



The youth of today, on international humanitarian law tomorrow...

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How do young people today understand and feel about international humanitarian law (IHL) and the policies in place when it comes to armed conflict? It is no surprise that our youth are increasingly affected by war, in a world where situations are becoming more complex. We bear witness to active youth participation in a way we have never seen before – leading and joining protests, documenting and sharing stories on social media, volunteering for various organizations, taking up difficult conversations with decision-makers, and, of course, living through an armed conflict.

In this episode of Humanity in War, podcast host Elizabeth Rushing sits down with three incredible young humanitarians – Julie Lefolle, Silvia Gelvez, and Kay von Mérey – who share their perspectives on IHL and humanitarian action, their understanding of the work ahead, and ultimately the hope to carry us forward as we begin a new year.

Humanity in War · Episode 17: The youth of today, on international humanitarian law tomorrow...

I would like to begin the conversation today with Julie Lefolle, who is an ICRC Associate here in Geneva. Julie, can you please walk us through what it's like to be an ICRC Associate? What are some of the files that you work on and what ultimately drew you to working in this sector?

Julie: Yes, absolutely. I am from France, but my family is from Haiti, which is a beautiful country that I've been to every two years since I was a kid. I've been able to go to school there and see how life there is different from the life we know. The population has had to face difficulties such as dictatorship, international interventions, natural disasters, and gang violence.

Growing up, I have seen humanitarian aid being given to the people around me. I've seen blue helmets, I've seen Land Cruisers of the Red Cross everywhere, I've seen the UN camps being built. So, I've seen the action, I've seen how it can be good, and I've also seen how there can be problems created by the humanitarian sector. I'm talking about corruption or sexual violence scandals or excessive use of force and things like that. I always felt I wanted to be a part of it, and I want to understand how the decisions are made and how we can fight for humanitarian aid to be given to people in a way that respects them.

I decided to study law and then for three years, I worked in migration helping people get a residence permit and then access to health care. I also worked with the French Red Cross in helping families find each other because they lost each other during armed conflict or migration.

I'm now a Legal Associate with the Legal Division of the ICRC. I was lucky enough to be able to work in three different units. First, privileges and immunity, where I was helping in protecting the confidentiality of the ICRC. Then in the Commentaries unit, which is about interpreting the laws of war – the Geneva Conventions – in light of the modern conflicts that we have today. The third Unit that I've been working for since the beginning of the year is on legal advice to operations, meaning that we give practical legal advice that can help people in countries where operations are being carried out, in their dialogue with states with military or with armed groups. We also work in classifying a situation of violence, meaning then when hostilities starts, when there's some fighting happening, we decide whether there is just a situation of violence or according to international humanitarian law, is there an international armed conflict or non-international armed conflict which triggers the application of IHL?

To follow up, how do you think youth such as yourself working on such themes can contribute to IHL and policy?

Julie: I think what's really important to take into account is that our generation was raised in a way where we have so much access to information. When a teacher or family was telling me something, I always had access to information to double-check it in a way. I could also have access to information from the other side of the world. So, we come as a really assertive and confident generation in what we think, because we are able to have information to confirm that we are thinking the right thing in the right way.

I think what's important with us is that we are going to come in this field with the certitude that we are not going to compromise on our values and we're always going to ask for more. We're going to say thank you to the generation before for everything that they acquired for us. But we're going to say we want more gender equality. We want more rights for people with disabilities. We want the consequences of intersectionality to be considered. We want racism to be taken out of law and policy. And we won't apologize for it.

Something else is that we know how important and how urgent it is to change the law, to change the policy when it's needed because we grew up seeing the consequences of armed conflict and also having the names to call them. If I'm talking about Rwanda, it was a genocide. When I'm talking about South Africa, it was apartheid, and talking about Iraq, it was occupation. We grew up with those words, using those words, using international law in our day-to-day life.

That's a great opportunity to introduce our next guest, Kay Von Merey, who is leading the Circle of Young Humanitarians, an organization that she founded herself.

To begin with, we would love to learn about the who, what, when, where and why of the Circle for Young Humanitarians. Could you please begin with a description of the organization that you spearheaded, how you came to create this organization, and then outline some of the core goals for a youth organization such as the Circle?

Kay: The Circle of Young Humanitarians is a politically neutral nonprofit association based in Zurich and established in collaboration with the ICRC back in the spring of 2021. Basically, we recognize in today's digital age that young people are constantly exposed to social media images and videos depicting conflict and war, which often leaves them feeling powerless. Moreover, like the volume of information available can also lead to misinformation and polarization. And this potentially is breeding mistrust in humanitarian organizations and even broader societal systems.

The Circle aims to bridge exactly that gap between the humanitarian world and the next generation, because we believe that what young people think about war and other humanitarian emergencies today will affect the direction of the world in the future. To facilitate this, the Circle offers a platform to promote an open and effective dialogue to stimulate discussions and global humanitarian challenges.

An example of our efforts was the first Young Humanitarian Summit held in March in Zurich under the ICRC's patronage. This two-day forum successfully gathered over 300 young individuals where we tried to foster an intergenerational and interdisciplinary exchange in the humanitarian world.

To your second part of the question, on how I came about founding the Circle of Young Humanitarians, it actually started in primary school. I remember being captivated by the stories a friend shared about her father's work at the ICRC as a delegate. This early exposure sparked a keen interest in the humanitarian work, leading me to volunteer for the Austrian Red Cross and a hospital in Ecuador during my gap year after high school. As you mentioned at the beginning, this led me to the traineeship at the ICRC in 2020, during which I noticed a disconnect between the young people in Switzerland and the important work of humanitarian organizations such as the ICRC.

Realizing this need for a platform that could bring young people closer to the humanitarian sector, I shared my vision with my supervisors at the ICRC back then, and they were supportive right from the start. I reached out to friends, took up their interest, and this led to the discussions with Jessica Eberhart and Leonie Basler, two friends of mine who eventually became co-founders.

The three of us developed the concept further and worked together towards bringing this visionary initiative to life. So what started two and a half years ago, with three young ICRC enthusiastic women, turned into an organization with 40 young professionals and students volunteering for the Circle's cause. And this cause, to summarize, is really more than just a series of events. The Circle aims to act as a compass, pinpointing away from conflict and towards peace. We're about building bridges and reminding everyone that building peace requires effort and commitment.

I'd love if you could help us understand why it's so important for youth to have a platform such as yours. And perhaps more importantly, why is it important for them to get involved?

Kay: I guess with social media you touch upon something already very important for me to answer. I believe it's vital for young people to have a platform like the Circle, because we try to address challenges they face in today's rapidly changing world. Today's young people are also known as the "crisis generation". Youth are living through an era defined by one crisis after another, the financial crisis, a global pandemic, and now for some, the reality of war on their continent. This has driven many to protests and activism. The confrontational nature of such actions, while really powerful, often doesn't always foster constructive dialogue or sustainable change.

The need for such a platform is also compounded by the fact that this generation is the first to grow up entirely in the digital age, so even though it has great opportunities, it also means that they're bombarded daily with images and reports of conflict and war. The Circle offers a different way forward. It's a space where the digital fluency of the younger generation is not only understood, but it's an integral part of its operation, as the Circle is youth-led. It provides a space for engagement on humanitarian issues in a language that resonates with the younger generation and I think that is key.

By cultivating such a solution-oriented environment, the Circle enables young people to overcome their feeling of helplessness and really fosters a sense of agency. And I guess that is exactly through their involvement that trust is built, outrage is replaced by optimism, and media narratives are shifted from glorifying conflict to highlighting peacebuilding efforts. So, the active role of young people is essential in promoting the understanding that peace is hard work.

I would like to bring in our final guest, Silvia Gelvez, who has dedicated over a decade to volunteering with the Colombian Red Cross. Sylvia, can you outline how you have come to volunteering as a youth for the Red Cross Red Crescent movement and what experiences you've witnessed as the Vice Chair of the International Federation of the Red Cross Global Youth Commission?

Sylvia: Yes, I think certainly experiencing life in a country that has been affected by armed conflict for so many years had a profound impact on myself. So, the exposure to the hardships of conflict triggered a deep sense of empathy for those who suffered and at the same time witnessing the injustice of armed conflict, I felt a desire within myself to make a positive difference. I joined the Red Cross because I was sure that was the right platform to make a change. First, I joined because I wanted to learn first aid, but then, after knowing all the different programs and projects, I was completely sure I was in the right place.

I started volunteering in the youth group with the weapon contamination project. I was going each weekend to the countryside to do risk education, especially for children and adolescents, to create awareness for victims that were affected by landmines or any other remnants of war and how their rights could be reestablished.

This was something that really marked my life as well, because this was a silent issue that was happening in the country. Despite I was knowing all this, people in the cities were not aware of it. I started getting more and more and more into leadership in the organization. It led to bringing more young people to work in the same organization and volunteering in the initiatives for peacebuilding.

I also think this need or this sense of responsibility for community development was of course initiated by my early experiences with conflict, but also the education that the Red Cross provided. I was always following the desire to contribute to initiatives at the local level, but also at a global level. I ended up being the vice chair of the Global Youth Commission and here I found an interesting perspective because I found one of the things that we are working now with in the Commission is the young people around the world pursuing the movement to create specific strategies for young people that are frontliners or that are going under crisis.

This is something that is really making a change in the way we do things. Also, because it's not only they are sharing their own experiences as part of conflict, but also creating awareness with other young people around the world that are not necessarily affected by conflict. The sense of empathy that is created around all young people, their interest in making change is amplifying the platform forward for the organization to create awareness and to make changes.

In your experience, what's the impact and importance of the diversity of youth engaging in such issues for the humanitarian sector, especially within a movement as large as the Red Cross – Red Crescent?

Sylvia: First of all, diversity also fosters creativity and innovation. It leads to the development of fresh solutions to complex humanitarian challenges. Young people around the globe are developing new programs, projects and methodologies that are aiming for peacebuilding. In Colombia, after the peace

agreements were signed, young people were working in the country, with ideology of nonviolent communication, teaching other young people.

They reshaped this methodology and it was used to teach ex-combatants from different regions in the reincorporation process to society. At the same time, after so many years of conflicts and violence permeated all spheres in the society, young people were bringing new programs to schools, new programs to work with children, new programs to ensure that everyone was first aware of the importance of peace, but secondly, teaching how it is important to develop a better understanding among different between the difference amongst people.

I think at the same time, the humanitarian sector benefits from this diversity in terms of the amplification of voices. When you have youth engaged in your processes, this is ensuring a broader representation, including those that are traditionally marginalized or overlooked.

This inclusivity helps address the diverse needs and concerns of affected communities, and it leads to a more comprehensive and equitable humanitarian response. And what I think is the most important thing about engaging youth, it's the long-term sustainability focus, because young people tend to emphasize in those long-term sustainable solutions, focusing on addressing the root causes and promoting a solution that contribute to wider and longer change.

I'd like to open the floor back up for your opinion and what's still needed for youth engagement in the sector. What are the current obstacles that we're facing and the messages that you do want to get out, particularly the ones that may impact legal and policy elements that we still face today? Can I start with you, Julie?

Julie: Yes, absolutely. I would say that in order to work in this sector and I'm talking about international law, maybe more broadly, you have to go through some socioeconomic barriers. And for example, if you take the case of somebody from a modest background who is going to public university studying law, you have to be first lucky enough to have one class in international law, lucky enough to have a teacher inspiring enough to make you believe that you're going to have a career in this field, which is not a given when you have nobody around you telling you that it's a possibility. Then when you start getting into a professional sphere, you have to go through internships and internships either unpaid are really under paid. In France, I was paid 600 (euros) for three different internships, so if you don't have support, you cannot live with it. And then if you're trying to be more specialized and maybe go higher in the international sphere, you might want to do higher studies. So, for example, I did an LLM and I was lucky enough for a bank that agreed to give me a loan that I'm going to pay for a few years now. But that's not the position that everybody is in. From everything that I talked of, we lost 70% of the youth who is trying to get into this field, in my opinion.

I know that there's a lot of efforts which is being made by organizations to work with academic circles everywhere around the world, to have people from different backgrounds but still more work needs to be done.

The second thing I would like to talk about is also touching on the issue of diversity. When you talk about the international world, from the outside, you have this impression that the people making the decisions don't look like you. You have this impression that the world of international law and international humanitarian law – it's an outdated facts and an outdated conception – but you feel like it was made for and by Europeans to help the poor people in other countries, when in reality now it's evolving. This field is evolving as more and more national people being involved in humanitarian aid at every level. But when you look at the people on top, they don't look like me. So that's also, in my opinion, a barrier in getting into this field.

Kay: I think Julie highlights already crucial points outlining the social economic barriers as well as the diversity aspect. Maybe to add upon that, I would say to enhance youth engagement in humanitarian efforts, we must establish firm accountability for breaches of humanitarian principles to maintain young people's trust. Furthermore, I would like to add that education, humanitarian law and human rights should be accessible already very early on, empowering youth to be informed advocates.

Sylvia: Yes, I can absolutely share the same perspective as them, but I think it's important also to highlight that usually youth engagement is seen as participation only. So, when people think about youth engagement, they say, okay, I'm going to invite some young people here to this activity or they are going to be the beneficiaries of this initiative. But usually young people are not engaged in decision making processes at all levels. And I think this is a thing that should be the main effort now, not only because it's something that will foster sustainability, but also because it represents a different way of seeing the world.

I always say being young is seeing the world through different lenses, so that perspective should be brought in all the legal and policy developments that we are trying to do today. Also, because the peer-to-peer education is key to drive changes and when you have people that are, as it was mentioned before, that when you see yourself reflected, you feel also more engaged.

I'd like to now come back to the issue of social media that we touched upon earlier and Kay, maybe starting with you, because we put a pin in that conversation earlier – could you illustrate for us how you would recommend to communicate and keep international humanitarian law relevant and respected in today's era of misinformation, disinformation and hate speech and communication overload?

Kay: It is difficult, but I would say that to maintain the relevance of all amidst today's digital noise, we should focus on concise, engaging social media content, interactive educational tools and compelling visual storytelling. If you talk about how to reach young people, it is important to collaborate with educational institutions and collaborate with influencers – young ambassadors which ensure that the message resonates with the next generation. Summing up, I guess it's about making IHL accessible, relatable, and interactive for all.

Julie: I mean, I will absolutely share what Kay says on being concise and having something in a format which is easily shareable. I have to say today we're at a time where so many, so many young people are getting involved and using terms of IHL and of international law. And it's incredible. I have people from my hometown, 700 inhabitants, who are talking to me about proportionality. I mean, it's something which is incredible to me, and I think now is the time to grab them and make them interested in and help them in understanding what they're saying and also giving them access to information, which is an easy package because all they want to do is to say, I know about this issue and I want to share it with people, so let's use them. Let's use them to give the right message out.

Sylvia: Yes, I think when we consider keeping IHL relevant, we should think like we have to keep up with technologies and development, and that's okay. But also, we need to put on maintain the focus in diversity and differences among young people around the globe.

If we're thinking people that are living in the cities are not the same people that living in the countryside, people that are more affected by the conflict usually do not have access to technologies. And that is where we need IHL the most – because these young people that are in those regions are the ones that are more vulnerable and that might end up being part of the conflict or taking a side because, they are in a high risk of recruitment or generational trauma leads them to pick a side. So, I can say that we can use technologies in the media and to keep up with young people in the cities, but there with the young people in those situations, we need to keep the traditional ways.

I remember when I joined the Red Cross, the first training we had as volunteers was Red Cross Principles, Red Cross history and international humanitarian law, and it was my first contact with IHL. We have volunteers in like villages, they start when they are very young and they start learning about IHL. And this gives them different perspective and it's not only our way to preventing these young people from joining the conflict, but also it is helping us to maintain the links between the parties in the conflict.

We have found many situations where young people were knowing someone that was part of the conflict and they started this conversation around IHL, about the rules of war, and how civilians must be protected, and it has helped a lot. In the example of Colombia, it has helped the Red Cross and the International Committee a lot, to engage with their communities and to have to gain this trust among parties. So, I think we cannot forget the traditional ways that well, to develop and create awareness regarding IHL.

I'd like to stay with you for the last question as well, which I'd also like to pose to our other two guests. Is there still hope? And what are the some of the things of the youth of today and tomorrow can still hold on to and point us towards?

Sylvia: Absolutely yes, I would say yes. I know that people say young people are losing hope because they do not see the changes happening as fast as we wish we could see it. But I've also seen it being in this global position with the Red Cross, all the efforts young people are doing around the world, all the energy that they are bringing in, all the new perspective, all this desire to build community and to drive change – it is amazing!

The level of engagement, like when people are volunteering, is incredible – people giving their whole weekend to the Red Cross to spread messages to build empathy among people, to relieve suffering, is something that is really inspiring for everyone. When you think about these young people taking either leadership positions, it is also something that is happening. I know if it's requires generational changes, but I think definitely we are in a good path.

And I also always for us, this like the human capacity to be resilient and to find new solutions is something that it has amazed me since I was a kid, like how we find solutions for everything. So definitely, I think we still have hope. Yes.

Kay: Absolutely is always hope. In my experience with the Circle has only re-enforced disbelief. Firstly because of the point Sylvia just touched upon, already that we see people come together to engage and make a difference. And this shows that the next generation is not only aware, but they're also committed to addressing global challenges.

The second one is that the Digital Age, for all its pitfalls, offers unprecedented opportunities, like, for example, to connect with likeminded individuals across the globe and use technology to amplify their voices. And lastly, organizations are increasingly recognizing the value of including young people in decision making processes.

To the youth of today and tomorrow, I would say, if I may, hold on to your passion, your ability to connect and innovate and your will to create a better world, because these are the tools to create a change we wish to see in the world and give us all a reason to be hopeful about our future.

Julie: I share the comments of Sylvia. Let's remind ourselves that IHL is a really young body of law. States were authorized to use force against each other until 1945. This is new. And of course, there's still variation and there's still issues – but now they are not authorized to do it – they have to justify himself. So that's something. And when we talk about the Geneva Conventions, the rules of war, which are unanimously adopted and are being respected by every state – we celebrate next year a 75th anniversary. This is the life of my grandmother, basically. Imagine how much we can do in the years to come, in the decades to come in changing the law. The law is established, and we have rules, but we can ask for more and we can do more, and we can make states agree to do more. And that's why I have hope.

I also have hope because there is a lot of initiative to include different not only diversity within the staff, but also within the reasoning and what we use. For example, in the legal division, you have people working on finding the similarities between Islamic Law and IHL. For me, that gives me hope, because we are seeing that there's this huge part of the world which already has rules and laws. We can not only use it to discuss with them, but also to enrich our own body of law.

And finally, I would say what gives me hope is to work here at the ICRC, to be able to share experience with brilliant colleagues, whether they are my fellow associates or my supervisors, all of them are here to fight to protect victims of armed conflict, and they're brilliant. If so many brilliant people can come together to work here, that gives me hope as well.

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