

INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE

Briefing From the Field: Women Caught in the Conflict, How is the IRC Helping Them Survive?

**March 08, 2007
1:30pm EST**

Operator: Good day everyone and welcome to the International Rescue Committee briefing from the field, Caught in the Conflict, how is the IRC helping women survive. My name is Melinda and I am the operator facilitating the call.

Please note that today's call is being recorded.

At this time, I would like to turn the call over to the IRC's Vice President of Development, Ms. Janet Harris. Please go ahead.

Janet Harris: Good day. This is Janet Harris welcoming you from our headquarters here in New York to our briefing from the field. This is in recognition of the International Women's Day today and we are addressing a very serious topic that of violence perpetrated against women and girls around the world.

Our goal today is to engage you in conversation and I'm happy to say that we have dozens of people calling in from all over the country, supporters of the IRC and people who are interested in this really important topic. So I want to welcome all of you and thank you for the support of the

IRC particularly your unrestricted support. It helps the IRC be flexible, responsive and to support innovative programs like the one we are very privileged to hear about today.

So welcome to all of you. We're going to spend the first 30 minutes in a conversation with two very special guests and that will be followed by about 20 minutes of questions from all of you. So get your questions ready as you hear the conversation ensue and we'll be giving you some instructions at the end of the first part so you'll know how to pose your question to our two guests.

So I want to introduce today Susan Dentzer. Susan is a member of the board of directors of the International Rescue Committee. She's a career journalist and she's the on air health correspondent for the news hour with Jim Lehrer on PBS. I'm sure many of you have seen her on a nightly basis. Susan leads the unit there to focus on healthcare policy and to investigate issues of healthcare in the United States. She's also an inveterate traveler. She's lived around the world and I know her to be a very curious person. So she's going to be a wonderful person to engage Heidi Lehmann in conversation.

Heidi is the International Rescue Committee's Senior Technical Advisor in Gender Based Violence which is the terminology we use to talk about violence perpetrated against women and girls. Heidi's had 10 years of experience in this area. She's worked in consulate zones and in areas where the IRC works in post conflict recovery. Heidi supports programs around the world wherever we work because women and children, especially girls, are victims of violence everywhere that there is conflict and war.

For example, Heidi's expertise reaches into the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Sudan and Chad, Uganda and Thailand. Heidi has recently visited many of these places and is going to be recounting some of the things that she has seen and heard and some of the terrific programs that she heads.

So welcome to both Heidi and Susan and with no further ado, I'll let you run with it.

Susan Dentzer: Great and thank you so much Janet and thanks to all of you for participating in this conversation and most of all for your support of IRC. Your participation in this call really signals how seriously you take your roles as partners in our work.

As Janet mentioned, we are marking International Women's Day with this conversation about the situation of women and girls caught in conflict or suffering displacement from their homes around the world. We all know that violence against women is a serious human rights and public health issue that affects women and girls of all ages from all cultures, countries, socioeconomic backgrounds, et cetera, and violence against women takes many forms including rape.

Many of us have heard or read about the situation in Darfur where women have often left their camps or villages to go collect firewood to sell to help support their families only to be raped by armed gangs as they do that. It's really a powerful example of how these acts of gender based violence effect women and girls around the world as they attempt to just live out their lives day to day, provide for their families and be contributing members of their society.

But as we'll hear from Heidi in a moment, much more than rape falls under this horrible umbrella of gender based violence. The term also refers to domestic violence, forced marriage, exploitation, harassment, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, human trafficking and even such cultural practices and genital cutting. These forms of gender based violence also deeply effect women and girls' physical, emotional, psychological and social wellbeing and create distortions of the social and economic order that none of us would find tenable.

Women and girls, as we know, are particularly vulnerable during armed conflict when rape is used by fighting force to terrorize, destroy and humiliate and when war forces women and girls to flee their homes, the risk of rape often follows them and the threat of domestic violence grows.

But as we'll also hear from Heidi, women and girls are also vulnerable in post conflict and camp settings even after the wars or conflicts are over. As long as people remain displaced from their homes or as long as social wounds of war are still healing, gender based violence can take root and flourish.

IRC recognizes the need to address gender based violence in all of its manifestations in all of these settings. We have programs to do that in a number of countries as Janet mentioned including Burundi, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Tanzania, Thailand and Uganda.

So with that by way of introduction, let's turn now to Heidi Lehmann and tap into her enormous experience and expertise on this very painful subject.

Now Heidi, to come back to what I was saying just a moment ago, there's obviously a lot of confusion around this term gender based violence. Many people do think it only means rape but there are, as we've said, many other horrible things under this umbrella. Give us some examples from your personal experience about the range of things you've seen in the field.

Heidi Lehmann: OK. As you said Susan, GBV is spoken about as if it's one single thing and the reality is that's not the case. Let me share two experiences with you to give you an idea of some of the things that I've dealt with in the field.

Let me start with Fatima, a woman I met in the Democratic Republic of Congo. I remember we were in a little mud hut. It was extremely hot. Fatima was sitting across from me, both of us on rickety little benches, knees almost touching. In a matter of fact and deliberate way, Fatima shared her story with me. The rebels had come to her village late in the night. She had grabbed her children and tried to run. I remember the motion she made of scooping up her youngest to

carry on her back. I asked her how many children she had. She told me four. Fatima told me that she didn't get far before they caught her and for the next several hours six or seven men took turns raping her. She told me that she remembered hearing her children crying. At the end of the story, Fatima told me what had brought her there to talk to me that day. She had heard that the IRC helped "women like her." When I heard her request Susan, I experienced a range of feelings but the thought that sticks with me most is that we could do better than this. Fatima was there to ask me if I could help her to get shoes for her two oldest children because they would be starting school in a few weeks. After all she had gone through; she was there to ask me for shoes.

Fatima's experience of rape and I think more specifically gang rape is something that I've dealt with literally hundreds of times through IRC's programs in the countries that you've mentioned and while rape is the one that catches the attention and we see in the headlines very often, it's not the only violence that women face in conflict and refugee situations.

Let me tell you about – actually I've just returned from Thailand. I visited Thailand about a week ago and there I saw one of the most common forms of GBV that IRC deals with on a daily basis is domestic violence and during my visit to Thailand to one of the Thailand refugee camps I met a woman named Ni Ni Aye. What I remember about Ni Ni Aye is that she was small, very small. She didn't say a word and she kept her eyes down.

The night before, Ni Ni Aye's husband had locked her and their one year old child in the house. He lit the house on fire and stood outside the door with a knife threatening to kill her and their son if she left. Neighbors intervened. They helped Ni Ni Aye and her son get out. The house burned to the ground. She and her son escaped with the clothes on their back and I found myself in the camp in front of members of the camp leadership community, all refugees themselves, and they wanted to know why the International Rescue Committee thought that this situation was "a serious case." They agreed yes the man should not have done that but no one was really hurt so

why was it a serious case that warranted the man being arrested? This conversation went on for almost two hours.

Rape, sexual assault, domestic violence, Susan the list of violence that women and girls face in conflict and displaced settings is entirely too long.

Susan Dentzer: Heidi, what did you do in those two situations first with Fatima and then in the situation in the camp you talked about talking to the authorities but where did the story lead?

Heidi Lehmann: Well in both of those countries, in Thailand and in Congo, luckily we have gender based violence programs which means we were able to help both Fatima and Ni Ni Aye.

Fatima joined an IRC supported women's action group which is a community based group of women. the support that IRC provides to those women include materials, hose, seeds, things for planting, small amounts of livestock, chicken, goats, things like that so that they can become self sufficient. Equally important I think though is that through that group, through that women's action group, Fatima learned that when she referred to "women like me," she was referring to strong, amazing women and not women that had anything to be ashamed of.

With Ni Ni Aye, we have – well the IRC social worker, the camp based social worker who's a refugee as well first made sure that Ni Ni Aye was safe and that her husband could not get to her. We then assisted her with clothing, food, other necessities. The social worker has been assigned to her. What we see with Ni Ni Aye I think clearly there's a long history of abuse so that social worker will also serve as an advocate for Ni Ni Aye.

Susan Dentzer: Well you've given us two extremely powerful examples that underscore the horrible variety of gender based violence and of course and I mentioned the situation in Darfur with

women attempting to collect firewood and getting raped. What are some of the other examples you've seen in the field of these different categories of gender based violence?

Heidi Lehmann: OK. What have I seen? I think the list would be shorter what haven't I seen. Sexual exploitation is extremely common you know and it's been most associated with young girls. Women and girls in situations of conflict are extremely at risk of sexual exploitation.

Susan Dentzer: This is specifically where women are essentially prostitutes and other commercial
(inaudible)

(Heidi Lehmann): Are wholly dependent on – I mean yes. Basically they're put in a situation of having to exchange sex for food, basic necessities, the ability to cross a border to actually seek refuge. In many of these situations women you know women – the only currency they have is sex. Other forms that I've seen forced marriage. In conflict situations where husbands are killed, it's extremely common for the women to be expected to marry a brother or a father of the deceased husband. It is also very common for girls 10, 12 years old, 10 years of age, 12 years of age to be forced into marriage for economic reasons.

Susan Dentzer: And give us a sense of the variety of IRC programs to deal with these very, very different phenomena effects.

Heidi Lehmann: OK. Our programs certainly do not have a cookie cutter approach meaning that what you see in Thailand is going to be very different than what you see in Indonesia or Liberia. What is consistent in IRC's approach is that it creates and runs programs focusing on the safety, health and psycho-social and legal needs of women who either are vulnerable to or have experienced gender based violence. Let me give you some examples of what that looks like Susan. In the DRC, it meant that one of the first things that we talked to Fatima about was the possible health

consequences of rape. That meant that we had a Congolese staff member that IRC had trained talking to Fatima about these potential consequences.

Susan Dentzer: Things like sexually transmitted infections, HIV, AIDS?

Heidi Lehmann: Yes. With support from the IRC, Fatima made the choice to go to an IRC supported clinic where staff had been trained specifically on how to respond to rape. She subsequently received medical care for a sexual transmitted disease that otherwise could have went untreated for who knows how long.

In Darfur, the IRC an example of our programming there, we support 10 women's centers. These are extremely basic structures, dirt floors, walls made of sticks, thatched roof. At these centers women can participate in literacy classes, health education sessions. The center is staffed by refugee women that have been trained in basic counseling techniques. Over 10,000 women and girls a month use those centers.

Susan Dentzer: IRC is known for working in the community a great deal as well. So what kinds of community partnerships are structured around many of these programs to link in what the IRC does with what is done in the community broadly?

Heidi Lehmann: In terms of community partnerships, our strategic approach and our overall approach is to work hand in hand with the communities. What that usually looks like ironically enough although we focus on women is that we go into the community and in order to access these women we first have to talk with men, link with men because they are the decision makers in many of these communities. We also partner with civil society organizations. FAWE would be an example, Forum of African Women Educationalists and governments. In different situations, governments are key partners.

Susan Dentzer: Let's talk a little bit more about bringing men into the discussion. You talked about the situation in the camp in Thailand where the camp authorities had to be persuaded that burning down a house and almost killing a woman and her child was a problem. How do you get to men as you reach out to them and begin to get them to see this issue through a very different light?

Heidi Lehmann: Well I think we've – you know with over the past 10 years of IRC having run GBV programs, we have learned that men are instrumental in addressing gender based violence at the very root cause so what does that look like in our programs? In Liberia and Thailand, we have very innovative programs working with men.

In Liberia, we have the men part of the solution program and you know the first step is going out there and talking to men about what their understanding of violence is because it is very – it's always interesting to go out into the communities and to hear what they think violence is and is not and you know I know of organizations that have been out in the community doing awareness raising about domestic violence to only find out that men don't consider pushing their wife as violent. So the first step of engaging men is to understand what their attitudes and their understanding of violence is.

Susan Dentzer: Can you give us again some person anecdotes, histories of other situations where you had this – you encountered this phenomenon of having people have to really refrain how they see this issue?

Heidi Lehmann: Sure. I mean I think it's – I've also worked with – I've worked with men in the states specifically batterers and one of the things I find very interesting in the field is that when we go out and talk to the men, they're extremely forthcoming about the fact that many of them do use violence, not all for sure but many of them do use violence and for many of them, it has not – simply has not occurred to them that that's a bad idea and that it is quite socially sanctioned so I've had many interesting discussions with men in these communities you know ranging from 18

year olds you know to 60 year old men saying you mean to tell me that you think it's a bad idea that we're hitting our wives. So I think it's been quite interesting but I mean the key thing there Susan is that they're willing to engage in that conversation and IRC's approach is such that we don't go in there and tell them anything. We do engage in conversation with them as and we recognize it as a process of moving forward.

Susan Dentzer: So much of this obviously is rooted in deep cultural attitudes towards women, the socioeconomic status of women in so many countries, all of which is just exacerbated when women are and girls are thrust into conflict zones. Talk a little bit more about that, what it has augmented your appreciation of these very deep seeded root causes of violence against women.

Heidi Lehmann: You know I think it's always important to point out and to remember that violence against women, GBV, does not suddenly begin with the conflict nor is it generally a result totally of the conflict. In every country where IRC is programming, running GBV programs, we know that a host of different types of violence existed before the conflict, domestic violence, sexual assault. Conflict causes a sharp increase of violence against women, no doubt about it.

We've seen rape be used as a weapon of warfare in just about every conflict in recent history, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Congo, Darfur today. And we know that it's used as a weapon of warfare because unfortunately it works. It tears communities apart. It strikes fear in the hearts of women and girls. It breaks the morale of men but looking at the root cause, the defining characteristic of violence against women is that women are targeted for violence simply because they are women. They have unequal power in relationships with men, low status in many of the countries that we work in and in most of the culture's country's societies overall women are in a disadvantaged position compared to men. I think that very fundamentally lays the foundation for their abuse in times of conflict.

Susan Dentzer: Now you addressed the situation in Thailand in the camp where a refugee setting, a displaced person setting, do these issues play out differently in the post conflict arena when you still have people displaced, sometimes in large numbers living in camps in some cases for years and years and years. What do you see there that's different from say in the immediate – the situation of a conflict setting?

Heidi Lehmann: Well I think and this is where IRC has used its experiencing in programming to know that at the onset of conflict especially where we know that sexual violence is being used as a weapon of warfare, we focus very much on that. It takes an extraordinary amount of time and energy to get out into the community to access these women that are either vulnerable to or survivors of and let them know that there is a place to go for help, to let them that it's OK not to be ashamed and at the same time working with their husbands and their brothers and the male leaders to say you have to let these women talk about this because if you don't, the impact on the community is going to be even worse. So in terms of the emergency situations, that's where we tend to focus our energy.

In the longer term displacement, what we see much more of is as I said the domestic violence but we also see sexual violence not used as a weapon of warfare for sure but we deal with situations of exploitation. We deal with situations of incest and often times the International Rescue Committee is the only NGO that has that particular type of program in those settings.

Susan Dentzer: Why is that?

Heidi Lehmann: Well I think one of the reasons is that this is considered an incredibly complex and difficult issue and it is but IRC has also recognized it for the life threatening issue and human rights issue that it is and as such feels very strongly that we have to take action to address it.

Susan Dentzer: We read so much now about trafficking Heidi and we know obviously there's a link in a conflict setting to trafficking. It's a very short path to take advantage of people who have been so subjected to violence and basically move them into another form of it, of exploitation through trafficking. How do you – how if at all is the IRC becoming more and more aware of these issues that a ping on refugees and displaced people and what are we doing about it?

Heidi Lehmann: Well how are we becoming more and more aware? I think that our linkages to the women in the community and even to the men. I mean you know IRC on average are in some of these countries for 10 years so that allows us to forge incredibly strong bonds with the community whereby they you know things that used to be kept silent and hidden are talked about. So we don't – our GBV programs don't address trafficking per se but in many of the situations women come to us and say you know this woman was here last week. She's not here now. We're concerned about that and then we use our position to facilitate that information to other organizations.

Susan Dentzer: Do you ever become overwhelmed with the dimensions of this problem? Do you become hopeless and if not, how do you maintain your own personal resilience and hopefulness in midst all of this misery?

Heidi Lehmann: Well one of the things I think about Susan is I think about where the U.S. was 25 or 30 years ago in terms of addressing violence against women and I think about the progress that we have been able to make here and I know that we can do that on a global level.

Another thing is that I close my eyes and I see Fatima who refused to give up, who now has two children in school, who survived the most horrendous thing a woman can experience. I see her sitting in a group of women not only be accepted but welcomed. Today's International Women's Day as you noted and my hope spring's eternal that because of the strength of women and girls all over the world we can make a difference.

Susan Dentzer: In just a moment we will be opening up the lines to questions from all of you listening in on this call. When we do that, let me just tell you the way to get on – ask a question and queue up is to press the star key and then the one key on your phone and as I say that, we'll place you into a queue to ask your questions.

While everybody's getting ready to do that, Heidi let me ask you one more question though. Obviously as Janet mentioned, unrestricted financial support from our very generous donors enables us to do everything we talked about and carry out those programs, community awareness, et cetera but also to advocate for more action on this among global leaders and all of this obviously is critical to you and your colleagues being able to carry out your work but for the listeners on the call, what can they do to help?

Heidi Lehmann: Well I think the first thing that I would say is the listeners can believe in the difference that one person can make in the lives in Ni Ni Aye or Fatima or any of the women and girls that we work with. I think another thing that listeners can do is to break the silence surrounding the issue of sexual and physical violence against women and girls, talk about it, ask about it. If you don't hear about it, ask why you don't because it's happening. Support organizations like the IRC that are actively running programs to address – to help women and girls recover their dignity and as you said and Janet is going to talk about it more in a minute, go to our home page and sign onto our online petition in support of the International Violence Against Women Act.

Susan Dentzer: And just to say a bit more about what that act would do, the legislation has now been introduced in Congress.

Heidi Lehmann: That act would do a number of things. It would provide an increased funding for programs that prevent violence and allow us to more effectively respond. It would promote

greater access to women and girls to educational opportunities to economic opportunities and I think it would be a recognition a long overdue recognition that this is a serious global issue.

Susan Dentzer: All right. I'm going to turn this over now to our facilitator of the call Melinda so she can handle the questions.

Q: Hi I'm wondering if in countries where you work outside of the United States, do women have the same legal rights and legal avenues for justice that we do here?

Heidi Lehmann: I would say in some – I would say in some places in theory but keeping in mind the effect that conflict – I mean that conflict in many of the situations decimates systems including legal systems. So I think one of our biggest challenges is the fact that there are not functioning legal systems. So to answer your question no.

Q: What recourse then do women have in those situations where there aren't legal structures that enable them to move forward with claims against people who injure them, et cetera, et cetera?

Heidi Lehmann: Where there are not formal legal systems and in our experience actually many times women forgo formal legal systems and instead go to the traditional legal systems which is where chiefs or community leaders litigate and decide the outcome and one of the outcomes that we see and we work – you know we work to change is the cases where the victims or the survivors are forced to marry the perpetrators in cases of rape.

Q: And those would tend to be in where, Sub-Saharan African countries, Asian or is this...

Heidi Lehmann: It's an amazingly universal response and I think you know one of the things that we have learned is that it is actually something that is – it's an outcome that the leaders think that they're making in very good faith that this is the best possible outcome for this woman or girl. because

she has been sexually assaulted either no man will want her so she will not be able to get married to anybody other than the perpetrator or that her husband will divorce her so they do see it as the best option.

Susan Dentzer: Let's move to our next question.

Operator: And once again as a reminder, that is star one if you would like to ask a question. Next, we'll hear from ...

Q: Hi Heidi. This is I guess a related question. Does the IRC have any programs to help women pursue justice? I mean I know you know a rape that happens in Darfur that's probably not an option but you know a case of domestic violence or you know a woman in the sex trade be – not providing legal representation but do you encourage or help women to use whatever legal avenues?

Heidi Lehmann: Yes. I mean part of our programming is to facilitate access to healthcare, psychosocial support and legal justice and as part of that, our staff are trained to give the survivor all of the options including that of legal recourse and some of our programs we link very closely to civil society organizations that are doing legal aid work. For example in Sierra Leone, we work very closely with the family support unit which is part of the Sierra Leone police and actually it's pretty amazing in a good way that about 75 percent of our referrals to that sexual assault referral center come from the police, so to answer your question, Barry, yes.

Q: OK. Thank you.

Susan Dentzer: Melinda let's take our next question.

Q: Hi Heidi. What you do is a very brave thing and I'm wondering if your life is at risk when you're out in the field and how you take steps to protect yourself?

Heidi Lehmann: Well I think that I've certainly been in some scary situations but it's not something that I consider very often to be honest with you and I think you know that the risk that you know Fatima faces and all the women that I have the opportunity to work with is much more significant than that which I face. Having said that, I think it is important to note that a trend or a change that we've seen in the risk to humanitarian aide workers overall in some of these situations.

Q: Thank you.

Susan Dentzer: Heidi, given the different resources that are available at any of these settings, you've described the conflict settings, the post conflict, the camp settings, we know it's unrealistic to expect the quality of services that might be delivered say in the United States where a rape victim in the U.S. is frequently, not always but frequently able to access care from a psychologist, post traumatic stress disorder not to mention any of a number of medications that can help her cope with depression or any other effects that follow. Give us a sense of what is able to do in the field in terms of psychosocial support for women who by all rights deserve the kind of treatment we would be able to provide to women in this very sophisticated western setting but are not going to get that just by virtue of the resource constraint in the areas we operate.

Heidi Lehmann: Thank you for that question Susan and I think that resource constraints is a very real issue. I think it is amazing what we can do and what the IRC has done with limited resources and I have a quote from a Congolese woman that we worked with in our program and she said when my attackers beat me I was ignorant about the consequences of violence. I didn't even know that there were people that could be interested in my problem and I think the fact that there are – that we have staff on the ground that are able to listen that are able to validate that are able to provide information to these women and girls, that's significant. That's a significant – it has very big impact on these women and girls and it's ...

Susan Dentzer: And looking to the future, what might we be able to deliver in the future by way of even augmented services to women in these situations?

Heidi Lehmann: Well I think the first thing Susan is that you know I said that we have programs. You mentioned a list of programs. We have programs in 13 countries and but the need goes far beyond that and I think that there's a couple things we need to look at. We need to make sure that GBV is being addressed everywhere that it needs to be number one and number two that it's not seen as an add on or a soft program but that of a life saving program that allows women and girls to function in society as they should as healthy mothers, as productive leaders. So I think that those are some of the things that need to be considered.

Susan Dentzer: Melinda, I believe we have another question.

Operator: Yes we do.

Q: I came late to the briefing so I apologize and you may have covered this but my question is how do you deal with the fact that a lot of things that are happening to women across the world relate a lot to the culture of the country in which they reside? You know I'm even thinking of you know circumcision and things of those issues. How do you deal with it? How do you sensitively I guess deal with the cultural issues as you try to protect women?

Heidi Lehmann: Well I think you know and I hear about the cultural issue. I get asked about that a lot and what has been surprising to me, I've done domestic violence work in the states. I've done domestic violence work in at least 10 countries around the world and the universality of the reasons and the excuses for violence against women remain the same across the cultures. So while we are definitely cognoscente of the sensitivity of it, I think that we have a number of ways of engaging the community and one of those ways is making sure – it's not me that's engaging the community necessarily. It's staff from the Congo. It's staff from Liberia and I think you know

engaging in discussion about this not judgment, not telling them that this is bad, that this is wrong but asking them to look at the public health consequences, asking them to look at other consequences on the entire community of women being treated like this.

Q: So what you're saying is in our situation it would be one Congolese talking to another Congolese about the violence in the community against women so it's within the cultural now you're also trying to...

Heidi Lehmann: Absolutely and I think that is – you know when people say what do you think about your impact. I think about the 40 Liberian staff that have worked with us for seven years and whose attitudes and beliefs now against violence against women are so strong that they're role models in their community.

Susan Dentzer: We have another question Melinda.

Q: Yes thank you. It seems to me education is so critical and I wonder ((inaudible)) terribly complicated to get education going in some of these camps. It's critical for women and children and how do you find – how do you decide where to start and who are the teachers? How does that all work?

Heidi Lehmann: Well a couple things is that I mean conflict has decimated many of these communities but before the conflict there were functioning education systems. There were trained teachers and one of the things that we do in the refugee camps is identify those teachers and it's you know when we think of the schools again I take you back to the women's center that I talked about earlier, very simple structures but identifying the teachers, putting up the structures and what we see again and again is that parents want their children to go to school so they're definitely very open to that idea. The problem comes in, in terms of insuring that girls are allowed equal access to that education.

Susan Dentzer: And another question. Melinda?

Operator: Yes ma'am. Once again as a reminder, that is star one if you would like to ask a question.

Next we'll go to...

Q: Hi Heidi. How are you?

Heidi Lehmann: Good. Thank you.

Q: Good. I was wondering I know that you talked a lot about communication and cultural understanding and what specifically you know the IRC is doing for prevention. I know that we provide or that you I'm sorry provide several you know centers and women's groups but is there anything that you can do to sort of prevent this from happening?

Heidi Lehmann: Prevent which aspect of it, the ...

Q: Well just the, you know, the rape, you know the sort of being ostracized from the community because of a rape, prevention all the way around for you know protecting women I guess is a better way to ...

Heidi Lehmann: Sure. Yes and I think you know that question – I like that question because it does bring out the complexities of the issue and the different levels that our programs much work on. So a GBV program for example would be doing education with the community on why this was not the woman's fault, why the woman still has value even though this has happened to her to make sure that she is accepted back into the community.

At the same time, we would be working with community leaders to make sure that they hold perpetrators accountable in as much as that is in their power. In a situation like Darfur where it is

outside the power of the community to do so, we would advocate with the international community overall to find ways to address the impunity.

Did that answer your question?

Q: Yes it does. Thank you.

Heidi Lehmann: Sure.

Susan Dentzer: All right. Well Heidi from your opening recollection about Fatima and what she had been through and her quest to provide shoes for her children to what you just outlined for us in terms of the many ways that we who care about this issue can respond, thank you so much. It's clear to all of you I think on the phone why we are so proud and delighted to have Heidi with us at IRC. As she said, she's a woman who doesn't despair notwithstanding the fact that she confronts certainly some of the most despairing issues that are to be encountered in a refugee and post conflict and conflict settings around the world.

So with that, let me turn this back over to Janet Harris.

Janet Harris: Thank you Susan Dentzer and Heidi Lehmann for being with us today. It was a fascinating conversation and thank all of you on the phone for joining us in celebration of International Women's Day as we support the protection and empowerment of women throughout the countries that the IRC works in.

You know I'm reminded of a story when I went to visit the Congo about six or seven years ago I met a man who said to me that if we educate women we educate the world and he told that that was an old Congolese saying or proverb and that came back to me today because I also thought about you could substitute the word protect or empower. If we empower women, we empower

the world and that I think speaks what the International Rescue Committee is striving for in supporting the work that Heidi and her terrific team throughout the world do to tackle gender based violence.

Again, I want to thank all of you on the phone for your support of the IRC as it helps us with this program and so many others throughout the world. I'm just going to remind you about a few things that you can do. Probably on your mind you're saying what more can I do after I get off the phone.

So go visit our web site. Help us break the silence about violence against women and girls throughout the world. Learn more about what the IRC does. Support organizations like IRC and right at the top of our home page you'll see a big button that says take action.

Heidi described the petition that's now before Congress urging the United States to fight against sexual violence and making it a top priority in our foreign policy and in our support for foreign assistance throughout the world. So sign onto that petition and make your voice one a united voice.

Thanks again Susan, Heidi and all of you being with us here today, our briefing from the field, Women Caught in the Conflict, How is the IRC Helping Them Survive.

Thank you for joining us and we hope we'll see you again online at the IRC and throughout the world.

Operator: Thank you for participating in our call today. This call is now closed.

END