

WORLD RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT DAY 1995

JOINT MESSAGE OF THE INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION
OF RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT SOCIETIES
AND OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS

DIGNITY FOR ALL: RESPECT FOR WOMEN

Women, whether volunteers, staff or victims, whether helping or being helped, play a decisive role in our International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

Disasters strike, conflicts erupt, leaving in their wake death, destruction, exile and despair. Yet from the origins of the Movement women have been at the forefront in caring for those in need. Henry Dunant was lavish in his praise for the local women who, through their concern for and self-sacrificing, untiring assistance to the soldiers wounded during the battle of Solferino, helped him to develop his humanitarian vision. As nurses, leaders and delegates, women have made a remarkable contribution to the Movement's efforts to uphold human dignity. Dedication to the noble task of helping others is a feminine characteristic; indeed, every woman is a mother at heart.

Unfortunately, millions of women have borne the brunt of conflict and disaster. When forced to abandon the rubble to which an earthquake or the shelling of vulnerable cities has reduced their homes, women are usually the ones who take the lead in rebuilding their shattered families by restoring the domestic routines that are so important to daily life. Theirs is a solitary and seemingly thankless struggle to maintain their dignity and that of their families when they are widowed by the conflict or their menfolk go off to fight for an ideal. Their dignity lies in the courage with which they overcome the immensity of their loss. Such dignity and courage are what make them the heroines of today's world.

A ruined house can be rebuilt and food supplies can be replaced, but an individual's physical and psychological integrity is sacred. Nature is often unpredictable, but so is man, despite his ability to reason. We make laws to protect ourselves, but sadly we do not obey them, even when our very existence and self-respect are at stake. The practice of rape, for example, which was associated with warfare in bygone days, is still a gruesome reality today, yet such acts are universally outlawed. What greater humiliation can a woman suffer than to be the victim of society's most degrading crime, when society itself discourages her from denouncing it? As Red Cross or Red Crescent members, and indeed as individuals, we must refuse to tolerate such blatant disrespect for women's dignity and strive to ensure that such behaviour becomes a thing of the past. It is the duty of all mankind firmly to condemn and punish such an odious and monstrous crime.

The Movement is highlighting the theme "Respect for women" this 8 May to support 20 years of international efforts to promote women's rights. In keeping with our tradition of helping the most vulnerable, as women frequently are in times of emergency, each one of us should do everything possible to uphold both respect for women and women's self-respect.

Let us all strive to defend the rights of women as individuals who have a crucial role to play. There has been enough mere talk about equality; now is the time to make it a reality. This is a humanitarian obligation and, as such, must become a guiding principle for our Movement. In the name of dignity for all, let us promote respect for women.

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