

Gender Perspectives on SMALL ARMS

What are the linkages between small arms issues and gender perspectives?

In recent years, small arms proliferation has gained increased international attention. Although it is clear that small arms do not cause conflicts, there is consensus that they exacerbate conflicts and increase risks for civilian populations. Small arms facilitate the targeting of civilians during conflict, including in refugee situations. After a formal cease-fire, small arms proliferation can contribute to violent crime, instability and banditry. The abundance of small arms has, however, also been raised as an important issue in countries not at war, for example, the United States, South Africa, Australia and Canada (Cukier, 2000).

International efforts, including the “United Nations Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects” scheduled for July 2001, are now looking to limit the transfers, availability and use of small arms.

Although there has been little discussion of the links between gender and small arms, there are many relevant issues which should be raised. It is known, for example, that while firearm casualties among women and children are significant both in conflict situations and in peace, the vast majority of victims of gun violence are men (Gartner, 2000). At the same time women are targets of certain types of violence involving small arms, particularly domestic violence. Gender is also relevant to the discussion of small arms since a disproportionate percentage of the owners and users of small arms are men, both in conflict and non-conflict situations (Cukier, 2000).

A gender analysis draws attention to people, and raises questions about who distributes, who owns, who uses, and who is killed and wounded by small arms. Such an analysis highlights human rights aspects of small arms proliferation and use.

The fact that people in communities are divided into different groups has implications for those working to reduce small arms at the local level. Communities should not be treated as homogenous. It is important to understand how communities are constructed and how different groups, including women and men, perceive their situations.

A key insight arising from a concern for gender issues is that not only are there differences between women and men, but that there are also significant inequalities. Women tend to have fewer resources, often work longer hours, have more responsibilities (especially for families), and have less access to power and decision-making. Furthermore, women’s work, needs and capabilities are often overlooked and undervalued by international actors. A primary reflection of the unequal nature of the relationship between women and men is the global phenomenon of violence against women. The widespread availability of guns contributes to the fatality rate of domestic violence.

Relevant issues for those working on small arms in **conflict situations**, include:

- **Women and men (girls and boys) often participate in armed conflict in different ways.** Men tend to be the primary armed combatants, although there have been situations where a significant number of women joined armies. Women and girls often support combatants by assuming responsibility for such tasks as cooking, acting as couriers, carrying supplies—both voluntarily and forced. Further-more, gender-based violence and human rights violations often define women’s wartime experiences. It is important, however, to go beyond the facile equation of women as solely victims and men as active combatants.

Demographics shift as a result of a conflict. The number of women-headed households tends to rise, as does the number of “dependents”. Refugee camps tend to be dominated by women and children. The presence of small arms can significantly increase the insecurity of women in refugee camps, disrupting the work towards reconstruction.

- **Women and men often have different perspectives of ‘security’.** For many communities, violence does not end with the termination of formal hostilities. Given the prevalence of domestic violence in post-conflict situations and women’s greater overall vulnerability than men’s, women and men often have different priorities vis-à-vis disarmament.

- **There is often inequality in representation of women and men in peace building and reconstruction.** Despite the fact that gender roles and expectations are often in flux in post-conflict situations, given the changed roles and responsibilities during the conflict, the formal peace negotiations tend to be dominated by men and women often have less access to incoming resources for reconstruction, including training and credit.

Gender perspectives are also important to consider in relation to small arms in **non-conflict** situations.

- **Gender and advocacy.** Women have played a strong leadership role in many parts of the world in small arms and gun control. Women have mobilized and spoken out on the need to reduce small arms proliferation. They have often found it more effective to organize explicitly as women with women's organizations.

Recent demonstrations include the Million Mom March held in the United States on Mothers' Day (May 2000) and *Women Call for a Gun Free South Africa* (March 2000). Women have organized separate events and demands as part of the culture of peace initiative. As well, the international women's organization WILPF (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom) was a primary founder of the Geneva Action Network on Small Arms (GANSA) and of the recently formed New York Action Network on Small Arms (NYANSA).

- **Masculinity and weapons.** Perceptions of masculinity and manliness are often interwoven with weapons and arms:

A complicating factor for disarmament is that in several parts of Africa, particularly in the Horn, ownership of arms is culturally accepted. In some areas a man without a gun is not considered a real man. (Kingma and Sayers, 1994).

To date, this issue has not been explored in much detail. One researcher, Jacklyn Cock (1996), briefly explores this phenomenon in her work on security and development in South Africa:

Many [actors] share a gender identity that involves a militarised masculinity. Many young South Africans understand weaponry as emblematic of manliness; this militarised masculinity cuts across diverse cultures, as the following statements:

"Buy weapons, collect weapons and clean your weapons. The Boer and his gun are inseparable" (Afrikaans resistance leader, Eugene Terre Blanche)

"The call to ban the bearing of weapons is an insult to my manhood. It is an insult to the manhood of every Zulu man." (King of the Zulus addressing a rally)

There is an increasing interest in understanding the relationship between masculinity and war or conflict in general. See, for example the work of Cynthia Enloe (1993). This broader analysis could provide starting points to explore the specific issues of men's identities and small arms.

Concrete implications

There are several possible entry points for mainstreaming gender perspectives into discussions of small arms reduction:

- **Ensure the gender breakdown of the casualties of small arms proliferation:** General estimates often place women and children as the primary casualties of small arms-related deaths and injuries in certain types of conflicts. Yet it is important to understand just exactly what the numbers are in specific situations. Good empirical data will increase the understanding of who is injured and killed and in what circumstances.
- **Improve the understanding of the role of masculinity in the culture of weapons.** More work

could be done to understand how gender roles and identities interact with ownership and use of weapons. Research could explore in specific situations whether or not and how masculinity is a relevant factor in individual decisions to retain weapons.

- **Carry out a gender analysis in practical disarmament measures:** Building on the analysis of masculinity and weapons, other gender dimensions of disarmament initiatives could be explored. The decision to disarm involves questions of security and identity. In post-conflict uncertainty male combatants may be reluctant to surrender their weapons, as it may be symbolic of surrendering power and male identity.

An individual's decision to disarm is influenced by the perception of personal and economic security. This makes microdisarmament a continuing process that is dependent on myriad factors such as the state's ability to protect its citizens, crime levels, economic opportunities and the degree to which the gun has become legitimized within society. (Pike, 1999).

The role of women in disarmament and mobilization against small arms - actual and potential - needs to be investigated as part of gender analysis. Women have played important roles in local disarmament initiatives. For example, in Bougainville women from all sides of the conflict organized an island-wide programme where trained women walked alone into the jungle to seek out and persuade guerrillas to lay down their weapons (Anderson, 1999).

Another example comes from the *Tools for Arms Project* in Mozambique. This initiative involves, among other activities, the collection and destruction of weapons and the exchange of weapons for tools. A project worker provided this anecdote: "A mother with her child came in the office one day last year. Her baby was wrapped in her capulana (to carry the child) on her chest. When she arrived she pulled out a pistol hidden between her chest and child. She refused any incentive saying that a family member hid the gun in the back yard of the house and she saw him take it out at night a few times. She was afraid he'd eventually use it, so she sneaked it out. She wanted nothing in exchange to avoid any questions at her returning to the house" (Email communication).

It is important to also improve understanding of how women's and men's perspectives on disarmament vary and whether or not there are policy and programmatic implications for these differences.

- **Promote women's expertise in small arms issues and increase gender balance in decision-making:** Security studies and analysis of weapons is a professional field dominated by men. There is need to promote greater participation and involvement by women at all levels. Greater openness to women professionals could be encouraged as well as support for increased specialization by women in this area of expertise. Increased participation of women in political decision-making could, for example, also improve domestic legislation on small arms.
- **Investigate whether or not the gender division of labour in the production of small arms is a relevant issue:** In looking at the supply side of small arms, are there issues to be addressed around who works in the factories and arms industries? Are there constituencies in arms producing countries of women and men who have a vested stake in continued arms production?
- **Integrate a gender perspective into the 2001 United Nations Conference on Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (9–20 July 2001).** The upcoming United Nations Conference is an important opportunity to both draw attention to the gender dimensions of small arms and to advance the discussion. This process can be improved through new research, analysis and improved documentation.
- **More research and documentation on the gender dimensions of small arms:** There is little research and documentation on the gender dimensions of small arms. What little has been written is often based solely on the perception of women as victims of small arms violence. Research and analysis could strengthen the understanding of how these two issues are interlinked and provide an improved basis from which to develop effective small arms control and disarmament initiatives. Of particular importance are situation-specific case studies that document how these issues play out in concrete situations.
- **Investigate issues relating to girls, boys and small arms:** Discussions on small arms often highlight the involvement of children as both the victims and perpetrators of violence. Yet little is known about the separate or different experiences of girls and boys.
- **Expand public support for campaigns to limit small arms:** Women and women's organizations have been major supporters of arms control initiatives. General campaigns to stop the proliferation of small arms could be strengthened through an analysis of how best to involve and mobilize women and women's organizations - both in war-affected countries and in other areas.

Resources

Books and Articles

Anderson, S (1999). "Women's Many Roles in Reconciliation" **People Building Peace**. European Platform for Conflict Prevention and Transformation. http://www.euconflict/pbp/4/2_intro.htm

Cock, J. (1996). The Link Between Security and Development: The Problem of Light Weapons Proliferation in Southern Africa. Published in **African Security Review** Vol.5 No. 5. Available at: <http://www.iss.co.za/Pubs/ASR/5.5/Cock.htm>

Cukier, Wendy. (2000). *Gender and Small Arms. A Special Report for the Small Arms Yearbook Project*, Geneva.

Enloe, C. (1993). **The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War**. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Gartner, Rosemary. (2000). *Cross Cultural Aspects of Interpersonal Violence: A Review of the International Empirical Evidence*, International Conference on Crime and Violence: Causes and Policy Responses, World Bank, May 2000.

Kingma, K. and Vanessa Sayers (1994) *Demobilization in the Horn of Africa*. Proceedings of the IRG Workshop, 4-7 December, Addis Ababa. http://www.bicc.de/demobil/brief4/chap5_7.html

Lorentzen, L.A. and J. Turpin (1998). **The Women and War Reader**. New York: New York University Press.

Pike, Claire (1999). *Facing the Challenges of Microdisarmament: A Case Study Review of Practices in Post-Conflict Countries*. Ottawa: DFAIT. Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (Canada)

Saucier, Ginette (forthcoming). *Seizing the Advantage: Integrating Gender into Small Arms Proliferation. A Discussion Paper*. Ottawa: Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (Canada).

Websites

The *International Action Network on Small Arms* (IANSA) website <http://www.iansa.org/> has a search facility. Possible key words include women and gender.

The *SAFER-NET - Small Arms/Firearms Education and Research Network* website: www.research.ryerson.ca/SAFER-Net

International resolutions, commitments, and agreements

Commission on the Status of Women Agreed Conclusions on the Critical Areas of Concern of the Beijing Platform for Action - UN Sales No. E.00.IV.6):

Join international efforts to elaborate international policies to prohibit illicit traffic, trade and transfer of small arms, and to control their excessive production, with a view to alleviating the suffering of women and children in the situation of armed conflict.

The themes of small arms and disarmament received attention in the discussions at the **Twenty-third special session of the General Assembly on Follow-Up to the Platform for Action** (June 2000 - A/S-23/10/Rev.1):

98 (k) Strengthen efforts toward general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control, based on the priorities established by the United Nations in the field of disarmament, so that the released resources could be used for, inter alia, social and economic programmes which benefit women and girls.

98 (l) Explore new ways of generating new public and private financial resources, inter alia, through the appropriate reduction of excessive military expenditures and the arms trade and investment for arms production and acquisition, including global military expenditures, taking into consideration national security requirements, so as to permit the possible allocation of additional funds for social and economic development, inter alia, for the advancement of women.

Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, adopted in October 2000, specifically mentions the need to consider the different needs of female and male ex-combatants and their dependents in DDR (disarmament, demobilization and rehabilitation) initiatives (para 13).