



FÉDÉRATION INTERNATIONALE DES SOCIÉTÉS DE LA CROIX-ROUGE ET DU CROISSANT-ROUGE
INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT SOCIETIES
FEDERACIÓN INTERNACIONAL DE SOCIEDADES DE LA CRUZ ROJA Y DE LA MEDIA LUNA ROJA
الاتحاد الدولي لجمعيات الصليب الأحمر والهلال الأحمر

Statement to the Hague Forum 8-12 February 1999

As written

The Hague Forum for the operational review and appraisal of implementation of the program of action of the international conference on population and development

The Hague, The Netherlands

9 February 1999

**STATEMENT BY GEORGE WEBER, SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE
INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT
SOCIETIES**

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Statement by George Weber, Secretary General,
International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies,
to The Hague Forum for the operational review and appraisal of implementation
of the Program of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development
The Hague, The Netherlands, 9 February 1999

Mr. President,

I wish you first to know that a considerable and growing number of our International Federation's 175 member National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies are taking inspiration from the Program of Action of the Cairo Conference and adopting gender mainstreaming and reproductive health activities. These Societies and our Federation are no small force. They join the efforts of 105 million volunteers and 300,000 staff members worldwide. Nor is reproductive health a recent or casual interest for them. Many of our Societies, as humanitarian service auxiliaries to their governments, have long played roles in mother and child health programs, both in emergency conditions such as disasters and epidemics and in community welfare and public health initiatives.

These Societies have become aware through their work with the vulnerable people of their communities that lack of quality reproductive health services leads to high mortality rates among women and children, especially in areas of socioeconomic stress. The absence of quality reproductive health services, these Societies well know, increases the spread of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS. It also contributes to rates of abortion complications and maternal mortality due to unsafe facilities and practices. These conditions have led us in the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to establish reproductive health components in our emergency services internationally, regionally and nationally.

This development is reflected in our membership in the Interagency Working Group for Reproductive Health.

Our International Federation involvement with reproductive health in emergency situations dates from 1996 when, in collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund, we inaugurated a reproductive health project in the Central African Great Lakes Region. This activity specifically addressed needs of refugee women, adolescents and men. The program was subsequently piloted also in Afghanistan, where our Federation assists our member Afghan Red Crescent Society to maintain the work of its community health clinics which are virtually the only functioning public health facilities in that armed conflict-shattered land.

Those collaborations have led to a memorandum of understanding between our organizations that was signed in mid-1998. After stating our shared concerns in the reproductive health and clinical services needs of women and men, the memorandum sets forth a framework for collaboration and coordination between our organizations to accomplish five objectives. These very pragmatic and realizable objectives are:

To address reproductive health information and service needs by increasing awareness of reproductive health needs and by developing and strengthening reproductive clinical and counseling services.

To promote a holistic approach to girls' and women's health.

To promote provision of reproductive health information among adolescents and young people.

To combat sexual violence, with particular attention to the dangers facing girls and women.

To put special emphasis on population victims of man-made or natural catastrophe.

Within our International Federation, we have focused the implementation of this understanding in our Community Health and Social Welfare Department and our Women and Development Unit. Both of these are working through our 13 regional field delegations and some 50 country delegations with our National Societies to raise awareness of gender issues

and reproductive health needs through workshops and training seminars with groups of Societies. Particularly in work with refugees and internally displaced populations, we and UNFPA have worked in close coordination. And we are working to strengthen our links with each other in the field, especially as we work to meet needs in training in reproductive health.

In this connection, we are developing a common course for dissemination of reproductive health information and needs particularly for Red Cross/Red Crescent components that are involved with refugee and displaced populations.

I might add that in all of our reproductive health initiatives we emphasize the importance of considering women's needs in emergency and armed conflict situations. This is a perspective often neglected. A priority objective with us, in fact, is that all of our field delegates and member National Societies involved with health care, in disaster relief or other emergency operations as well as in development programs, should be aware of the need to identify and address reproductive health care of women. In such manner, we are carrying out our Federation policy, enunciated in 1997, which commits us to incorporate a gender perspective into all policies and programs.

The UNFPA document prepared for this Forum mentioned "the difficulty associated with operationalizing concepts related to gender equality, equity and empowerment of women in various social, cultural and political contexts." Without in any way minimizing such difficulty, I want to suggest from our Red Cross/Red Crescent experience that there is good reason for optimism in our efforts to make reproductive health a generally accepted concern of humanitarian health activities. In our Red Cross/Red Crescent disaster and refugee operations we encounter interest and appreciation when we bring reproductive health information to the women we are assisting. And, even further along the road, we think you would be proud, with us, of our National Societies that have challenged their countries' historic cultural practices by working against genital mutilation of young women.

From all of us in the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, best wishes as you prepare for the Cairo Conference follow-up conference next month. The record of the first five years of the 20-year program of action from the Cairo Conference will reveal

many surprising and heartwarming developments that will bring cheer to us all. We in the Red Cross and Red Crescent are proud to be part of the endeavor.

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