

Responsibility to protect

The International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect (ICtOP) aims to build global solidarity so that when a crisis happens in one part of the world it becomes a concern to *all*.



ANP / Gavin Heller

Can you tell me about the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect (ICRtoP) and why it was established?

In September 2005, the UN World Summit endorsed the principle of ‘responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity’. According to the RtoP principle, states are responsible for protecting populations from mass atrocities, while the international community has the responsibility to assist states in providing that protection, and to intervene if they fail to do so. In January 2010, representatives of eight regional and international NGOs founded the ICRtoP. The coalition aims to promote understanding of the principle, to strengthen capacities to prevent and halt mass atrocities, and to mobilize NGOs around the world to push for action to save lives.

In your previous work you focused on women in conflict. Why did you decide to start working on the Responsibility to Protect?

Coming from a war-torn region, I have always had a deep interest in peace and security issues. RtoP is a new tool with the potential to advance global peace. How can we not be excited about such a novel idea? There is nothing more basic than protecting human lives.

I wish the norm had been adopted when war broke out in 1997 in Congo-Brazzaville, where I was working. We were told to leave the office immediately. I remember how frightening it was as we walked home in groups, with shooting all around us. The conflict lasted many months, but the shootings went on for years after the conflict was ‘officially’ over. Every day we hoped the UN would come to our rescue, but they never did.

Talking about RtoP reminds me of the initial controversies surrounding violence against women (VAW). Years ago, people used to say we could not intervene in cases of domestic violence because these were private matters, which happened in ‘the sovereign domain of the head of the family’. The advocacy work of women’s rights groups has led to a paradigm shift. From the unthinkable to the inevitable, domestic violence is now universally recognized as a violation of women’s human rights. RtoP should be viewed through the same lens. Sovereignty is again at stake, but we cannot

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close our eyes to mass atrocities just because they occur in the ‘domestic’ domain of states!

How will you use your expertise on women in conflict to further the work of the coalition?

My work entailed advocating for the protection of women from violence and other human rights violations, and promoting their leadership role in conflict resolution and peace building. A number of those advocacy strategies could readily be adapted to advance the coalition’s work on RtoP.

For example, we need to humanize the RtoP concept. It can be helpful to bring in the voices of survivors or their descendants – in a way that is respectful of their experiences – as we seek political endorsement or to educate the public and the media. RtoP should not be just another UN norm. The Coalition will reach out across the globe to forge strategic alliances with relevant stakeholders to make sure that people feel they own this norm and integrate it into their own agendas. It is not only up to the UN or civil society leaders to uphold the norm: it must be a collective endeavour.

We need to build global solidarity so that when a crisis happens in one part of the world it becomes a concern to *all*. Victims of rape in Bosnia and the DRC may come from very different backgrounds, but they share a common experience. We hope that the RtoP message will help them come to the conclusion that ‘Your battle is my battle’.

A gender perspective needs to be part and parcel of RtoP. Because RtoP focuses on protecting populations at risk or victims of mass atrocities, there is a danger that it will look at women only as victims. We would then roll back all that women’s movements have achieved in demanding accountability on women’s rights violations. Instead, we also need to pay attention to the role of women as agents of protection and leaders in peace processes.

How can research help to develop a gender perspective in RtoP?

We have developed some knowledge on early warning, but we know little about what can actually be done to halt or prevent mass atrocities. What would you do in the case of mass rape, when the national government is unwilling or unable to act? Should you use force to end the rapes? Would

that be effective? We know that the deployment of an all-women contingent to Liberia helped to create an environment that was conducive to reducing sexual violence. But we do not know precisely how that worked.

Another knowledge gap concerns the identification of women-specific mass atrocity crimes. Rape has been recognized as such, but what others should be considered? In the context of early warning, could troops be deployed solely to prevent women-specific mass atrocities? We need research to identify other indicators that will help to identify women-specific crimes.

What research is currently being done on these issues, and what additional work is needed?

Most strategies are designed in the North and adapted in conflict contexts in the South. It is important for donors to support action research that link women’s organizations with research institutes in order to generate data on effective ways to prevent or respond to VAW in conflict areas. We need a holistic approach to VAW, one that addresses the medical, legal and psychological aspects, as well as the underlying causes. But I know of no conflict where a holistic approach has been used for lack of adequate resources and coordination among key actors leading these anti-violence projects.

UNIFEM has investigated the role of women in peace negotiations. This research showed that war is a male-dominated arena, and that women often lack the resources to participate in peace talks. They are not invited, or do not have the know-how, but we know from experience that if we provide training to women, they are able to sit at the table and bring about change, as the women in Liberia did.

At the institutional level, research is needed to explore synergies between, for example, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General on sexual violence in war zones and special mechanisms such as the inquiry procedure of the Optional Protocol to the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). ■

For more information, visit the ICRtoP website:
www.responsibilitytoprotect.org