

GENDER-FOCUSED RAPID RESPONSE TEAMS

A PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION OF THE CONCEPT AND POTENTIAL FOR IMPLEMENTATION

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FOR WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS

Gender-focused rapid response teams (RRTs) are international, women-led teams of activists with expertise in various disciplines, who partner with local women requesting immediate assistance because of threats or attacks in their country or region. Whether they are called to witness human rights abuses, investigate and document, provide expertise and training, bring relief and healing, publicize, or monitor situations, RRTs provide a unique and rapidly-mobilized support structure for women attempting to intervene in a violent conflict or an escalating crisis.

The UN World Conference on Human Rights recognized women's rights as human rights for the first time in 1993. Even today, the world denies recognition and redress of many violations against women. For years, the women's human rights community has discussed the idea of gender-focused RRTs as a potential framework for intervening in cases of women's human rights violations. The contributions of RRTs might be distinguished from other international responses by their feminist political perspective, physical deployment, strategizing with local women to induce long term change, and ultimate accountability both to the women who requested help and to women globally.

To explore the viability of RRTs and begin to lay the groundwork for implementation, UAF commissioned Marieme Helie-Lucas and Indai Lourdes Sajor to write a concept paper as a springboard for discussion. UAF then convened a consultative meeting of knowledgeable, experienced women's rights activists from around the world in London, England in November 2002. This summary highlights key points of the RRT concept, as well as the experts' discussion. The full report is available upon request.

GENDER-FOCUSED RAPID RESPONSE TEAMS: A CONCEPT SUMMARY

RRTs MISSION AND SCOPE

The RRT's mission, to support women and promote women's human rights in crisis situations, rests on two underlying ideological considerations—organizations and individuals coming together around a specific issue, and an emphasis on solidarity, a two-way process between equals. Teams would build alliances with local women for mutual benefit, realizing that violations in one locale create major repercussions for women elsewhere. RRTs, and local activists, would collaborate to promote awareness and ensure follow-up beyond the team's mandate.

Customized to respond to the unique circumstances of each intervention, RRTs would: expose, prevent, or relieve human rights violations against women; draw attention to forgotten issues; voice truth in the face of rumors, fragmented reports, or political propaganda; and provide the authoritative voice of the women's human rights movement.

Like many human rights organizations, RRTs would engage in fact finding. Yet, seeking to empower victims, survivors, and local organizations, they would have a much broader scope—to provide expertise and training, bring relief and healing, publicize the situation, monitor the campaign, and work toward long-term change.

WHEN TO INTERVENE

RRTs cannot take on all situations requiring intervention. Decisions would be based upon both strategic issues and urgency. Strategy dictates that RRTs consider the frequency of types of violations, as well as give priority to groundbreaking issues likely to mobilize people internationally. Mass killings or the risk of an activist's safety cause little debate about intervention. Other cases are less obvious. Even cases long past can be urgent if they have been denied forms of redress and accountability or if they connect to a recurrent problem. Many women today suffer violations similar to past violations. We must signal strongly to the present perpetrators that they will be held accountable, even if many years from now.

A current campaign on behalf of the "comfort women" of World War II brings an understanding of sexual slavery to international law and the United Nations. It redefines reparation and compensation for victims. Survivors' testimonies teach us that atrocities go beyond being crimes against just one group of women. Rather, they are an assault against women as a whole. Had RRTs existed years ago, we would have advocated sending a team to the trials these former "comfort women" initiated in the Tokyo District Court against the Japanese army.

HOW TO INTERVENE

Once a project is accepted, a lead activist would identify appropriate team members and specific responsibilities of all involved coordinators—international, in-country, and local. Several factors would determine who to send to a particular location for a specific problem: availability of specialists (activists, lawyers, journalists, doctors, etc.), difficulties in obtaining visas, and the right balance between local and outside women. Recognizing that local groups may be unaware of their options, we see value in international, national, and regional campaigns. Yet, seasoned activists must believe in the capacity and competence of local groups, never assuming that an international strategy is best.

The complex tasks of managing security, media, and logistics each would be assigned to one person. RRTs would terminate the project only after ensuring that they have completed their mission and that organizations whose mandates go beyond urgent response will follow up by supporting local groups.

OBSTACLES AND POLITICAL TRAPS

National laws and practices sometimes contradict international treaties or human rights laws, ignoring or minimizing violations against women. A nation's laws aim to regulate non-state as well as state actors; but often non-state actors violate women's human rights even more than state actors do. RRTs would be prepared to challenge existing laws and practices when women's lives are at stake. They would help reduce non-state abuses and enforce state accountability by exposing extreme violations and the state's failure to act. As RRTs deal with such complexities, however, they must consult with involved local women to prevent any potential backlash.

EVALUATION OF SUCCESS

In evaluating our work, "success" may be the wrong measure. The security situation or lack of resources may interfere with successful completion of the mission. Even after the team visits, lives may be lost and massacres may continue. Yet we must not conclude that the mission failed or that money was misspent. Even when gruesome realities cannot be changed, women's presence and continued communication reassure isolated victims and highlight atrocities for the global community.

Belgrade's Women in Black claim they were "kept alive" throughout the war in Bosnia by their Italian sisters' visits. Though their situation did not change, the very fact that feminists from another country stayed with them and shared their struggles was therapeutic. Later, when communication was more difficult, the Italian feminists brought a fax machine to Belgrade. This, say the Women in Black, was their only link with the outside world, and "saved their sanity."

CONCLUSION

If the RRT concept comes to fruition, we could make tremendous progress toward eliminating human rights violations against women. RRTs would engage a broad base of support for each action among networks they have nurtured, and act based on the needs of specific situations. Throughout the process, the RRTs would work with local women to determine the extent and form of regional, national, and international involvement. With commitment, solidarity, and expertise, RRTs could face down the daunting forces of the politics and laws that perpetuate human rights violations against women.

A MEETING OF EXPERTS

Grounding their discussion in the concept paper developed by Ms. Helie-Lucas and Ms. Lourdes Sajor, a group of seventeen women activists who work in conflict zones worldwide addressed both the reactive and proactive potential of RRTs. They agreed that teams might impact situations most when warning signs of impending crisis appear or immediately after armed conflict, when government and civil society must be reconstructed. The group concurred that RRTs should intervene only upon requests of local women or after consulting local groups when an outside party suggests intervention. These experts advocated clarifying expectations between local and international teams, developing a solid infrastructure, and reactivating pre-existing links within the women's movement before any intervention occurs. Lengthy discussion about forming alliances with men yielded consensus that such alliances might be part of an RRT's strategy, though with several caveats.

The participants identified types of expertise needed for effective interventions and adopted several working principles reflected in the concept paper, as well as the following core statement: "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 . . ."

Implementing RRTs would not necessarily require creating a separate institution; RRTs should not be owned by anyone. Developing a database of information about key organizations, individuals, and cases would be a critical first step. The group considered two possible structures: creation of the database, which would be available to women's rights activists as needed, or an international coordinating body that would use the database to act upon incoming requests. They agreed that any RRT supporting structure must be flexible and emerge from activists' field experience.

With this groundwork in place, the expert activists are considering a second meeting to examine specific case studies and create a plan for further development of the RRT concept.

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