

Women's Role in the Red Cross/Red Crescent

By Susan L. Gibbs

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CONTENTS

PREFACE	5
I. PROLOGUE: The Voices of Women	7
II. INTRODUCTION	19
A. THE CHANGING GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT	19
B. POLICY INITIATIVES	21
III. WOMEN AS PARTICIPANTS	24
A. NATIONAL SOCIETIES	24
1. Members	25
2. Managers	26
3. Executive Committees	27
4. Presidents and Secretaries General	28
5. National Society "Satisfaction" with Female Participation	29
B. LEAGUE SECRETARIAT	32
C. INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS .	34
D. CONSTRAINTS ON PARTICIPATION	36
1. Women in Management	40
E. POLICY OPTIONS	42
1. Training	42
2. Women in Development Coordinators	45
IV. WOMEN AS BENEFICIARIES	49
A. INTRODUCTION	49
B. PROGRAMME PRIORITIES	52
1. Income-Generation	52
2. Health and Nutrition	55
3. Education and Training	57
C. PROGRAM INITIATIVES: SELECTED CASE STUDIES	58
V. CONCLUSION	65
ANNEX 1: Questionnaire Respondents	71
ANNEX 2: Notes	75

PREFACE

The Henry Dunant Institute would like to express thanks to the author, Ms. Susan Gibbs, (M.A. International Affairs/Columbia University U.S.A.), who worked so diligently on this report. Ms. Gibbs, a contracted Consultant researcher to the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, was assigned to the Henry Dunant Institute specifically for this study.

This book is based on an extensive consultation by the Henry Dunant Institute with National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. An unprecedented 103 responses were received to a specially designed questionnaire that was sent to 148 National Societies and 14 Societies in formation.

Incorporated is information received from a seminar on "Women in Development" organised by the Norwegian Red Cross in June 1989 in which the author was a participant. The author also took into consideration information received from questionnaires circulated to staff from the ICRC and the Equal Opportunities Group of the League Secretariat.

The commencement of the project that has resulted in this book started nearly one year ago, in the summer of 1989. Since then the project has produced a League Plan of Action which was unanimously approved by the General Assembly of the League in October 1989. A phase of the Plan is already being implemented with the employment in April 1990 of Mrs. Karen Stoltenberg, the Senior Advisor on Women in Development. We are indebted to her for accepting to critique this manuscript. We are equally indebted to Lucianne Phillips, League Desk Officer/Americas Department, for reviewing the draft and suggesting improvements.

Additionally, a special word of thanks is owed to Gunnar Hagman, former Head of Development Studies, for his continued collaboration on this study even after being transferred to the League; and to Carolyn McIntosh, Administrative Assistant, who so ably helped to prepare it for publication.

The purpose of this publication is to examine and document the current situation of women in the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement so as to prepare men and women for the challenges facing the Movement as the new decade begins. The report is presented in two parts: data on women as participants in the various components of the Movement and data on women as program beneficiaries. The data reveal wide gender-based discrepancies between those who manage and control the resources of the Movement and those who serve and are served by the organisation's programs at the grassroots level.

We thank the National Societies who took the time to respond to the questionnaire, provided photos and additional information in interviews. Special thanks also to the American, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish Red Cross Societies who so generously provided funding towards the realisation of this book.

Finally, we wish to thank the "network" of consultants and contact persons from all the regions who gathered information and encouraged the tremendous response received from National Societies. All are listed in the book's annex.

May 1990

Linnie Kesselly
Coordinator a.i./Development Studies

I. Prologue

The Voices of Women in the Red Cross/Red Crescent

(Excerpts of Interviews Conducted in Autumn, 1989)

In the course of preparing this report on the relevance of gender in the Red Cross/Red Crescent, dozens of interviews were conducted with women from every region of the globe. Their questions and their answers gave voice and vision to this report, and have set into motion a process of institutional self-assessment that will continue for many years to come.

"It is a new era, and women are becoming aware of their own worth," according to Irene Mparutsa of the Zimbabwe Red Cross. "Women are talking more strongly about issues that concern not only themselves, but their communities." While women have long been associated with the Red Cross/Red Crescent, the nature of their contribution is transforming. This report documents some of these changes, and sets out to examine the implications of introducing gender as a relevant criterion in program planning. But first, some first-hand perspectives on women in the Red Cross/Red Crescent ...

LUDMILA POTRAVNOVA
PRESIDENT, MOSCOW BRANCH
THE ALLIANCE OF RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT
SOCIETIES OF THE USSR

Q: How are the roles of women in the Soviet Union changing?

A: Last year, a survey was published in a popular Soviet magazine called *The Village Woman* which surveyed opinions on the characteristics of an "ideal wife." Two-thirds of the 200,000 Soviet respondents answered that the "ideal wife" is a stay-at-home housewife, not professionally employed, but concerned primarily with her family's welfare.

These survey results give women the courage to face reality as it is. Previously, the image of women in the Soviet Union was distorted - there was too much focus on their professional contributions to the nation. Before, women were asked by the government to take on professional roles in order to fulfill the stereotypical image of the socialist society. Now some Soviet women are not only aiming for high professions, they are preferring to concentrate their energies on their families. But these women are realizing that they must really fight back to regain their roles in the family. Now, women are free to arrive at their own conclusions as to whether they want to stay at home or work outside. A distinction must be made between formal declarations of equality and the real situation. Previously, there were just the formal declarations.

Q: How is the role of women changing in the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies?

A: In general, the Alliance's programs represent a trend towards "mercy": Humanitarian actions aimed at improving the lives of vulnerable groups. Previously, our activities were constrained by formalities. For example, there was an official statement

that there were no poor people in our society because socialism makes everybody equal and prosperous. This was far from reality. But now, the Red Cross is free to undertake humanitarian action.

These changes affect women because Red Cross humanitarian action is very close to women's character. I think there are areas in which women are better than men. For example, family health care and environmental protection - both in the home and nationally. If women had more political power, they could contribute their strengths in a more positive way. Recent political reforms in the USSR have given women the chance to take advantage of their political power. Women are participating more and speaking up more freely about their problems. This same process could benefit the Red Cross. I would warmly welcome any actions that would strengthen this potential of women in the Red Cross.

* * * * *

CATHERINE THUPAYAGALE
SECRETARY GENERAL
BOTSWANA RED CROSS SOCIETY

Q: How can the role of women in the Red Cross/Red Crescent be strengthened?

A: Women in the Red Cross/Red Crescent must come forward as women. Women tend to say that men have never given them opportunities, but I think women themselves often do not take their possibilities very seriously. Women tend to see their roles as playing low. We talk about starting technical training and income-generation projects for women, but that is only part of the solution. The real challenge is to deal with the psychological issues. I have read that in some cultures women will breast-feed male infants longer than female infants. In my own tradition, women often dish out more food to

men. But who is doing the cooking? Who is really in control? It's the women! Women themselves make these choices.

I do not mean to dismiss the importance of cultural factors. But having a culture doesn't mean being a slave to it. We need to encourage women to play their part. Women need to know that respecting men doesn't always mean obeying men. Women need to know that they can be more than just beautiful flowers to attract men.

Q: As Secretary General, have you faced any special problems due to your gender?

A: Not at all. I would not want anybody to make excuses for me just because I am a woman. I would not want to be given a position just because I am female. It's not that I dislike being a woman. I love my gender! Men are physically stronger and women are emotionally stronger. We are perfect compliments to one another.

* * * * *

YVONNE PATTERSON
DIRECTOR GENERAL
SAINT VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES RED CROSS SOCIETY

Q: In your opinion, what are the major issues facing women in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines?

A: In addition to serving as Director General of the Red Cross, I am also President of the National Council of Women. We have identified two major issues: Increasing women's education in the rural areas and expanding women's income-earning opportunities. Income-generation projects for women are definitely needed because most women depend on their men, and men do not always treat women as they should. Common-law unions are widespread, where a

man lives with a woman for five or ten years, has children with her, and then decides that she has grown too old. Then the man gets a younger woman and moves on. That woman left behind must be both a mother and a father to her children. When she can not meet her children's material needs, she becomes frustrated and can take it out on the children.

Q: What is the strategy of the Saint Vincent and Grenadines Red Cross for strengthening the role of women?

A: When Henry Dunant was first in Solferino, he got women and children to help him. The Red Cross was started by a man, but his work force was women. That's why in my National Society, I have 95.5 percent women. When there are wars or disasters, the women are left to take care of those who are suffering. Look at who are the care-givers in our communities. If there is an old person living alone with no family, only rarely would you find a man taking care of that person. The caregiver is almost always a woman.

In our Red Cross Society, we also run specific programs for women. In rural areas, women work in agriculture. When these women go out into the fields, there is often no one to take care of their children. Poor women cannot afford day care, so they would sometimes tie their children to the foot of a table or lock them up in their houses. The Red Cross now operates day care centers for these underprivileged women. We also have lots of unemployed young people, so we teach them sewing and embroidery and they sell their handicrafts in special stands. We are planning to build a large canteen where these products can be sold.

Q: What advice would you give to young women starting out in the Red Cross/Red Crescent?

A: Young women should develop themselves intellectually and physically first, before launching out into the world. Education should be the first goal. Women should not feel inferior to men. They should try to reach the same goals. Older women must set themselves up as role models for younger girls. I say to young people: Shoot for the stars! If the star is flying by, keep holding on. Let it take you where you want to go.

* * * * *

SORAYA
PRESIDENT AND SECRETARY GENERAL
AFGHAN RED CRESCENT SOCIETY

Q: How are the roles of women changing in Afghanistan?

A: In Afghanistan, the roles of women are changing because of war. Some women are losing their children, their homes, everything they love, and everything they own. There are so many widows in Afghanistan who are 18, 19, and 20 years old. There are so many older women who have lost their only sons to war. The women of Afghanistan desire one thing only: Peace.

Q: As President and Secretary General, have you faced any special problems because of your gender?

A: The only problems that I face are those of our country and our Society. Those problems do not discriminate: They hit both men and women very hard.

Q: What advice would you give young women starting out in the Red Cross/Red Crescent?

A: It is difficult to give advice applicable to all women in all places, but I would advise young women to campaign for peace. Women should think of children in war-torn areas as their own children. These children do not have healthy environments in which to grow. Women could be such a great force if they were unified. It does not matter if a woman is highly educated and living in a developed country or illiterate in a poor country. Both have influence on their families. They can promote peace within their families. Because of this, women have incredible power.

Q: How can the role of women in the Red Cross/Red Crescent be strengthened?

A: First, the Red Cross/Red Crescent should increase its programming efforts among illiterate women in developing countries. This does not mean just setting up handicrafts projects and giving these women technical instruction. No, these women need more than that. They need self-confidence. Then they can do anything. I believe that women are very strong. In today's world, physical strength is not enough. Strength comes through knowledge. But in addition to being strong, women must also be kind. If a woman loses her kindness, nothing else is left.

* * * * *

BEVERLY WHITFIELD, PRESIDENT
MARINA GLINTON, SECRETARY GENERAL
THE BAHAMAS RED CROSS SOCIETY

Q: How would you describe the situation of women in the Bahamas Red Cross?

A: (Whitfield) In the Bahamas, the President and Secretary General, and two of the three Vice Presidents are women. In fact, there is only one male on the entire staff!

A: (Glinton) *The Red Cross Societies in the English-speaking Caribbean have a lot of women in top positions. Nonetheless, somehow I think that the Red Cross is still viewed as a man's organization, even though women do most of the actual work.*

Q: How is the role of women changing in the Bahamas?

A: (Whitfield) *In the Bahamas, parents used to concentrate on educating their sons. This is no longer the case. The current trend is to educate their daughters. Now, women are becoming proficient in all fields, even civil engineering. So I think it is a logical evolution. There are now more educated females, and therefore, something has got to happen to us. We cannot simply fall between the cracks!*

A: (Glinton) *Also, the role of women in the Bahamas Red Cross is becoming more important because there has been a general decline among men. For example, men are often more involved in drugs. Now there are more women graduating from high schools and colleges than men. There are even more women in adult education classes.*

Q: What is the strategy of the Bahamas Red Cross in strengthening the role of women?

A: (Glinton) *Every summer, our Junior Red Cross has leadership training camps in the Bahamas and in Florida. When our girls attend these camps, they see other young women succeeding. This gives them something to aspire to. The National Youth Officer herself was once a Junior Red Cross member, and that in itself is a positive example. We tell them: You can aspire to become Director General! There is nothing to stop you!*

* * * * *

NAJWAN EL-HOUNI
HEAD OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
LIBYAN RED CRESCENT

Q: How would you describe the situation of women in the Libyan Red Crescent?

A: Until now, women have not been very interested in Red Crescent work. But this has changed. Women are inspired by the Libyan Red Crescent's sense of justice and the open opportunities available to them. In fact, it is one of the very few organizations in Libya where women have taken on so many leadership roles. I think that there are more female heads of department at the Red Crescent than in any other place in the country.

Q: How are the roles of women changing in Libya?

A: The current trend is that women should participate in every aspect of living. In the Libyan government, each minister must have a female deputy. We are hoping that maybe when the next meetings and elections are held that a woman will be elected minister herself. In Libya, women are encouraged to work outside the home, and now women work everywhere. Sometimes in the morning, you see more women going to work than men!

Q: What advice would you give to young women starting out in the Red Cross/Red Crescent?

A: I would like to see young women take a deeper and more serious look at life. One fears that the way things are happening now, the world is in increasing danger. If we do not teach our children how to make peace, things are going to get worse, especially with new military technologies. I can barely imagine what will happen in another century if we continue on like this. How can nations continue to wage war? Women should join men and work towards promoting peace.

* * * * *

COMFORT BLAY
NATIONAL CHAIRMAN, YOUTH COMMITTEE
GHANA RED CROSS SOCIETY

Q: How are the roles of women in Ghana changing?

A: *The change in women's roles has been very rapid from the time of my grandmother through to the present day. In my grandmother's time, most women had very limited education, if any. The majority of women were illiterate. They were prepared only to be housewives, and received training only to be good mothers. There were virtually no female professionals. Now both men and women have educational opportunities available at all levels. There are also more employment opportunities: Women are becoming fully integrated into the formal employment sector.*

Q: How is the Ghana Red Cross strengthening the role of women?

A: *The Ghana Red Cross runs Mothers' Clubs which are being formed by mobilizing mothers and sometimes their husbands under the banner of the Red Cross to help improve the health and standard of living in their rural communities. Most of our projects are initiated by the women themselves. The women plan everything. Most of them are illiterate, but when they get together, they do great work. We only help them to cost their projects. When the women themselves initiate a project, they work at it with real enthusiasm.*

Q: What advice would you give young women starting out in the Red Cross/Red Crescent?

A: *To achieve anything, you have to strive for it, and you have to work at it. There are no two ways about doing a job - especially in Red Cross work. You must get totally involved. In Africa, you are*

dealing mostly with people at the grassroots level, the underdog. You have to be patient, tolerant, and understanding.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

DATIN PADUKA RUBY LEE
SECRETARY GENERAL
MALAYSIAN RED CRESCENT SOCIETY

Q: As Secretary General, have you faced any special problems due to your gender?

A: No, I do not think women face any opposition. The field is wide open. The constraints on women are more of a domestic nature, like not being able to find enough help in the home. In today's families, instead of just the husband working, there is often a working wife. Fortunately in Malaysia, the family can often depend on grandmothers and aunts and other family members for help in the home, but it still can be difficult for women to spend so much time in the office and away from home. But, you know, we are not doing too badly.

The roles that the wife, mother, and grandmother have to play are so very important. Women are always having to readjust. I was once a young wife with young children, and then my children grew up and became teen-agers and I discovered that I had to learn all about rock and roll. Then my children grew up and married, and now I have grandchildren. Now, I have to learn all about Michael Jackson!

Q: How do you think the role of women in the Red Cross/Red Crescent should be strengthened?

A: We talk about strengthening the operational capacity of each National Society, but how can we improve operations without strengthening the leadership at all levels? And how can we strengthen leadership

without also strengthening women? If men cannot persuade governments to talk about the Geneva protocols, maybe the women can! Perhaps women could bring fresh ideas to a refugee problem or to a conflict situation.

More attention must be paid to women's development so that they in turn can play a part in developing and shaping the minds of our young people, and they can teach the young about moral values and the Red Cross and Red Crescent principles.

Q: What advice would you give to young women starting out in the Red Cross/Red Crescent?

A: The message I would give is that the home is no longer bounded by four walls. Today, women have to go beyond that in order to find some meaning in their lives.

* * * * *

II. Introduction

A. THE CHANGING GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT

The influence of women is an essential factor in the welfare of humanity, and it will become more valuable as time proceeds.

Henry Dunant (1)

Times have changed since Henry P. Davison, the founder of the League of Red Cross Societies*, praised the "quiet, white-garbed women" who produced gauze and cotton bandages for the battlefield victims of World War I. Davison lauded the "freemasonry of women, this white magic they weave to shield their men from ...the bayonet thrusts." (2) Sir Andrew McPhail of Canada, writing about the same war, stated that:

The Red Cross brought into the austere life of the soldier... an element of the feminine, for most of the services were performed by women. The regular issue of food and clothing, adequate as it was, lacked something in daintiness, and the Red Cross accessories that were continually arriving supplied the lack. (3)

A glance at Red Cross/Red Crescent activities around the world today might cause both Davison and McPhail to blink their eyes in disbelief. Where wounded and dying men in uniform were once the majority of Red

*Now known as the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Cross and Red Crescent beneficiaries, women and children now make up the largest number, through community health and refugee relief programmes. Economic underdevelopment and environmental devastation have redrawn the lines of battle. Family structures have shifted and splintered - now an estimated one-third of all households worldwide are headed by women. Many women suffer special hardships due to fewer economic and educational assets, malnourishment, inadequate legal protection, restricted mobility and multiple family responsibilities. These hardships require more than gauze and cotton bandages to heal.

In some Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, this healing process has begun. In some Societies, women are raising poultry, pigs, and bees to generate cash. In others, women are trained in computer programming, secretarial skills, tailoring, and business entrepreneurship. Child care is offered to poor women while they work in the fields. Women are planting trees, immunizing children, providing first-aid services to prostitutes, and forming pottery co-operatives. Refugee women are taught the skills needed to survive in foreign lands.

This programmatic diversity reflects the expansion of women's traditional gender roles. More and more women are attending schools and universities, working outside the home, and holding government office. In some regions, the "typical" profile of Red Cross/Red Crescent female personnel is undergoing a dramatic transformation. According to some, the Movement's organizational structures have not yet fully adjusted to these changes. Many insist that women's expanding perspectives and capabilities are not yet sufficiently integrated into all staffing echelons.

This report aims to present a snapshot view of the current situation of women in the Red Cross/Red Crescent in order to prepare men and women for the challenges facing the Movement as the new decade begins. The data reveal wide gender-based discre-

pancies between those who manage and control the resources of the Red Cross/Red Crescent and those who serve and are served by the organization's programs at the grassroots level. The result is a dangerous potential to misconceive program design and misdirect scarce resources away from those who may need them most. Several League General Assembly Resolutions have declared that decisions about how to carry out the Movement's mission must be made with women as vital parts of the authority structure. The challenge now facing the Movement is how to lift these declarations from the page and put them into practice.

This report is presented in two separate but closely interrelated parts. First, the report draws a portrait of women as participants in the various components of the Red Cross/Red Crescent - National Societies, the League Secretariat and the International Committee of the Red Cross - and analyzes some of the factors underlying the skewed profile of female participation. Second, data on the role of women as program beneficiaries are presented. Three program priorities are identified as having special importance for women. It is argued that the Movement must cultivate greater sensitivity to the needs of those who benefit from Red Cross and Red Crescent programs, and that this will promote an improved system of service delivery.

B. POLICY INITIATIVES

In the past several years, the issue of gender in the Red Cross/Red Crescent has received high-level attention. In 1987, the League General Assembly in Rio de Janeiro passed a resolution on "Women in Development." This resolution requested that the League Secretariat produce a "Plan of Action" for presentation to the VIIth General Assembly in October 1989 in order to "safeguard that the resources and potential of women can be fully utilized to the benefit of development work in the Red Cross/Red

Crescent." The resolution also urged the Henry Dunant Institute to "publish studies on how to promote the use of women's skills and experiences in all development work."

In response to this resolution, the Henry Dunant Institute, in collaboration with the League Secretariat, conducted a major evaluation of the role of women in the Red Cross/Red Crescent in 1989. This process encompassed a review of the literature on women in development, interviews with League Secretariat, National Society and ICRC staff, and consultations with other international and nongovernmental organizations experienced in the field of women in development. An extensive questionnaire on women's role in the Red Cross/Red Crescent was designed and distributed to all of the then-recognized 148 National Societies as well as 14 Societies in formation. Under Henry Dunant Institute supervision, a global network of over 30 National Society staff and regional delegates conducted field research and assisted National Societies in the completion of their questionnaires. Questionnaire responses were received from 103 National Societies and Societies in formation - the largest number of responses to any study ever conducted by the Henry Dunant Institute.

For the first time, a wide range of gender-disaggregated data was collected and analyzed. Drawing upon this feedback from National Societies, the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the Henry Dunant Institute produced the Plan of Action on Women in Red Cross/Red Crescent Development. The League's Secretary General presented this document to the VIIth General Assembly in October, 1989 (4). Twenty-three General Assembly delegates took to the floor to voice their support of the proposal, and the Plan of Action was unanimously adopted.

The Plan of Action presented a ten-point agenda aimed at formulating and prioritizing gender-based programmatic concerns as well as steps to redress

gender-based staffing inequalities. In short, two groups of women were targetted: Participants and beneficiaries. As the Plan of Action explains:

"Given that women and their children form the majority of beneficiaries of Red Cross Cross/Red Crescent services, efficient and appropriate programming must be based on their needs and must include their active participation. Before efficient and appropriate programs can be designed for and with women, women must be integrated into the decision-making structures of the Movement itself. (5)