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Interview with Mary Robinson*

Mary Robinson, the first woman President of Ireland (1990–1997), former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (1997–2002), and current President of Realizing Rights: The Ethical Globalization Initiative, has spent most of her life as a human rights advocate. As an academic (Trinity College Law Faculty), legislator, and barrister, she has always sought to use law as an instrument for social change. The recipient of numerous honours and awards throughout the world, Mary Robinson is a member of The Elders, co-founder and former Chair of the Council of Women World Leaders, and Vice President of the Club of Madrid. She chairs the GAVI Alliance (Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation) Board and the Fund for Global Human Rights and is Honorary President of Oxfam International, Patron of the International Community of Women Living with AIDS (ICW), and President of the International Commission of Jurists.

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In your experience of working with women in situations of conflict, how have you perceived the effect of conflict on them?

Women often bear the brunt of coping with conflict. While I was serving as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, I heard firsthand accounts and grievous stories of the deliberate targeting of women, particularly for rape. Rape took on the character of a weapon. That's why I was very pleased that the ICTY [International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia] found rape to be a war crime in the conflict in Bosnia. It *is* a war crime, and certainly a form of warfare. And this problem hasn't gone away. I came across it again last March when I was going out to the camps in Goma, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). When you hear of the savagery of attacks on women, clearly it goes beyond sexual. It's about a sort of deep power relationship, an intention of

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utterly subjugating the woman and womanhood; even the mentality behind it is very hard to understand. It's clearly a pattern in situations of conflict and, sadly, almost a trend.

How did women cope with their fate?

When listening to the accounts of women in such situations, I'm continually struck by their resilience: how, despite the brutality they experienced, they still tried to look after their children; how much it mattered that their children would have an education, even in the refugee camp; how much they tried to make things normal in a very abnormal situation. But even in the camps there were very often inequities – it was the men who were in charge of the food and other resources, which made it much more difficult for women.

I saw that again recently when we were in eastern Chad, in an initiative to bring international women leaders to link up with women on the ground and help to get their voices heard. We went to the refugee camp first where the women had come across from Darfur, and some of their stories about what forced them to leave still stay with me.

Can you share any of these stories in particular?

One woman described 'men on horseback, and planes shooting from the sky' – words which point to government complicity in the situation. She gathered up her twin babies and ran as far away as she could, and then felt she had to know what had happened to the rest of her family. She left the babies by a high tree where she would be able to find them again, and went back. Her husband had been killed, her older child had been killed, and she was immediately seized and raped multiple times. She then crawled back to where her babies were and eventually got herself across to the camp.

This is just one of many stories. However, the woman who was telling this story said, too, that she was more vulnerable in the camp itself, because she was a widow and was poorer and had to go out for firewood. So, instead of being more protected because of her situation, she was actually more vulnerable.

A number of the women who spoke to us told similar stories. Because we were women leaders coming to listen to them, and they were with a small NGO that had been working in trauma counselling with them, they were more open in talking to us than they would otherwise have been. We didn't know them, and it's hard to open up about such things, but they felt we were there to listen to their story. Part of the story wasn't only what had happened to them across in Darfur; it was also that they were not safe in the camp – an official refugee camp established by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. When we tried to probe who the attackers were, the answer was that they were men in uniform. It didn't matter whether they were inside or outside the camp; rebels or government soldiers – men in uniform – would just take them as if they were property. It was quite harrowing to hear.

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How are women affected outside the refugee camps?

Among the people displaced internally by the conflict in eastern Chad, the conditions were noticeably worse. Paradoxically, the living conditions of those women and families – citizens of Chad – was both less secure and of a lesser standard in every sense than in the refugee camp. Those people had been displaced by conflict from about sixty or seventy miles away. Because it was a makeshift camp and they were looking for land, they would tend to be in the wrong areas, where flooding occurred, and there had been flooding in that internal camp. The women complained about the fact that they were second-class citizens there. Again, the stories were that the food supply was not as regular, and that the men dominated. We actually attended a literacy course where the women were learning to read and write, so that they could get into the queue to claim their own food and be able to sign for it.

What I'm trying to convey is that it's only when you really listen to the women that you understand the multiple ways in which they suffer – from being displaced, from the killing of members of their family, from the savage abuse sometimes inflicted upon them, which is literally aimed at trying to destroy them in order to destroy the identity of their clan or group – and that they can suffer a second-class situation even within the camps.

Women are often broadly categorized – even stereotyped – as helpless victims of war, yet you have mentioned examples of women in camps taking action to improve their situation and that of their family. How else have you seen women moving beyond the label of 'victim'?

I would say that a number of the women I have met in situations of conflict started as victims, and then became agents of change and tried to help others in the group. That is a very important part of the resilience, of the inner strength shown by many of these women in situations that are really very difficult indeed. This struck me – in a slightly different context – when seeing the people who gave their personal testimonies during the World Conference against Racism held in South Africa. Gay McDougall [UN Independent Expert on minority issues] had organized a series of panels, with four or five victims together on each one, many of whom had been in some way affected by conflict as well as racism. She started by calling the sessions 'Voices of victims', and then realized that it was wrong, because these were victims who had become agents for change.

Most of the women we met in Darfur and Chad had lost their husbands in the conflict, so they were widows, and many of them had been raped multiple times. Often the women feel ashamed of themselves as a result of the rape, and sometimes their families reject them, so there is that internal problem as well. What struck me, when we began to discuss further with them, was they didn't want to be seen just as victims. They wanted, in fact, to have the dignity of being able to work, to take decisions on their own, and they felt a sort of helplessness at being in the camp. The real problem for them was the lack of security, but they were trying to group together and make their voices heard.

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What can be done to empower women in such situations?

What we are trying to do in the Women Leaders Intercultural Forum of Realizing Rights[1] is to engage women who have access to and opportunities for influence. By linking women who are prominent international leaders with women working to address conflict at local levels, we are really trying to listen to these women facing conflict, to draw them out and understand what they want and what their priorities are, then to convey those messages where we can to governments, at the United Nations and in other international fora. We make it clear that's the purpose: not to impose our solutions, but to support *them* and help make their voices heard.

In the case of Chad it was in fact good timing when we did so, because Europe was just deciding whether to put a military presence in the country. This happened relatively soon afterwards. After meeting with women in Chad we went to Paris; to Berlin, because one of the people with us was a former minister from Germany; and to London, where we had about three-quarters of an hour in Downing Street with Prime Minister Gordon Brown. I think that, by the timing, which was deliberately chosen so as to maximize our influence, we did actually bring home the realities that persuaded leaders to take that step. I'm certainly of the view that this was why the Irish decided to put in a contingent, because the stories got back to Ireland in a fairly substantial way.

How did you involve the local actors?

Realizing Rights and the Women Leaders Intercultural Forum is a small but effective team. So we always work with partners. We have worked with *Femmes Africa Solidarité*, for example, to support the Sudanese Women's Forum on Darfur. It's a remarkable forum, bringing together women from Khartoum and from Juba who were interested in supporting their sisters in the three regions of Darfur. They were doing what the men had not been able to do – getting together across all the divides of class, tribe, and even religion, as some are Christians and some are Muslims.

Even when the International Criminal Court (ICC) indictment was lodged against [the Sudanese President Omar] Al-Bashir, this group did not break up. That was an extremely tough challenge, because it was a divisive issue. There were all kinds of different opinions, but the women coped.

All in all, I would say that the aim of the Forum is be an amplifier of women's voices, and an advocate for them having a place in peace talks and reconciliation efforts. We want to help ensure that these women really feel they are making their own stories heard.

Did the Forum make representations to the authorities in Sudan and Chad?

Yes, and to the African Union too. We actually managed, in Addis Ababa, to have a meeting with the African Union where we had two Darfuri women with us. One of

1 For further information, see http://www.realizingrights.org (last visited 12 March 2010).

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the male leaders from the African Union wanted to talk to me particularly, and I kept starting and then giving the floor to the Darfuri women. It was very interesting because it was quite clear that, culturally, there wasn't much of a disposition to listen to women. This was despite the fact that one of the Commissioners of the African Union, who was present, was herself a woman. They were putting me up on the rostrum with the African Union Commissioners. I said no, and insisted that the leader of the Sudanese women – chair of the Steering Committee – should be up on the rostrum. They were shocked at the idea of an ordinary woman being up there!

I'm giving this as one example of how we consciously try to amplify women's voices. If the women are present, as in this case, it's their voices that should be heard, and we create space for them. Otherwise, in contexts where they have no access, we make their voices heard on their behalf.

I'm very supportive of African women's groups: those of us that come from the outside can facilitate and can have a different kind of access, but actually it's the reinforcing of the work of local groups and of groups like *Femmes Africa Solidarité* that I think is sustainable. That's the way that we create a context for the future. So my colleagues in the Women Leaders Intercultural Forum are building partnerships with a view to creating sustainable ideas for African groups to continue this work.

When considering women as actors rather than victims in war, another aspect that comes to mind is women's increased participation in hostilities. In your work, what have your experiences been with female arms-bearers?

In fact, one of the participants in the second Sudanese Women's Forum on Darfur was an active combatant. The member of the Steering Committee for the West Darfur region was a remarkable leader, a young, natural leader. She felt that it would be important to have representation from refugee women as combatants too. She went out and found this group of women combatants and asked them to be part of the forum. I was very happy about that because I felt it was a real reaching out.

I've had some experience as well with girl soldiers in Sierra Leone. I remember one discussion with a number of girls who had been with the soldiers but hadn't actually been fighting – they had been sex slaves more than child soldiers. In Freetown, we also met a group of former child soldiers. We saw that there wasn't any difference between what the boys and girls wanted. Essentially, they just wanted to find their families.

A striking illustration of how images of women in war are used to evoke emotion is the example of Jessica Lynch, the United States soldier captured in Iraq, who says she was inaccurately portrayed as a hero and a victim for propaganda purposes. What do you make of the way that women in conflict are portrayed in the media?

To some extent I think that when any of us hear that three soldiers were killed, and find out that one of them was a woman and happened to be a mother of three

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children, we all instantly react a little bit: 'Oh my God, a woman, a mother!' I think we're still not accustomed to seeing this in quite the same way. The military do try to make heroes, and sometimes they will be women. We saw bad examples of that tendency in relation to Afghanistan, too – the well-known footballer [Pat Tillman] who had signed up after 9/11 and was killed in friendly fire, and then they tried to make a huge hero out of him and his family were rightly outraged.

What role do women play in armed forces?

You've triggered a memory which was really an extraordinary affirmation of the role that women in uniform can play. I was at an international colloquium in March of last year which was co-organized and co-hosted by Ellen Johnson Sirleaf [President of Liberia] and Tarja Halonen [President of Finland]. We had two days at the colloquium, which united a remarkable number of women from inside and outside Liberia. On the third day there was a commemoration of Liberia's adoption of the plan of action under Security Council Resolution 1325 on the role of women in peace and security, which marks its tenth anniversary later this year. There must have been about 2,000 Liberian women there along with their president.

We were sitting beside Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in a large covered part of the stadium, and there were various presentations. We could see a large number of women gathering outside, even young girls. Then Ellen went out to take the salute from those women in uniform in the protection of Liberia, and invited me to accompany her. There were women in the army, the police, in social services, girl guides, all of these. They marched past their president and saluted, and she kind of chivvied them along and half saluted, and they came in their hundreds. I found tears in my eyes, thinking of the background of those women – how many of them would have been subjected to rape and abuses – and here they were so proud. The teenagers, their feet didn't even hit the ground – it was just such a moment of pride for them, for the president, and for the country.

What impact could a larger number of women in the armed forces have?

It's very important that women are involved in peacekeeping in particular. In Liberia, for example, the Indian all-female contingent of peacekeepers is an important statement and an important involvement. In the camps in Chad, where the women wanted internal policing, they wanted women to be involved because the fear is that any man in uniform would be a potential attacker. In Chad, for example, some soldiers based near the camps came from the other end of the country, so they were out of their village context and saw women as fair game. Equally, a problem that I came across as High Commissioner for Human Rights was that of peacekeepers assaulting and raping or trafficking women in several contexts. Quite a number of the women, when they came forward with these harrowing stories, found that there was a lack of understanding and were treated very poorly in some situations. That's why the women in the camps wanted to have more women visibly involved in policing them.

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How can gender-based violence be fought?

There is also a group in Ireland that I'm quite proud of – I didn't initiate it but I play a kind of mentoring role in it. I would wish that other countries interested in conflict-affected and post-conflict developing countries would take a similar approach. It was decided by Irish aid agencies that they had not taken gender-based violence seriously enough in their work in developing countries, so they came together as a coalition to address such violence. The Irish government, through Irish Aid, became part of that coalition, as did the Irish Defence Forces. They've been doing a lot of work; I go back to Ireland once a year in November to meet with them and we have a serious exchange as to their experiences. I've now met them four times, and in the first two years most of the discussion was on how we never realized how much more work we needed to do to combat gender-based violence, both ourselves and with our partners on the ground. Now, they're building from strength in terms of what they want to do in that regard, and Ireland is in a cross-learning process with Liberia and Timor-Leste and developing a national plan of action based on UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

The Irish Defence Forces found it hugely important, because they are not only peacekeepers themselves but also train a lot of peacekeepers. They found that they had no idea how important it was to address gender-based violence in their training. I've learned quite a lot myself about how much work you need to do in highlighting and focusing on all the issues that arise in relation to gender-based violence. It has had a big impact on all of the Irish aid agencies, and that includes Oxfam and Christian Aid in Ireland, as well as Concern and GOAL. They're much more sensitized, they have become very aware of the need to put in place approaches they would not have put in place before: zero tolerance of gender violence, being very supportive of those who suffer, etc. As I say, the Irish Defence Forces are delighted that they had this opportunity, and have now built it into the courses they offer to our own peacekeepers and others.

A recommendation that I would make is that developed countries involved in supporting projects in countries in a conflict and post-conflict situation ought to take gender-based violence much more seriously, and invest much more in learning, training, and awareness in this area.

There has been criticism of peacekeeping forces regarding sexual violence, use of forced prostitution, and so on. While there are international legal obligations in this regard, there do not seem to have been many consequences for perpetrators. Where does the problem lie?

I agree, this is a real problem. We saw it in Sierra Leone, and Bosnia in particular. The trouble is that perpetrators are just sent home and in many cases nothing happens. This impunity reflects a deeper dismissal of the importance of these crimes. It's humiliating, when you think about it, that there is such broad impunity – it means that these women don't really matter.

I was struck, in a completely different context, by a similar kind of problem. There's a health project in Malawi addressing some of the problems of why

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pregnant women stay at home instead of going to clinics when facing complications. This listening project, quite different from the usual sort, ascertained that the main reason women don't go to the hospitals and clinics is that they are disregarded – even slapped. They are treated as non-persons. This happens in refugee or IDP [internally displaced persons] camps as well. I'm afraid that in an awful lot of these situations, that's part of the problem: women are not seen as important people or as citizens, they are just shuffled along.

So at the root of the problem is the undervaluing of the humanity and the human rights of women in that situation. I think it's as serious as that.

Do you have the impression that some of the issues that women are facing need specific conventions or resolutions, such as those recently passed by the Security Council?

I welcome the strengthening of Security Council Resolution 1325, as well as the national and even regional plans of action that we're seeing. Women are able to use that resolution to have more of a voice, more participation. The recent Resolutions 1820, 1888, and 1889, and the mandates that have come out of them, show that the UN, very late in the day, is coming to recognize the serious nature of gender-based violence in conflict.

Do women have a particular role to play in humanitarian organizations and in humanitarian action, whether international or community-based?

As humanitarian action is a particularly sensitive area of services to vulnerable populations, I would say 'Yes'. Women are tending to play much more of a role in these kinds of services anyway. I wouldn't say that it should be primarily women – I always feel that balanced is best, because that is also better from the point of view of combining various talents and approaches. However, I do think that the role of women is important in trauma counselling, so that women have an opportunity to tell their stories and open up to other women. I think there's no doubt that generally it's much harder for women to tell intimate details of an attack or traumatic situation to a man who is almost a stranger.

When I went with some colleagues to Albania to talk to refugees from Kosovo, we were trying to identify some of the worst cases that we would quietly pass on to be taken forward as possible cases by the ICC. In that situation, my women colleagues were infinitely better at being able to listen and hear the real stories. But I was always conscious that, at a certain point, after seeing the victim side of it, you learned to see the resilience: what those women were contributing and what they were doing.

After the conflict, what role do women have to play in healing and building bridges?

Rwanda is the great example of that. I went to Rwanda in September/October 1994 as President of Ireland, and the aftermath of that genocidal killing was something that I will never forget. At the time, there were a number of NGOs working, but

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they were mainly foreign NGOs. I went back a year later, in 1995, because the UN was marking its Fiftieth Anniversary and I was determined to bring the failures of the international community in Rwanda to the table. When we were there the second time, there were already local women's organizations who were urging that the one thing nobody seemed to understand was the need for trauma counselling.

The third time I went to Rwanda was in March of 1997 for a Pan-African Women's Conference which these women, these widows of Rwanda, had organized. Now, you might say: why have a women's conference when there are so many other problems to deal with? Well, why is Rwanda doing so much better than many other African countries? It's because women are involved, and it was that conference that set the trend. Women are in every sense part of the country's resources, and, because these women were in a majority after the genocide, they were able to influence in a particular way. What made a difference was actually the fact that women became so involved in ministries and so on – of necessity, because they had to take on such a role in the country. The lesson is that we can't wait until after a terrible conflict to involve women in decision-making.

What about areas where there is a purportedly religious basis for discrimination against women? What are the opportunities for women to become involved in such areas?

I'm proud to be a member of The Elders, one of the groups that was brought together by Nelson Mandela and Graça Machel. We're small in number and have no capacity to run programmes, but as part of our efforts we wanted to address women's empowerment and women's rights. We spent quite a long time deciding what exactly we would do. We've decided to focus on the way that religion, tradition, and sometimes culture are distorted to subjugate women, because we believe it is a really very important issue. What we're saying is that these distortions are wrong. Changing the way women are treated requires changing the hierarchical structures within some cultures and some religions, or women will inevitably continue to have that second-class position. This was at the heart of the Afghanistan problem – this was why the Taliban was able to carry out such a crude, total subjugation of women.

Often it is argued that all people are affected in a situation of war, and that placing a particular focus on women may sideline others. How would you respond to this?

Yes, I've heard that argument. I do believe we don't pay enough attention to boys and men in the context of addressing situations of violence against women. We tend to focus on the violence against women, and it's a woman-to-woman discussion. We don't focus enough on engaging men and boys, provincial chiefs, and traditional chiefs – those who can really make a difference.

There is a bishop from Nigeria who says that he doesn't like the term 'gender-based violence', because it posits that women are as much involved as men. He was making the point, I think, that the language was wrong, since most of the

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violence was from men to women. However, we do have very bad cases of the reverse, and women can be very violent in different ways, even without hitting anybody. They can freeze somebody out and in some situations can make life extremely difficult.

I still feel that it's right to address specifically the issue of women in conflict – without disregarding others – since in many countries which are experiencing conflicts, women are still second-class citizens. But I think boys and men and traditional chiefs must be part of that discourse, and must also be part of the solution. In that sense, there's a lot of work to be done.

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