

Women combatants and humanitarian law An unprecedented conference in Geneva

For 3 days, from 27 to 29 August 2004, more than 30 women combatants or former combatants belonging to rebel armed groups from some twenty war-torn countries, accepted an invitation by Geneva Call to come together and share their experiences and ideas concerning international humanitarian law.

Are armed conflicts the preserve of men? Are women merely innocent victims or symbols of peace? What are the roles and the responsibilities of women fighting for armed groups? Do women have more respect for human life? What do they know about humanitarian law? Are they particularly sensitive to humanitarian principles? Are they able to convince male combatants to respect these norms?

These are just some of the questions Geneva Call and the PSIO of the IUHEI wished to ask women participants in armed struggle. To this end, Geneva Call, thanks to its extensive network of non-state actors, invited them to participate in a workshop on the theme "How can women combatants contribute to the promotion of humanitarian law?"

Over the course of three days of debate, emotion, conviction, and sometimes anger, the views and experiences of these women were put at the centre of the discussion in an attempt to achieve a better understanding of the involvement of women in armed conflict and their potential role in the promotion of humanitarian legal standards.

"Women and girl combatants within armed groups: leadership, agency, and the challenges of implementing a humanitarian agenda"; "Women's and girls' experiences as victims, perpetrators and resisters of violence during conflict"; "Invisibility and neglect: including women and girls in the DDR process"; "Girl soldiers: protection, psycho-social effects, and the challenges of reintegration", and "Raising awareness of the landmine issue and seeking cooperation in mine action" were the key issues of the workshop.

The various personal experiences of these women made it possible to reach the conclusions that on the whole, women are more sensitive to life and extreme violence than men. However, once they are engaged in armed struggle, women must "forget" these values both to answer men's demands and to gain their respect. Therefore the challenge is how to find ways to defend women's values even when women choose to fight men's battles.

This workshop, very successful, was a first meeting with only women combatants. Future collaborations will seek ways to be more effective and sensitive to gender, in order to enhance the status of humanitarian law during armed conflicts. A second step has been already envisaged to bring together women combatants based on the type of conflict (in progress, cease-fire or end of conflict.)

A publication written by Dr Dyan Mazurana and published by the Programme for the Study of International Organization(s) of the Graduate Institute of International

Studies, co-organizer of the conference, will be available at the end of October 2004. (available from info@genevacall.org)

Since 2000, Geneva Call, an independent international humanitarian non-governmental organization (NGO), has dedicated itself to engaging NSAs in adhering to the Antipersonnel mine ban and other humanitarian norms. Geneva Call works in partnership with local NGOs and members of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. The Ottawa Treaty, the major international instrument on landmines, applies only to States. Geneva Call complements the treaty by having NSAs sign a Deed of Commitment to renounce the use and stockpiling of mines.

For more information, please contact info@genevacall.org or www.genevacall.org