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FOR WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS

Gender Focused Rapid Response Teams:
*A Preliminary Discussion of the Concept and
Potential for Implementation*

REPORT OF EXPERT CONSULTATION HELD NOVEMBER 2002
INCLUDING BACKGROUND PAPER

Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights

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FOREWORD

This report is a summary of papers, documents, discussions, and conclusions of the UAF Experts Meeting on Gender Focused Rapid Response Teams, that took place in London, UK, November 18-19, 2002.

UAF is proud to present this report to the wider community of activists and organizations that advocate for and defend women's rights at the local, regional, and international level.

The Concept Paper offers an in-depth analysis of the Rapid Response Team (RRT) concept, provides a framework for exploring various options of how an RRT could be made active, and points out the traps and potential obstacles. The summary of discussions builds upon the Concept Paper and presents key points on core values, purpose, scope of work, and possible structure of RRTs. This summary is informed by the rich experience and knowledge of the participants at the Experts Meeting who live and work in pre-conflict, conflict, and post-conflict situations. A list of participants is included in the Appendix.

The work and knowledge presented in this report is based on the wide experience and debates around the need for more effective and concerted efforts to react fast and successfully in defense of women's rights, particularly in conflict situations. We do not want to reinvent the wheel: we want to contribute to furthering the idea and the practice of a gender-focused intervention whenever severe violations of women's rights occur.

UAF's vision is for the RRT concept not to be owned by any organization or network, but to be used as a framework and a tool for women's rights activists at the local, regional, and international level.

UAF presents this report in the hope that it will serve as a solid base for further refining the concept of RRTs and, more importantly, for initiating RRTs in various regions of the world.

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GENDER-FOCUSED RAPID RESPONSE TEAMS *A CONCEPT PAPER*

BY MARIEME HELIE-LUCAS AND INDAI LOURDES SAJOR

At the request of Urgent Action Fund, Marieme Helie-Lucas and Indai Lourdes Sajor prepared this concept paper related to gender-focused rapid response teams. The paper is designed to be a springboard for discussion to determine the advisability and viability of intervening in cases of women's human rights violations worldwide.

How It Started

The need to react in situations where women are endangered and where the mere physical presence of outsiders could make a difference for the concerned women came out a decade ago when Marieme and Indai were trying to act upon the death penalty sentence of Sara Balabagan.

Sara, a 17-year-old domestic servant from the Philippines employed in one of the Gulf countries, murdered her employer and rapist in self-defence. According to the law of the country where she was employed, she could only prove rape by producing “four eye witnesses—male Muslims of good repute.” She obviously failed to prove rape under these conditions. But by merely reporting rape,

she implicitly admitted having had sex outside marriage, a crime of “zina,” which is punished by stoning to death or public flogging. She was sentenced to death by stoning.

Together with other national women's organizations, human rights groups, and NGOs that work with migrants in the Philippines and in the region, Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) took up Sara's case and launched an international Alert for Action and a letter writing campaign. Additionally, Marieme and Indai decided to gather a team of women and attend the trial, so politicians and judges would feel that whatever happened in this court would be known to the world.

We failed to get funding, visas, and an adequate team in due time. But more importantly, two French women (Marie-Claire Mendes France, the wife of a prominent progressive politician, and Gisele Halimi, a feminist lawyer well known for her actions in favour of women's reproductive rights in France) managed to get there in time. Their stature, credentials, and access to international media made the difference

for Sara Balabagan, whose life was saved. Sara's death sentence was commuted in a sentence of 100 lashes (which seem to have been mildly administered, for she survived it). She later was expelled to her home country.

Indeed it was the physical presence of foreign witnesses, the court's unease at the prospect of being exposed to the international community, and the international campaign that saved Sara. As a result of such incidents, we are seeking mechanisms to ensure that such crimes will not happen again.

Gender-Focused Rapid Response Teams—A New Approach

It was only in 1993 that the UN World Conference on Human Rights recognized women's rights as human rights. Even today, many violations of women are kept private and therefore denied recognition, redress, and accountability. Many horrendous gross human rights violations of women in war or 'peace' have remained covered by silence. The international community still grapples with these past crimes. Gender-Focused Rapid Response Teams (RRTs) could provide one means of uncovering the silence and moving forward with ensuring women's rights. Underlying RRTs basic mission and their role are two key ideological considerations:

the necessity of working in conjunction with other women's and human rights organizations, and the importance of approaching the RRTs' tasks from a position of solidarity.

The Mission of Rapid Response Teams

Rapid Response Teams (RRTs) aim to mobilize women and men in all sectors of society to act upon human rights violations against **women** in the most **swift and decisive manner** possible. By 'act upon' we mean that, on the one hand, RRTs will react to existing violations. On the other hand, RRTs also will be proactive. As potentially dangerous situations arise, RRTs will approach potential victims before violations and victimizations actually occur. When women's human rights needs emerge, RRTs will be organized as quickly as possible and sent to the specific areas where violations are taking place or soon may take place. RRTs will put all their weight into bringing about the change that is called for by concerned people. They will:

- ◆ expose, prevent, diminish, stop, or relieve human rights violations.
- ◆ draw attention to forgotten crises or issues.
- ◆ voice the truth about the women's human rights

violations in the face of rumours, fragmented reports, exaggeration or political propaganda.

- ◆ provide analysis and the authoritative voice of the women's human rights movement.

The Role of Rapid Response Teams

We are not necessarily or merely envisioning the RRTs as fact-finding missions. In that respect, we do not endorse the underlying assumptions of some of the preliminary discussions about the RRTs, where it was often assumed or presented as self evident that RRTs would be fact-finding missions, mainly in the context of war. Already our world is overloaded with documentation and human rights reports floating around that leave situations as they are. The numerous sensationalist articles in the media about violations seldom result in any redress. This leads us to what we think is at the very root of the RRTs. In sharp contrast with the urgent missions that are satisfied with documenting a situation for posterity, the RRTs aim at inducing a real and lasting change for the concerned women. Thus, RRTs will act upon and follow the cases until completion of their contract. The RRTs will hold themselves accountable to the women who called them for help.

This distinction is a very important one. The RRTs will give visibility not only to the problem, crisis, or violation, but to the women concerned, though not just as victims. RRTs will empower the victims, survivors, and local organizations. Change will be possible as women fight and advocate in their own situations and as the organizations that represent them or defend them take action.

Though fact finding is essential in improving women's human rights, we believe that the RRTs have a much broader scope—a scope that includes many different tasks, as outlined below:

Witness

As in the previously-mentioned case of Sara Balabagan, one can contemplate and wonder about what could have happened, had the women's movement been internationally present at Flor Contemplacion's trial, or when the cases of the "comfort women" were dismissed by the Tokyo District Court.

One also can contemplate the changes that a visit to Algeria now could induce. In July 2001, more than a hundred women workers, migrants from the north of Algeria, were raped, mutilated, and killed in a city in the far south of Algeria where they were employed. An incendiary speech by a local imam provoked a pogrom

against women by the male crowd in the city, after the imam pointed at the devilish nature of women workers living without a male guardian. Some of the survivors who dared file a case in court have been under such heavy threats that they presently are withdrawing their legal complaints, in total isolation. Had witnesses been present, the international women's movement would not only have helped the individual women, but also would have drawn public attention to the fascist nature of fundamentalism, indeed an important theoretical step forward in the analysis of the new forms of fascism that specifically affect women.

Investigate and Document

Fact-finding is only one of the many roles RRTs will play. Though sometimes asked specifically to do fact finding in certain situations, the RRTs' fact finding will differ from the usual fact finding missions that most human rights organizations have been conducting for a long time. RRTs will investigate and document situations (in a reactive way) when violations are ignored or denied, or (in a proactive way) when violations are likely to happen. As we all know, reactive documentation is best done when collected as soon as possible after the events, before pressure is put on survivors. The thorough investigation and documentation of the issue/case is very important, as this would be used to

persuade others that this incident or these violations occurred. For the RRTs to be persuasive, therefore, information must be detailed and conducted according to the rules.

Support

The solidarity women express lends much-needed support to those in difficult circumstances. We have direct testimonies from the Women In Black in Belgrade who were "kept alive," in their own words, throughout the war in Bosnia by the visits of their Italian sisters. Though these visits did not in any way change their situation, the very fact that feminists from another country came to stay with them and that they could share their worries and struggles was in itself a therapy. Later, when communications were more difficult, the Italian feminists brought to Belgrade a fax machine, which, say the Women in Black, was their only link with the outside world and which "saved their sanity".

Provide Expertise and Training

Very few psychotherapists specialize in traumatic disorders, and there are far fewer feminists among them to pay special attention to trauma affecting women. RRTs can help fill that gap. During the Tokyo Tribunal, Algerian women who attended and participated in the Public Hearing on Present Crimes Against Women in Wars

expressed how difficult they found it to help women raped by fundamentalists, given that they had to work on their own and without any training. Likewise, a group in Afghanistan recently asked for guidance in helping raped women. Women in Belgrade who assisted raped and traumatized women of all communities and nationalities throughout two wars (the war in Bosnia and the war in Kosovo) have the kind of expertise that is needed. These women could share insights and train feminists who must deal with gravely traumatized women.

Bring Relief and Heal

Bringing relief and helping women heal after the humiliation they have suffered are crucial steps in women's human rights activism. It has been proven in cases such as those of many former 'comfort women' that healing occurred only after many years of suffering in silence, and only when their experience as sex slaves was recognized by respected women, lawyers, and advocates as a war crime. In general, trauma counselling and recognition of the affected women's suffering draw attention to the cases and offer security to the involved women. In most cases of violation, relief should be pursued through long term feminist therapy. Obviously, such action is not within the mandate of the RRTs. However, RRTs should be sent to the trouble spot to help train

two groups : 1) feminists who take care of or intend to take care of traumatized women, and 2) professional psychologists, psychiatrists, and psychotherapists who need to gain awareness of the theoretical research in feminist therapy and in the treatment of trauma.

Mobilize and Intervene

Effective rapid response requires the capacity to visibly mobilize groups and individuals to take action in support of the desired change. A successful RRT has both depth and breadth among its supports, and can be measured by the positive impact it generates. Rapid action and mobilization are vehicles that help save women's lives, move ordinary people to stand up and defend or promote the issue from their own experience and perspective, build the case in legal terms, and shape arguments or draft legislative proposals.

Publicize

Prominent personalities who have the credentials required to address the issue on behalf of the concerned grass roots organizations or victims often have access to international, national, or regional media. Although all of us have the experience of being cheated or misrepresented by international media, and although fewer and fewer states or non state actors get "shamed" by international

attention to their most blatant crimes, RRTs need to pay special attention to the help we can seek from media.

Monitor

Monitoring entails gathering information related to an event or situation, watching the event or situation closely, and making a report or deciding upon a follow-up action as a result of what has happened. Monitoring is an important role of the RRT because our intervention is meant to prevent further human rights abuses and (to an extent) assist the victims of the human rights violations or find a solution to violent situations.

Monitoring could entail any of the following: tracking down the response of the authorities, the family, the employers, or the village; knowing the security status of the victims/survivors and their psychological condition; following up on a case; checking harassment and further abuses among members of the families and communities; or determining whether the perpetrators have been identified or held in prison. As a result of these activities, RRTs should make a short report on the monitoring of the case and make it known to the public.

Having entered into a contract with concerned women, the RRTs will not leave the ground before completing that contract.

Monitoring assures those affected that they are not left alone after a major intervention or response to their case has occurred. They will know that there is continuing concern about their case, and that the RRT will follow through in making further intervention as the case proceeds. While the mission itself should be able to create impact by the very presence of women who care, by getting media attention, and through mobilization, the RRT should be able to sustain the momentum of support through careful monitoring and consistent follow up on the development of the case.

Rapid Response Teams' Connections with Other Women's and Human Rights Organisations

To fulfil their mission RRTs must work in conjunction with other organisations rather than in isolation. RRTs' projects should develop from the networking of networks, i.e., organizations and known individuals **coming together on a specific issue**. We need to clearly establish from the start that the RRTs will be engaged in mobilizing, with the women's movement and beyond it, all the forces from the progressive social movements that are needed on a specific case. RRTs will activate and feed into all the networks, organisations, unions, and parties that will provide help in the case, create awareness, and follow up with actions that are beyond the mandate of the

RRTs. Team members should recommend solutions to be pursued by like-minded organisations through campaigns and lobbying.

We are at a stage in the women's movement when we feel the need of a formal **networking of networks** on specific issues. The women's movement has lost some of its initial connections with social movements at large (a distance that took place for very good reasons at that time!). In the process, the international women's movement has gained autonomy and self-determination, but also taken on some of its politics. We believe that there is a need to renew these connections with other parts of the social movement—on our terms. Urgency and rapid response to crucial situations are certainly areas where the networking of networks can be operational.

In the long run, the RRTs will initiate a new organization in which existing networks will participate: the **RRNet**. The RRTs should be sponsored by women's organizations willing to be part of this network and to make it a component of their mandate. As we consider the need to continuously improve communication and networking among women's groups, we need to reflect on the vacuum that was left by Isis-International when it was moved to Manilla and changed into

a regional organisation. Since the Isis-International Bulletin ceased to exist, no group has undertaken the task of informing the global women's movement at large about the situations and struggles all over the world.

Keeping in mind that here we are focusing on emergencies, we of course need to mobilize support in ways that will affect positively the potential victims and the survivors of violation. But our intervention and support ultimately may change the views of the women and the men who will be involved in this struggle, as well as the views of those looking in from the outside.

Aid vs. Solidarity

The RRTs are committed to working closely with women within the ideological frame of international solidarity. Let us then examine the concept of aid versus the concept of solidarity. Unfortunately, these two words often are used as if they were identical.

Aid is a one-way process by which one party "gives" something that it pretends or believes is needed to another party, with or often without the recipients' expressed request. However, psychology and social anthropology have amply demonstrated that there is no such thing as a gift that

does not call for return. Gifts are never for free. Similarly, in politics there is no such thing as 'free' aid; we know for sure that we have to pay back, on donors' terms, aid that was neither chosen nor desired by those receiving it. States use aid to protect and cover up their vested economic interests. We women are only concerned here with solidarity; hence the need to clearly distinguish between these two concepts.

Solidarity is a two-way process between equals. It implies both complementarity and reciprocity. Solidarity stems from the analysis that we are bound together, that what affects me here will inevitably have repercussions for you there. What I lose here constitutes a threat for your rights there, and vice versa. What I gain may help you gain, too.

To understand the need for solidarity, we have only to look at the link between an extreme right government in Afghanistan and the rise of the extreme right in the US (which is, by definition, anti-women and which aims to keep women 'in their place', the one assigned by God and nature). We can say that the rights of women in the US, which are threatened under the influence of the extreme right, are bound to the oppression of women in Afghanistan under its Taliban/extreme right regime, formerly backed by the US. The link between US

foreign policy and its oil interests, the Taliban regime, the subsequent oppression of women in Afghanistan, and the rise of the political extreme right in the US create a potential backlash on women in the US. This chain reaction points to the fact that it is **also** in the self interest of women in the US to support women in Afghanistan against extreme right policies.

We also could mention the widespread impact of actions against reproductive rights. The unholy alliance between Al Azhar and the Vatican during the UN World Conference on Population sought to curtail women's access to contraception and abortion. And we also can consider the drastic and sometimes fatal attacks on reproductive rights all over Europe, after the coming to power of Solidarnosc in Poland under the auspices of the Vatican and the reunification of Germany. These examples show that, to a certain extent, we are all in the same boat. What affects some women locally also has huge repercussions for women elsewhere, giving us another way to look at globalisation and to rethink this concept as activists.

Morals and religion have taught us that in order to be generous, the 'haves' should come to the rescue of the 'have-nots'. They have taught us that selfishness is bad. What instead is advocated here is that we look without fear into our needs,

identify the common interests that we have with other women around the world, and figure out how needs and interests can be articulated around the common issues. We should look into what we gain and what we lose when other women in the world gain and lose.

Far from the ideological stand that pours out often perverse aid on the (by definition) unequal 'poor', the stand we take of solidarity with our oppressed sisters represents a way of taking care of ourselves. In the long run, showing solidarity with other women comes down to preserving our own interests. By struggling for their own rights, these other women, in the long run, struggle for and preserve ours. This is what is meant by reciprocity. Obviously, it rarely will be reciprocal in a mechanical way (I give you 'this' and I get 'that' in return). Although we have had a few experiences of the immediate reward of solidarity across different cultures, religions, and nations, more often the reciprocity occurs over time.

This reflection should lead us to another understanding of the word 'international' in 'international solidarity.' Unfortunately, many inter-national conferences, including some in the women's movement, have limited themselves to the juxtaposition of individuals from different nationalities or

origins who may have little to do with each other. This certainly makes the conference **multi-national**, but how does it make it **inter-national**? Our wish is that the RRTs truly reflect an inter-national perspective, i.e., focus on the relationship and reciprocal solidarity between women from different parts of the world, rather than on their mere diversity regardless of the human and political quality of their interaction.

Let us rehabilitate 'selfishness' for what it brings—a fearless look into one's needs, disembarassed from moral misconceptions. This holistic approach of women's struggles for their rights should allow us not to focus solidarity on 'The Other' exclusively, but also on our common interests; hence, our approach not to have projects forced upon other women 'for their good,' but to seek alliances for our mutual benefit. Only then can we come to the rescue of our oppressed sisters without any hidden agenda, any judgment about what is good for them, any sense of superiority about our values and culture over theirs, but a clear understanding of why we seek such alliances and what it may bring to both parties. Only then can we link hands as equal partners and companions. To be companions in struggle requires us to know each other, to exchange information, and to appreciate the work each of us does and how we do it. It thus requires that we be able to acknowledge the need that we

have for one another.

But how often have we seen women from North America or Europe call on women from Afghanistan, India, or Nigeria to support their struggles? A most striking example of this imbalance, which reflects the absence of awareness of our common interests on the part of North American women, was the assassination of the 14 women on a campus in Montreal. A campaign was launched seeking solidarity from women in the US and in Europe, but it was not extended to 'Third World' countries, as if nothing could be asked from women in Asia and Africa. It goes without saying that we expect the RRTs not to be limited to North-South or South-South interactions, but also to promote South-North solidarity.

Obstacles and Political Traps

Our strength lies in our solidarity. While this may seem natural and self-evident to women, our work together is full of political traps when we consider the context in which many human rights violations against women occur. Inconsistent and unjust laws create tensions. The interplay between state and non-state actors creates yet another layer of problems with which we must contend.

The Impact of Laws and Culture on Rapid Response Teams

Rapid Response Teams address and try to eliminate **gross human rights violations against women** that could constitute serious crime under national law, international law, humanitarian law, and human rights law. In a number of instances, however, the law of the land contradicts human rights law or international treaties that may have been signed by states 'with reservations.' These contradictions often relate to religious laws and practices. For instance, national laws often give all power to the head of the family. Sometimes this is done in the name of God. This complexity suggests a delicate challenging of customs, traditions, and religion.

But the RRTs will not be bound by customs, traditions, or religion when concerned women raise their own voices about abuse committed against them. We should be prepared to bypass the law when women's lives are at stake. RRTs must insist upon an end to all practices that discriminate, abuse, and torture women, whether or not these crimes are acknowledged in the laws.

Written laws can only reflect the society they rule, and more specifically the dominant forces within that society. We all have experienced that it is difficult to

incorporate women's concerns into the laws and that very often; the application of the laws ignores or minimizes the violations done to women. We cannot deify Law as if it were God given, for it is always and necessarily man made. RRTs should not be intimidated by accusations of importing foreign ideologies or attacking traditions or religion when the concerned women themselves are ready to challenge those.

Still, RRTs will pay great attention to potential backlash on victims. We will honor the analysis by the women concerned regarding what they can challenge at a specific moment in their history, and how best to challenge it. The victims' experiences coupled with dialogue with RRTs should bring about the best strategy: challenging 'from within' (which may imply limiting the RRT to national/regional teams, or would require a specific expertise of the whole team) or using the standpoint of universal human rights. When we speak of 'best strategy,' we always should keep in mind that it applies to a specific case each time and that what is best here and now may not be best at all for the next similar case.

State and Non State Actors

Sorting out responsibility taken and damage done by state and non-state actors presents us with a daunting task. Since

World War II, most armed conflicts have taken place not between two armies of two nation-states, but between non-state actors or between state and non-state actors. This has been the trend on all continents, affecting many countries (at random, Sri Lanka, Colombia, Algeria, etc.). While national laws are supposed to regulate both state and non-state actors, international laws apply only to states that are signatories to treaties, thus leaving off the hook the non-state actors who now are virtually always involved in the conflicts are not subject to these laws. Non-state actors cause most of the world's gross human rights violations. Responding to these crises saves women's lives and allows us to expose and condemn these violations.

International human rights organizations consistently have failed to hold non state actors accountable. The organisations focus on state responsibility, including the state's responsibility to protect its citizens from the assaults of non-state actors.

In cases where individuals or non state actors are the main perpetrators, state negligence and lack of assistance, as well as aggravation from the state's law enforcement agencies, should be investigated and put to task. In exposing the failures of the state in any given issue or crime, the RRTs may play a very important role in enforcing state accountability. However, The RRTs also

will have to be very cautious in cases where charging the state with its responsibilities and not charging the non state actors with theirs actually creates an imbalance that amounts to giving the non state actors a political backing and increasing the weight of their ideology.

We do not believe that human rights issues are devoid of politics and we should be very aware of the fact that RRTs' work can be used against women, for instance in reinforcing forces whose ideology is fundamentally anti-women. This is especially visible today in cases of insurgencies of fundamentalists against secular but inefficient or corrupt states (such as in Algeria where nevertheless one cannot ignore the fact that women are better off under the present regime than they will be under a Taliban-like regime). But more generally, one could point to the fact that most popular insurgencies are difficult to regulate, by definition, and that states may be caught in between drenching in blood the insurrection or being unable to protect their citizens. Such has been the case, for instance, with all colonial powers unable to protect their citizens, and subjects, while facing national liberation movements.

The RRTs have to acknowledge the gap in the legislation that leads to these misrepresentations. They will not be bound by the fact that non state actors are

not signatories of international treaties, but will expose and counteract the violations the non state actors commit. The interests of women – short and long term – will be the only guide of the RRTs. The RRTs will not veil their face to the political implications of their human rights work.

When to Intervene

Already we can foresee that RRTs will not be able to take on all the situations that would require their intervention. We will be challenged by many difficult choices. We will have to determine when it is that the mere physical presence of a team will make the difference for the women victims or for the advancement of the theoretical understanding of an issue if it is already too late for the victims themselves.

Clearly, the needs of the women concerned come first, but since the RRTs never will have the capacity to deal with all cases of violations, choices largely will be made based on two key considerations.

Strategic Considerations

RRTs will have to be strategic about choosing which cases they will take on. The frequency of a particular type of violation that needs to be addressed will play a part, as will the conceptual importance for the women's movement at large of unveiling a specific problem. Priority may be given

to issues that are ground breaking in influencing and mobilizing the women's movement internationally—issues that would bring new dimension either into the situation or into the thinking of the international women's movement. For instance, taking up issues such as the fascist nature of fundamentalism undeniably has advanced the theoretical understanding of oppression of women.

RRTs primarily will address violations against women, keeping in mind that it is not in women's best interest to have too narrow an interpretation of their mandate. A quick survey of international human rights organisations shows that very few interventions focus on violations of women. Although RRTs are designed specifically to address human rights violations of women, we should, in a proactive way, look at some violations of men, or *men and women* alike. This position stems from the analysis that the rise of extreme right forces, whether or not they initially attack women, always results in coercion and violence toward women (for example ethnic conflicts or fundamentalism). Similarly, wars and armed conflicts are most likely to end with violations such as mass rapes. Thus, when RRTs anticipate a probable violation, they need to intervene prior to the violation. In addition, they need to be sensitive to indicators, be those violations of men or general violations. In

some situations where violations are not against women, we may need to intervene in order to bring women's perspective into the analysis of a violation.

The Question of Urgency/Rapidity

The notion of 'urgency' is at the root of RRTs and of UAF. But what is urgency? Some cases are obvious: when a life is at stake, when a death sentence has been issued, when massacres are taking place, or when an activist needs to leave the country immediately. Under such circumstances, there will be no debate about the urgency of the case. But we can foresee cases where lives may not be at stake or when urgency will be defined differently by the participating groups, each of whom may have different priorities and different political guidelines to define these priorities.

Even past cases can be considered urgent. Ground breaking issues that have been neglected, have not been thoroughly addressed, and have been denied forms of redress and accountability may be seen as urgencies. Even if the crime happened long ago, RRTs might take on such cases, especially when those cases connect to a recurrent problem that could be addressed through this past case.

Let us take a slightly provocative example. The so-called ‘comfort women’ of World War II are a good case in point. Though violations of the ‘comfort women’ happened more than fifty years ago, more recently the women’s movement and human rights organizations have responded to these women’s plight. The resulting campaign brought the understanding of sexual slavery into the language of international law and the United Nations. It gave new dimensions to what constitutes reparation and compensation for women victims of war. The survivors’ testimonies taught us that this case goes beyond one crime committed against one group of women, clearly being an assault against women as a whole. The details brought out made us understand new elements of violence against women in war—issues like sexual slavery, forced abortion, recruitment, deception, sex trafficking in war time, military brothels, and comfort stations.

Had the RRTs existed those many years ago, we would have advocated that an RRT be sent to the trials that former ‘comfort women’ initiated in the Tokyo District Court against the Japanese army. An international RRT witnessing the trials may have made a difference in the judgements handed down.

The fact that these horrendous crimes happened more than fifty years ago does

not disqualify them in terms of urgency. The women survivors still are fighting for redress today. Many other women suffer today the very same kind of violations. It is urgent to signal strongly to the present perpetrators that they will be held accountable, even if many years from now.

One of the practical consequences of urgency is the need to **mobilize rapidly** on short notice. Members of the teams will be not just people available and willing, but also those who have the kind of identity papers that will help them enter a country without delay. Hence the need to create and maintain a proper data bank with full indications of which passport takes the holder to what countries without visa or for a visa granted in 24 hours.

Intervention—Local, Regional or International?

Another underlying assumption in the informal preliminary discussions about the RRTs was that some women *a priori* conceived of the RRTs as necessarily regional, with the belief that the women who live where the violation takes place know best how to deal with it, while others *a priori* conceived of the RRTs as necessarily international, with the belief that salvation necessarily comes from outside.

International women's networks have experienced both that international campaigns can be very helpful, and that they can be counterproductive at times for the movement and for the organizations inside the country in specific political circumstances. Social anthropology can testify to two facts: that proximity does not necessarily ensure insight into a situation, and that one may not, by nature, be the best sociologist or social anthropologist of one's own society. Psychotherapy assumes that self-enlightenment is increased by the presence of the outside witness. Yet, we are aware of concrete cases of adverse effects that some campaigns (launched by women's organizations for their own moral satisfaction) had on victims who never were consulted prior to or after the campaigns.

A fundamental question that some international networks have been reflecting upon in the past two decades is what balance to maintain between what local groups or individuals consider to be in their immediate interest and how an outsider would evaluate the options available to them. Many years in the international women's movement lead us to think that, although local groups probably know best what strategy would be dangerous for them, they may be unaware of other possible strategies. They may underestimate the potential of those strategies for lack of having experienced them, or based upon

national pride (or community, ethnic, or religious pride). 'Third worldism' and other diseases of political judgment can blur an understanding of the advantages of an international strategy.

Just as local women may underestimate the value of strategies brought in from the outside, some "outsiders" do not believe in the capacities and competence of local groups, even when those groups are backed nationally or regionally. They think that an international strategy is the only strategy that ensures success. The evaluation of the best strategy for RRT intervention (local, regional, or international) needs to be done for each specific case in consultation with local groups who would take the backlash if a wrong choice were to be made. Group discussion is a must in such circumstances and may prevent political misconceptions that would derail the best strategy.

Several additional considerations should play a role in deciding who to send to a specific spot: the availability of specialists, the difficulties in obtaining visas to a specific country depending on the nationality of the seeker, and other practical considerations. It seems most important that the decision about whether to send local, regional, or international teams should indeed reflect a political and a strategic choice determined by each specific circumstance, rather than an *a priori* decision.

The case of a young Nigerian woman condemned to be stoned to death for sex outside marriage provides an example of the importance of determining whether to take a local, regional, or international approach. The following is an August 2002 statement issued by the international solidarity network “Women Living under Muslim Laws” (WLUML):

“Amina Lawal and Yahaya Mohammed were arraigned before the lower Sharia court, Bakori, on the 15 January 2002, on a charge of adultery. WLUML has been following the case of Amina Lawal since March 2002. We are aware that numerous women’s rights and human rights organizations have been expressing concern and launching appeals in support of Amina since her first court appearance on 22 March 2002. These international, regional, and national campaigns and efforts have increased the visibility of the case and raised awareness about the important issue of women being sentenced to stoning for alleged zina crime (sexual relations outside marriage). However, throughout the case, Women’s Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA) and BAOBAB for Women’s Human Rights, a Nigerian organisation and acting WLUML regional coordination office for Africa and the Middle East, advised us not to initiate a call for action. They clearly stated that their preferred strategy in this case was, and continues to be, to pursue the case by prioritising local pressure and working through the Nigerian legal system. Both organisations are backed by a coalition of Nigerian women’s rights NGOs from all over the country that are supporting Amina’s case and have been working on it since it began. They have also worked on similar cases in the past, some of which have been successfully resolved without ever coming to international attention”.

The Process and Work of Rapid Response Teams

Once a crisis mode has been established or declared, a chain reaction of **information networks** (individuals or organizations). When a mission is about to be launched and the RRT identified, members of the RRT should meet to discuss the nature of the work, agree on the objectives and conduct of the work, share opinions on how to strengthen and expand the team, and consider individuals' contributions to the work. These objectives can also be achieved through a telephone conference or by chat email if members of the team are located in different countries. The team should ensure that roles are clearly understood and that one of its members will take care of the **security** (and be trained for it), another member will take on the role of **media** person, and another member take charge of the **logistics** of the entire operation.

Teams and Coordinators

Rapid Response Teams are composed, at a national, regional, and/or international level, of team members and coordinators. **RRTs'** overall international coordinator (**RRCi**) and mission coordinators (**RRCs**) work in conjunction with local organizations.

Composition of Teams

The composition of teams will differ greatly depending upon the aim of the urgent mission—to offer relief, witness, document, monitor, etc. Members could be human rights activists, lawyers, journalists, professors, writers, parliamentarians, UN personnel, artists, doctors, psychotherapists, and camera people, among others.

RRT members should have some authority, command a following, and be able to make a substantial contribution to the mission. It is important to have the expertise of those whose concerns or professions relate to the thematic area of the particular issue of concern. In court cases, for example, we should have lawyers, law professors, and journalists. For refugees or internally displaced people, an effective team might include humanitarian workers, UN personnel, UNCHR, doctors, and psychotherapists. Biodiversity scientists or chemical engineers would do well with environmental issues. Even in the apparently simple case of documenting abuse, the composition of the team will vary depending upon whether this documentation is to meet the needs of the press (journalists, camerawomen), of court cases (lawyers), or of human rights organizations (human rights activists).

Team Members—Selection Process

RRTs should always be formed through collaboration or in alliance with other women's organizations and human rights groups. Networking and building lists of persons who are willing to work with networks and be part of the RRTs will enable us to draw from a pool of qualified and interested people. Individuals, as well as groups, will be encouraged to recommend a list of people they could mobilize with short notice. Once the initial group that wants to put together a team and launch the project determines team member selection criteria, RRT members will be selected from lists established by these various sources.

Such coordination points to the need for a database in which not only names and addresses will be entered but most importantly the nationality of the prospective team member. If we are speaking of urgency and rapidity, it is crucial to know who can move where without delay due to obtaining visas. This is a self-evident limitation in the choice of team members. We may be confronted with the fact that those who can travel on short notice will be either those holding passports from the region only, those from the former European colonial powers, or North Americans. It is crucial that a proper database be maintained in order to select team members in ways that will

ensure as much transparency as possible.

Some people should be invited to participate well in advance so that when the situation demands a rapid response, these people already know the nature of the RRTs and what is expected of their participation. A letter of invitation sent to selected people would define the general orientation of the RRT, as well as the possible role of various people involved in the mission. When a selected person agrees to be part of the emerging team, several types of information should be requested: address, phone and fax numbers, nationality (which affects obtaining a visa), a short background of the person, her expertise, her areas of specific interest, her willingness to join a national, regional, or international team, and her willingness to speak to the media or be interviewed.

A practical warning from experience: We should not underestimate the potentially destructive role of 'divas' in our movement. These people can speak out and are able to attract the media, but because they do it for their own publicity rather than for the cause, they will not be able to empower local organizations and local women. We also should avoid 'divas' who require such luxuries as five-star hotels.

Coordination of Team Efforts

International Coordinators

The overall international Rapid Response Coordinator (RRCi) for any mission should have at least worked in the women's movement in the past ten years and have national, regional, and international exposure in dealing with campaigns, trainings, or fact finding missions.

The RRCi is the primary contact for communication, information, consultation, and administration of a crisis budget. She should be able to identify or recognize a situation that requires a rapid response, and must ensure that immediate action takes off the ground 24/7 with appropriate support, whether that be local, regional, international, or any combination of these. She works in liaison with Rapid Response Coordinators (RRCs). She oversees the recruitment of RRCs, and helps develop criteria for selecting RRC members for each specific mission. Her role in overseeing the initial networking within the women's movement is crucial.

Rapid Response Coordinators

For each particular mission, Rapid Response Coordinators (RRCs) will be chosen from the group of RRT members to coordinate the team's efforts. They should have the authority to make things

happen and the experience to make clear decisions regarding the kind of structures that are needed and how to readjust priorities when required. Sensitivity to the theoretical points that we discussed at the beginning of this paper, as well as a clear understanding of and agreement with the political and philosophical perspective of RRTs are essential. In other words, the RRCs' skills are not only practical but political, as well.

RRCs should be able to develop crisis response networks of organizations and individuals, building the crisis response capacity of the local groups and consistently working with them throughout the course of action. They should have access to social movements, unions, parties, organizations, personalities, and leaders who can be mobilized. RRCs should work with in-country coordinators on possible preventive actions and prepare contingency plans. An effective RRC can mobilize extra volunteers to work with her in a short period of time.

In-Country Coordinators

An organisation working for women's human rights could take on the function of in-country coordinator for a specific crisis and nominate a person to be in charge of the interaction with the RRC and RRT. This function could be made permanent. However, institutionalization of the in-

country coordination may lead to problems vis-à-vis other local organisations. We would advocate that the appointment of an in-country coordinator remains limited to a specific crisis.

The in-country coordinator helps the RRTs travel to the locality, and participates in the coordination of the crisis strategy. She may or may not, depending on the strategy that has been selected and the risks for local activists, be part of the implementation of actions. In-country coordinators review the team's work. They can declare the end of crisis mode and lead the transition period and evaluation.

Local Coordinators

The local organizations should assist in the **logistical needs** of the mission, as well as media coverage, statements, and written reports. They can form a crisis committee and agree who will coordinate with the RRT and who will have the final decision-making authority on the ground. It is good to have a clear chain of command so that when a crisis arises in the area, quick decisions can be made by the in-country coordinator or by the RRC.

Community-Based Response

Women in some organized areas develop ways of providing support for each other when violations occur. In some rural areas

in Africa, if a man tries to break into a woman's house or she finds him attacking her, there's a certain call she makes and members of the community know that she needs assistance. In Northern Ireland sometimes a whistle or a horn is used to alert others to a danger, and local sympathetic people go into action to protest or hide a person at risk. In the Philippines urban poor women living in squatters' areas make sounds out of pots or pans when they hear a woman being beaten by her husband, and they go to her assistance.

This community-based response helps women at risk and in many instances even prevents violence from occurring again. Though the RRT is about regional and international exposure and response to the issue, it is with admiration that we recognize and learn from the community-based response. Through the RRnet, examples of these responses can be passed on to other communities for adoption or adaptation to their needs.

Ensuring Security

Documenting human rights violations, let alone acting upon those violations in more active ways, is a dangerous occupation. It is criminal not to acknowledge this fact and to send teams totally unprepared. We may have to send on location skilled professionals (from therapists to

camerawomen) who have not been exposed to such dangers and more generally to such difficulties as police intimidation and political repression in their own country or in their life experience.

We insist that development of awareness and skills in managing such situations is an important component in the preparation and training of the RRTs. The RRCs take responsibility for increasing the security of their teams to the best of their abilities. In addition, each team must have one duly trained person in charge of security issues. Thus, we envision not only awareness sessions led by activists, but also serious training of potential team members, or at the very least one team member, in skills that may help them in this endeavour.

Media Strategy

Accessing media is certainly an important component of gathering wide support, albeit far from being the only one. We have seen a number of women's cases commuted to a less severe sentence because of media attention to the injustice and discrimination in handling the case. The media offer a very important public expression of the issue, and they also can be a vital source of information for the community about the crisis while the RRTs could be satisfied simply with making a name for themselves or exposing a situation, they will have far

greater impact if they develop a media strategy. Each particular mission requires defining a media policy. Thus, a **skilled media person** should be assigned to take care of all media projection, statements, and monitoring for a specific case.

We know from experience that the media sometimes distorts our views and analysis, projecting a very different image than the one we called them for. The designated media person should keep this in mind. The women's movement in general so far has failed to approach the media and negotiate with them so that our views will be accurately represented. It is crucial to make progress in this respect.

We should never assume that making a problem public necessarily brings about positive change. We have many examples of media further endangering activists or victims. For example, Pakistani women's organisations have changed their policies regarding reporting rape in the media, after finding that each reported rape in the newspapers initiated a wave of new rapes. Clearly, the involvement of local groups is crucial in estimating these consequences. A country also can become defensive when attacked in the international media. Some countries just cannot tolerate being shamed from the outside. The best example of this is the US, which systematically disqualifies the attempt to shame them when they are exposed by Third World countries.

Since the RRTs will need to make selective use of the media, we have two options. First, we could agree to have prominent personalities addressing the media, writing for the media, or being interviewed (prominent enough so that journalists will fear backlash if they were to distort the person's views . . . but in that case, we know that it will rarely be women who will address the media). A second possibility is for us to devote time and effort to 'entering' the media, an investment that certainly would benefit the women's movement at large! However, we know that members of the media like to interview "experts" or academics and get their views on the crisis. Perhaps a good balance could be achieved by having the media interview the RRT members, as well as well-known contacts, experts, and/or academics from the crisis country and from outside the area. We should keep potentially helpful people informed of the RRT's concerns and advise them on how the issues could be projected through the media.

In some cases, a press conference may be necessary outside or in the country when an RRT is about to be launched and in the country where the RRT is taking place. A press conference may lead to massive media campaigns involving print, broadcast, and TV, with the participations of victims, survivors, NGOs, and institutions.

RRTs need to consider the option of not involving media in certain situations. We can envision situations in which RRTs could be called by organisations just to provide their expertise, but that would not necessarily lead to publicity. Such an intervention is unlikely to involve a campaign unless local activists intend to use the opportunity to educate people in their country. For example, Algerian women or Afghani women suddenly having to face helping the victims of mass rape in war could call for an RRT to come and train them. This relief team should involve psychotherapists who have already experienced and dealt with situations such as the women from the Women's Crisis Center in Belgrade. The media might or might not be involved.

Evaluation of 'Success'

Human rights and especially women's rights activities cannot be evaluated in terms of success or failure. 'Success' is a very inappropriate term when it comes to changing the world, for that, indeed, takes a long time. RRTs are not obliged to always succeed. In some cases the security situation or lack of resources may not allow us to proceed. But we do have an obligation to try.

Teams and donors should be prepared to accept that a mission has not 'succeeded'

in accomplishing its goal. Lives may not be saved, and massacres may still continue after the visit of an RRT. However, it would be a mistake to conclude that the mission was a failure and that money should not have been spent on the case.

One should always remember the example that we gave earlier in this paper of the moral support given by Italian women to the Women in Black in Belgrade during the war in Bosnia. Even when facts cannot be changed, solidarity, presence, and continued communication offer reassurance of non-abandonment to the women who are isolated in situations that they cannot change (for instance the growth of fascism and war in ex-Yugoslavia). Knowing that other groups outside their country were consistently supporting them in their struggle for survival and for other values gave these women comfort.

These types of situations will continue to exist, and our response should not be underestimated, whether or not the mission 'succeeds.' Our commitment could mean the mere presence of women in the area where conflict just occurred and taking a stand to give visibility to the issues of women and to mobilize the public. It could mean the mere presence of the women in court cases to lend support to the survivors. It could also mean being present in the areas where a massacre took

place. Just being with the victims and survivors is, in itself, an achievement.

In situations where it is impossible to get into the country, intervention could come in different forms: the presence of members of the RRT in the embassies of the country involved; a series of letters sent to the state, persons, or agencies responsible; or letters and telephone calls made to victims and survivors. However, as much as possible, such initiatives should not take place without the consent of concerned individuals or groups.

Conclusion

The Rapid Response Teams initiative stems from a sense of social responsibility. Social responsibility is an action undertaken on behalf of sufferers and victims by standing for them, championing their cause, and helping them. In reality, taking social responsibility is the implementation of solidarity. Most religious and philosophical traditions have postulated that good thoughts and good words have to be accompanied by good actions. Most religions enjoin their followers that those who are 'privileged' have an obligation to the disadvantaged. The term 'privilege' here does not imply wealth. It is relative, and can be taken to connote a more fortunate situation in which one is placed rather than that of those who are disadvantaged. Our

concept of social responsibility transcends the sharing of wealth and focuses on the utilization and dedication of one's goodness, intellectual talent, or skill potential for the advancement of women's human rights.

Concerned groups and individuals should call upon RRTs, as the need arises. They should 'intervene' in collaboration with, or after suggestion and consultation with local groups, imposing neither their presence nor their preferential strategy. Calling upon the RRTs without fear of being administered 'aid' instead of solidarity implies positive pre-existing links within the women's movement locally or regionally. Hence the RRTs need to establish these links early enough and to have a permanent dialogue through existing organizations. Clearly, one of the first tasks in establishing RRTs will be to establish a list of potential members of RRTs and a list of local organizations, then to reactivate links with them long prior to any 'intervention.'

Bearing in mind the need to take a strategic approach, RRTs will thoughtfully choose appropriate interventions and proceed with the tasks required in a particular situation—whether that be to witness, investigate and document, support, provide expertise and training, bring relief and heal, mobilize, publicize, or monitor. Throughout the

process, the RRTs must determine, always consulting local women, to what extent intervention should be local, regional, national, or international. They will call upon a broad base of support among other activists. RRTs' commitment to eliminate violations of women's rights will enable them to face down the daunting forces of the politics and laws that can present major obstacles.

The 'social contract' with groups who call upon or accept the presence of RRTs should be clear. If the aim is a concrete achievement, the RRTs should not leave the group without ensuring that the RRT has completed their part of the contract and that other organizations whose mandate goes beyond urgency will follow them in supporting the local groups. A mutually supportive attitude will ensure the value and impact of RRTs on a local, regional and international level. With commitment, solidarity, expertise, and skills, Rapid Response Teams should go a long way in helping to eliminate the human rights violations of women.

SUMMARY OF EXPERTS CONSULTATION

The idea of gender focused Rapid Response Teams (RRTs) has been percolating in the international women's human rights community for several years. Already there have been cases where lives have been saved, wrong doings exposed, and hope kept alive by acts of women's solidarity across national borders on short notice.

Given the current environment, there is an urgent need to put systems in place so that small teams comprised of international activists with expertise on documenting human rights abuse, treating trauma, conflict resolution, or whatever is most needed can be called in by (and work in partnership with) local activists who see women's human rights in their country being threatened or attacked.

To further explore this idea and begin to lay the groundwork for its implementation, the Urgent Action Fund convened a consultative meeting of activists from around the world in London, England on November 18th-19th, 2002.

The Urgent Action Fund (UAF) was established to promote the human rights of women and girls through a global program of urgent response grant making and by

encouraging or creating collaborative projects to support women in situations of violent conflict or crisis.

The consultative meeting was organized and hosted by the Urgent Action Fund's global office (USA) directed by Julie Shaw and Urgent Action Fund - Africa directed by Betty Murungi. Ariane Brunet, Chair of the Urgent Action Fund Board and one of the originators of the RRT idea, chaired the meeting and will play a major on-going role in the project.

Although UAF envisions subsequent meetings that may have a regional focus, the first meeting had a global theme. The participants list included women activists from Kenya, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Kosova, Albania, Serbia, Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Colombia, the United States, the United Kingdom (working in Afghanistan), and Scotland. Participating Urgent Action Board members were from Zimbabwe, Nepal, India, and Canada.

The international activists considered the key points and questions raised in the concept paper.

In preparation for the meeting, UAF commissioned Marieme Helie-Lucas, co-founder of Women Living Under Muslim Laws, and Indai Lourdes Sajor, both well-known experts on women in conflict situations, to prepare a paper to introduce participants to the concept (see attached document).

“We are not necessarily or merely envisioning the RRTs as fact finding missions,” state the authors in the concept paper. “In that respect, we do not endorse the underlying assumptions of some of the preliminary discussions about the RRTs, where it was often assumed or presented as self evident that RRTs would be fact finding missions, mainly in the context of war. Already our world is overloaded with documentation and human rights reports floating around that leave situations as they are. The RRTs aim at inducing a real and lasting change for the concerned women. Thus, RRTs will act upon and follow the cases until completion of their contract. The RRTs will hold themselves accountable to the women who called them for help.”

Current scenario

In envisioning how an RRT would function, the participants decided to “play out” a scenario based on a real situation. One of the participants described current

conditions in her country. “There are many warning signs” she said, “of a possible take over by fundamentalists allied with the military.”

“Late last year the government ordered the military to control the out of hand crime situation. Even though they have no legal authority for arrest, the military began arresting people and holding them for interrogation. Twenty-eight people died in one month due to their violent treatment.”

“Our history tells us this is the way the military has come to rule in my country and others in the region,” she commented. “You make the Prime Minister a figurehead, if she/he is willing to be that, and it [the military] takes over. A few months after that the constitution is suspended and then the military chief forms his own party.”

Since women’s human rights are the focus of the RRTs, other participants asked how this is a women’s issue.

The activist responded by explaining that members of the military were entering people’s houses and beating up women. Then she and another RRT participant provided two examples that they knew of in which the military had forced women to wear veils, and other incidents in which fundamentalist based religious practices were being enforced.

If there were already a mechanism in place for an RRT response, one of them said she would request the RRT to call international attention to the actions of the military. "In this case the army is seen as an active peacekeeper in international disputes and they would be really upset if their current role were exposed." She would also want a team to come to her country and meet with families of victims, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and so on. She felt the visit would give the people being affected more strength to speak out.

Participants envisioned already existing networks being activated world wide to call attention to the situation. For example on a given day women around the world would contact their country's embassy to the country in question, inform them of information on abuses that would be collected and prepared in a report beforehand, and demand attention be paid to the situation of women in that country.

At this point the discussion began to focus on the particular role the RRT could play in such a scenario. It was pointed out that there already are groups doing international coordinated responses to such situations. One participant suggested that the RRT would be that part of the strategy that deploys physically in a country and feeds information to networks prepared to educate and lobby

internationally. Others responded that Amnesty International already has in place an extensive network of contacts and is very able to investigate and write reports similar to what was envisioned.

What then is the niche that RRTs would fill? Part of the answer is in the perspective of the RRT. Not only would it focus on what is happening to women, but it would also look at the situation from a feminist political perspective, in this case highlighting what a turn to fundamentalism would mean to women. In addition to investigating, the RRTs would be empowered to play an active role in addressing the situation at hand.

One suggested approach to the situation in the country being considered in the scenario was for an RRT to be composed of or convene a group of women who have experienced similar situations where the military and fundamentalists have been enmeshed. These women, in conversation with local women, might be helpful in understanding the situation and planning what kind of response would be effective.

A statement to the military could be prepared, offered another participant, with expectations of behavior. It would say "If you go beyond this in the way you treat women's rights somebody is watching you. It can work in certain cases - to basically read

them the women's human rights rule book.”

When is an RRT most needed?

It was decided that a list of criteria should be developed that would guide the decision about when an RRTs should be sent to a country, when is the most strategic time?

Two such key times that RRTs could have a great impact are when there are early warning signs of the onset of crisis, or when a war is ending and a new government and civil society are about to be reconstructed.

“We need to develop a set of indicators that show at what level a conflict could break into violence,” commented a social scientist from an on-going conflict zone. “At that point a pre-emptive campaign can be launched. The presence of witnesses does hold them back. I have seen it when an [international observer] comes to a checkpoint and the soldiers are restrained.”

“That time when it's the end of the war and just beginning to be some kind of peace is called liminal time,” commented another participant. “No one really knows what is going on and there are so many opportunities at that point to direct things in another way. Strategically if you are planning this is one of the best times to go in. International aid groups

haven't gone in, the journalists that are there don't really know what stories to cover, it hasn't really come into a pattern yet - you can push them in this direction, the military is in a mess. Before the UN system has really got going this can be an excellent time for intervention.”

There may be a need for the RRT to consciously be operating on two levels. One is responding to requests and crises as they occur, the other can be thought out proactively. One suggestion was to periodically (every six months) focus on a different country or region. This would be useful in being pre-emptive, in spotting trouble or trends before they are in crisis proportions. Another suggestion was to operate with themes such as corporate violence. Or, for another example, if the issue being addressed was fundamentalisms and women, the RRTs might highlight one Muslim case and one Hindu case and one Christian case each from a very different country, North and South.

It was also stated that there are actions that can be undertaken without a trip to the country, and that should be considered a valid strategy. One of the participants felt that possibility was not given ample time for discussion at the conference.

One of the positive offerings of an RRT is hope. Several participants related how in the middle of a conflict it has been

crucial to know that there are people who care. Whether it is for an individual woman to know that when the bombing has subsided she will receive a visit from a women's group, or for people under siege to hear that somewhere in the world there is protest about their oppression. It is hope that keeps an activist going in the face of despair. She is maintained by a belief that the effects of her work will be seen in the future. When a person is lost psychologically because of despair, it is on a par with a loss of life. Therefore participants urged the RRTs to remember this crucial yet ethereal element that they will be bringing to those they interact with in the middle of a crisis.

RRT Accountability

One of the ways that an RRT might operate differently from the traditional human rights groups currently doing related work is in the RRT's ultimate accountability to the women who have requested the RRT, and to women's human rights law.

“For example, for some [human rights groups], if the way the law is currently interpreted does not cover the violation they see, like a violation of women, then they say we can't denounce it because our first principle is to follow the law as it currently stands. So for us, we might say well if the law doesn't address this violation

of women we still need to do that. Because the first thing we are answerable to is the women with whom we have this contract.”

There was considerable discussion about the relationship between the local group or groups and the RRT. It was proposed that the RRT come to a country virtually always at the request of a local group. However, the discussion, which leads to the request, may be initiated by the RRT. In rare cases where there is no functioning women's group in a country a local group from a neighboring country may initiate a request. However this is potentially a dangerous situation.

It is important that the local groups and the RRT are clear with each other on what the expectations are for the work to be done. Issues that must be clarified are the extent and nature of the work, security concerns, financial responsibilities, insurance, logistics, timeline, decision making, follow-up and so on.

At one point the participants disagreed on what the agreement between the RRT and the local group should be called. Some of the participants from the Global North called for a contract. They said that a contract implied a professional relationship which would hold particularly the international team accountable to a high standard of commitment and follow through, and

would emphasize the professional over the personal relationship.

Others primarily from the South said that their colleagues would not accept an RRT that required a contract. To them the word “contract” implied a cold business relationship devoid of the trust they feel should be the foundation of a truly feminist endeavor.

Finally the group found a term that was acceptable to all: a memorandum of understanding. Although some might view this discussion as one of semantics, it is rich with cultural meanings, and this coming together across differences will continue to be inherent in the work of the international RRTs.

Responsibilities of RRTs and local groups

Breakout groups discussed at length what the expectations and responsibilities of the local and international components of the RRT would be. They emphasized the partnership between the local and international team members. There should be constant strategizing and information sharing. They were particularly concerned that the international experts not take an action that would inadvertently harm the local group, which would have to deal with any repercussions for a long time

after the internationals were gone. For example, it was proposed that any contact with the media be cleared with the local group, and that the international group be vigilant about how and where files are kept (they asked that the files be kept locally) and what is done with the information gathered in the country that is visited (further use of information should not jeopardize local women).

Sometimes there may be a clash of values within an RRT. Team members must be willing to take a risk to get to know each other and develop the necessary trust to work together. There needs to be mechanisms to resolve issues, which may arise within a team. One example was given where a team of four women was doing a mediation that never seemed to get unblocked. Later they realized that both of the parties of the mediation were willing to find a solution, but it had been the four women themselves who had blocked progress because they had not resolved their own differences.

It was decided that there needed to be a statement defining the values of those working on the RRTs. A breakout group composed the following, which was accepted by all the participants.

“Our wish is that the RRTs truly reflect an inter-national perspective, i.e., focus on the relationship and reciprocal solidarity between women from different parts of the world, rather than on their mere diversity regardless of the human and political quality of their interaction.”

Working principles for RRTs

While there are many responses in the world to human rights violations against women and girls, we believe that there is a need to have an international group of experienced women who will respond immediately to specific crises in order to achieve wider positive changes in society and in the world.

We are a group of women who believe in the following feminist principles:

We respect human life, human dignity and body integrity.

We are against all kinds of discriminations based on race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, sexual choices, class, ableness, and age.

We focus our activism on women's human rights in a belief that feminist perspective could change the existing power relations in society.

We have a vision of peace that is based on equity, gender and social justice.

We are against any gender-based violence (irrespective of who is the victim) and our aim is to provide critical support to women in areas of crisis.

We believe in women's solidarity which means mutual exchange and learning from each other.

We believe that the local experience of women is crucial and is not to be judged.

Support to individual women or to a group is given based on a belief that a feminist intervention will have greater global consequences for positive changes in the lives of women worldwide.

In addition to the above, participants wanted to include a quote from the concept paper, “Our wish is that the RRTs truly reflect an inter-national perspective, i.e., focus on the relationship and reciprocal solidarity between women from different parts of the world, rather than on their mere diversity regardless of the human and political quality of their interaction.”

A list was created of the kinds of experts that might be needed to either be a part of an RRT or be available to consult about the work of an RRT:

security
international law
counseling
mediator
media expertise
medical professionals
feminist toxicologists
police/forensic experts
writers
parliamentarians
psychotherapists
UN officials
translators and interpreters
photographers
grass roots activists
feminist thinkers
play writers/celebrities

There was disagreement about whether or not celebrities should be included.

There was a lengthy discussion on whether or not there are times when it is appropriate to work with men. Although opinions and past experiences varied, the general conclusion was that this is something to be discussed on a case-by-case basis. The RRTs themselves should in most or all cases be made up of women. However, when those involved deem it is necessary

to collaborate with men, they should do so with consciousness. “There should always be a space where the patriarchy can be critiqued”, said one participant. Others expressed concern that when men take actions for women’s security they are prone to “protecting” the women in a way that keeps women as victims and/or submissive. The group concluded that when considering alliances with men as a potential part of an RRT’s strategy, there should be no compromising of security, integrity, identity or leadership.

Supporting structure for RRT

A breakout group took on the assignment of envisioning a supporting structure for the RRTs. They began by saying that a decision-making body was necessary. They also proposed a logistical team that would arrange flights, money, visas and so on. A support team would prepare the RRTs and then debrief them when they return. A support team would be able to do therapy with the returning RRTs in order to prevent burn out. A clearinghouse would be needed to house the database of case studies and experts available to go on an RRT, and to coordinate the RRTs. Then as the discussion progressed the breakout group hit on an idea that resonated strongly with several of the members. The RRT should be a flexible instrument, a tool, not owned by anyone.

There is no separate institution that would need to be created. They pointed to the example of the women's tribunals.

“The tribunals idea is not owned by anyone. There are tribunals that were done in South Asia, there were tribunals that were done in Latin America, there were tribunals that were done at the international level, and there is a permanent tribunal that is based in Morocco. [Each] took a different shape. Those various types of tribunals have integrated basic principles, but nobody can say the tribunals are [run by] a coordinated body that is situated in such and such a place. People have used the tool when they saw it appropriate given a particular situation because some people tried it and discovered it could work.”

One possible scenario would be something like this: A database of examples of RRTs and of experts prepared to participate in an RRT could be housed with an existing organization (NGO). A clearinghouse system could be established so that when an RRT request comes in, information could be dispatched including basic information - this is what the request is about, this is who is needed, the materials, the expertise and so on. The responsibility of the team comes to those who are clearly interested in doing and in bringing the expertise following a request. These would be people who had already become familiar

with the guiding principles set for RRTs by discussions such as this one.

Although it was acknowledged that a coordinator might be necessary it was deemed too early to know exactly what kind of decision making and implementation system was needed. Rather than set about to create a new structure it was suggested that this is a time of collective learning. Already there are projects in Colombia, a visit set for Gujarat and other actions that could be looked at closely for lessons learned that apply to setting up the RRTs. A structure could be built on experiences in the field.

In conclusion the group said that many issues remain to be thought through such as the database of experts and case studies, and the decision making structure. However the main product of the discussion was a principle of understanding about decision-making - that the structure needs to be as flexible as possible, and not owned by anyone.

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