary research to further contextualize and illuminate the issues raised by the women participants.

EXECUTIVE LESSONS LEARNED

On women and girls within armed opposition groups:

1. Women and girls within armed opposition groups consider themselves, and are considered by their groups, as fighters and full members of the group. They stressed that terminology and concepts applied to them must be able to encompass their full membership within the group and their armed opposition to the state.
2. Nearly all the women joined armed opposition groups to try to shield themselves from further violations of their physical and mental integrity by state actors. The failure of the state to uphold its protective obligations under IHL and IHR, among other laws, was a primary motivator in girls and women entering armed opposition groups. All but one woman indicated that the option to join the group was her last option.
3. Nearly all the women entered into the armed groups as girls. This suggests that (certain) girls and boys are both targeted by and at heightened risk of lack of protection by the state, perhaps more so than adults or the elderly.
4. Sexual violence against girls and women by state actors was a driving force in pushing girls and women into armed opposition groups. In some cases, it was the primary motivating factor in some girls and women choosing to take up arms against the state. Thus sexual violence by state actors against civilian females is anything but secondary and was shown to be a key factor within the perpetuation (and potentially escalation) of the conflict.
5. Women and girls play central roles and hold diverse, key positions within armed opposition groups. Governments, international, multilateral, and nongovernmental organizations should recognize women's central leadership positions within armed groups and engage with women leaders in efforts to promote and uphold IHL and IHR.

On women's leadership and agency within armed opposition groups:

6. Women are leaders within armed opposition groups and their needs and interests may vary from those of male fighters. However, women's voices and priorities continue to be marginalized within peace processes, at times by their own armed groups.
7. While none of the women joined the armed opposition group with a women's rights agenda in mind, today, half of the women are working within their groups to include some women's rights in their political platforms.
8. Women in armed opposition groups are treated on a more equal footing with males where women and men have the same experiences. When women have different experiences, such as relating to sexual and reproductive functions and child-rearing, they are at a disadvantage within the group which normalizes men's experiences.
9. Women leaders within armed opposition forces face challenges to their authority from subordinate male fighters on the basis of their sex. Their hold over non-professional and ill trained fighters is tenuous. Consequently, women within armed opposition groups most likely would face difficulties, in some cases gender-specific, in trying to promote or enforce IHL or IHR within their forces. Thus, strategies for working with women regarding IHL and IHR would need to pay attention to and factor in these challenges.
10. Women within armed opposition forces may be more inclined than their male counterparts to view sexual assault against female civilians and members of their own forces and killing of children and civilians as unnecessary and abusive and seeks ways to address or prevent it.

On girls associated with fighting forces:

11. Girls and boys are primary members of armed opposition groups. In a number of cases, they enter the armed group because the state has failed to protect them. Indeed, many enter into the groups seeking defense from violations by state actors.
12. Armed opposition groups encourage girls to join telling them it will be safer within the group than if they remain a civilian. None of the women from armed opposition groups saw the presence of children in their groups as a violation of IHL or IHR. On the contrary, many saw it as the best alternative for children trying to escape abusive state actors. Thus, significant work remains to be carried out in terms of enhancing states' obligations of protection of its children as well as the

obligations of armed opposition groups not to use or recruit children within their forces.

13. Girls also enter armed opposition groups to escape violent or repressive relations or institutions within the larger society, including forced and arranged marriages and abusive households. In these cases, again failing the protection of the state, girls seek sanctuary among armed groups to escape violations and repression within their own families and cultures.
14. Girls serve a variety of roles within armed opposition groups, including as fighters. Young girls are being trained as fighters, including being trained and commanded by women. Women should not be seen as inherently more concerned about the security and rights of girls in their armed opposition groups.
15. Armed opposition groups say they offer security to girls by relegating some of them to roles that limit their exposure to direct fighting. This is not an effective form of security for the girls as they will be treated “as if they were fighters” if captured by government forces. However, most of the women in the armed opposition groups felt that limiting their roles was a sufficient form of security for the girls.
16. There is little security for girls within armed opposition groups. They are at high risk for sexual exploitation and abuse from the males of the group. Single young girls appear to be at the highest risk. Little is done within some of the armed opposition groups to address these factors.
17. Girls in some armed opposition groups are turning to alcohol and drugs as a coping mechanism to enable them to function in violent, male-dominated environments. In other cases, girls are being forced to take drugs and alcohol to deaden them to the horrors of fighting and killing.
18. Women within armed opposition groups can provide important information about girls within their groups, although this should complement and not serve as a substitute to talking with the girls themselves. Information is vital and should include an on-going analysis of the roles and experiences of girls in armed opposition groups, and their physical and mental needs to inform policy and practice to promote and enforce the protection and rights of girls.

On disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of women and girls in armed opposition groups:

19. There is a need to gather gender-disaggregated data to develop more accurate understandings of the roles and experiences of women and girls associated with fighting forces during the conflict so as to better inform peace negotiations and DDR policies and programs.

20. Women and girls continue to be marginalized and excluded in DDR programs. This is due, in part, to the fact that they are not present during peace negotiations when parameters for DDR are set. When they are marginalized, women and girls participate in DDR in much lower numbers than their actual force numbers, leaving most of them to spontaneously reintegrate with no assistance.
21. Narrow definitions of “fighters” continue to cause problems for women and girls within fighting forces and are blocking women’s and girls’ entrance into DDR programs.
22. Many demobilization camps continue to fail to meet the needs of women and girls associated with fighting forces. Physical security and the ability for them to care for their children while in a camp or center is a paramount incentive/disincentive for women and girls entering a camp and must be enhanced.
23. In reintegration, the women prioritized more equitable economic, political, and justice systems, and a psychosocial healing of individuals and communities. None felt these priorities had been adequately achieved and most believed the state disengaged from reintegration once the armed opposition had demobilized.
24. Women and men community and religious leaders within the communities that “hosted” fighting forces may be good sources to help identify girls associated with fighting forces.
25. Demobilization should be the end to a military process for girls. They should be separated from adult fighters as soon as possible. One should strive to ensure that demobilization of girls is demilitarized.
26. Civilian organizations and staff should work with and provide appropriate services for demobilized girls. Entrance into DDR programs should incorporate military entry points but should expand beyond to include health care centers, churches, mosques, and civil society organizations assisting victims of sexual violence.
27. One should ensure that at demobilization girls are given clear information about what the DDR process is about, their rights within it, their options, and the next steps in the program.

On challenges to implementing an IHL and IHR agenda within armed opposition

groups:

28. Most women had no working knowledge of IHL or IHR. Most were not aware that IHL, in particular, was applicable to women and girls.

29. Most women were unaware of their own obligations under IHL. Violations against civilians or enemy fighters by themselves or their forces were not seen or understood in the context of violations of IHL or IHR.
30. Some women saw little relevance in IHL or IHR because their own rights had been violated by state actors whom were never held accountable.
31. Knowledge about IHL and IHR is insufficient to produce change in attitudes and behavior among armed opposition fighters. There needs to be more systematic work on how to enact attitudinal and behavioural changes on the ground.
32. There needs to be development or strengthening of external and internal monitoring, reporting, and enforcement mechanisms to hold violators of IHL and IHR within armed groups accountable. Without accountability mechanisms, declarations and signed statements are often meaningless.
33. The women do not speak of violations by themselves or their groups against civilian populations or enemy fighters with any reference to their obligations under IHL or IHR. The women's concern for violations against civilians was primarily strategic, in terms of undermining a support or supply base, and not reflective of an understanding of obligations under IHL or IHR.
34. Working with armed opposition groups regarding the support and promotion of IHL and IHR has important gender dimensions. If women within armed opposition groups are identified as potential change agents, consideration must be given to the constraints they face as women within these groups.
35. Women in armed groups' willingness to interact with international actors involved in IHL and IHR was centered around their desire to have their struggles seen as legitimate. This included a strong desire for more active and meaningful roles in peace processes and negotiations. Given the roles women and girls play in keeping alive the conflict, they clearly have a stake in ending conflict.



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