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Republic of Kenya



United Nations
Development Programme

Guns and roses: Gender and Armed Violence in Africa¹



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**Geneva Declaration
on Armed Violence
and Development**
www.genevadelaration.org



Introduction

In 1998, Solomon Mhlongo emptied a magazine of bullets into his common-law wife Elizabeth and five-year old daughter Tlaleng. He stopped to reload and then continued firing until the gun jammed. Elizabeth was left sprawling next to the bed, her chest, head, thigh and hand peppered with bullets, while their daughter lay slumped sideways in a blood-spattered chair. Solomon Mhlongo, a Soweto, Johannesburg resident was a registered gun owner.² This is just one example of the gendered nature of armed violence – demonstrating that men, women, boys and girls, respond to and are affected by armed violence in different ways. The tragic story of the Mhlongo's fits the emerging profile of gender and armed violence in Africa: men are the main perpetrators of armed violence and women are particularly vulnerable in private spaces, where firearms are often used to intimidate, control, hurt and kill intimate female partners.³ Similarly, while women have traditionally been excluded from discussions of peace and security, it is now widely recognised that women's experience of war – whether as soldiers or civilians – is also different to those of men.

Understanding the differentiated gender impacts of armed violence – whether in the home, during armed conflict or in immediate post war contexts – is necessary for developing appropriate and gender-sensitive interventions and programmes. For example, working with 'both men and women in order to reduce risks and bolster resilience to insecurity and violence'⁴ is one of the best means to avert increases in violence and post-war armed criminality.

This paper will focus specifically on the nature and extent of armed violence, including sexual violence, against women, both during and after armed conflict as well as within the family domain, thereby illustrating the linkages between the various forms of gender violence. Studies both in Africa and elsewhere show that it is not always possible (nor desirable) to separate women's experience of armed violence from other forms of violence, such as physical assault and sexual abuse – both in times of armed conflict and in the home. The paper will also briefly describe some of the interventions aimed at addressing this issue, ranging from UN resolutions to local community based programmes.

Men as victims and perpetrators

- Across cultures, most acts of violence, including firearm-related violence, are overwhelmingly perpetrated by men and boys and most victims of firearm-related violence are also men and boys.⁵
- Globally, data from situations of war and peace show that over 90 percent of firearm-related homicides occur among men.
- Most firearms are owned by males—whether in state structures such as the police or military, as part of non-state armed groups, gangs and militias, for leisure or sporting activities such as hunting, or for self-defence in the home.
- In countries at 'peace' where guns are widely available, they are used mostly by men, to commit various types of violence, such as murder, suicide, robbery and assault, and in gang warfare.

The National Injury Mortality Surveillance System (NIMSS) shows that in South Africa⁶:

- Majority of firearm homicide victims are men.
- Between 80 to 87 percent of all victims are men, and 13 to 20 percent women.
- For every female death where a firearm is used, between 7 and 8.5 male deaths are reported.
- The majority of women killed are known to their assailants, while men may equally be killed by strangers.⁷
- A similar pattern emerges across Africa, with males being four to ten times more likely than females to be murdered.⁸

In countries emerging from war and those with high levels of urban armed violence, 'young men may use guns as part of a rite of passage from boyhood into manhood.'⁹ In addition positive associations between guns and manhood can occur in wars of liberation where their use is valued and encouraged, as seen in the symbolic value of the AK-47 in liberation wars across the continent.

1 Written by: Adèle Kirsten, Independent Researcher, South Africa. This paper draws primarily on three sources: WHO Report on Violence and Health in Africa (to be published in early 2008); Missing Pieces: Directions for reducing Gun Violence Through the UN process on Small Arms Control. Geneva: Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue 2005; The impact of armed violence on poverty and development. Bradford University, UK 2005. Editorial support: Rob Muggah, Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development; Paul Eavis, UNDP.

2 Email exchange with Lisa Vetten of Tshwaranang Legal Advocacy Centre to End Violence Against Women, Johannesburg, March 2007

3 Gun Control Alliance Briefing: 54. 2006. *Guns in the home and intimate partner violence*. Johannesburg, South Africa

4 Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2005. p: 67.

5 Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2006. RevCon Policy Brief: "Hitting the Target. Men and Guns"

6 A profile of fatal injuries in South Africa, NIMSS. 2003; NIMSS. 2004.

7 Mathews, S et al. 2004. "Every six hours a woman is killed by her intimate partner": A National Study of Female homicide in South Africa. Johannesburg: Medical Research Council Policy Brief, pp. 1-4,

8 Murray and Lopez (1996) reported a global male: female homicide ratio of 6:2 the mid-1990s in Outwater A et al. Homicide in Dar es Salaam Region, Tanzania, 2005. (Submitted AJPH)

9 Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. 2005

Nature and Extent of Gender Violence in Africa

Women and girls are subjected to various forms of violence, including sexual violence, at the hands of state security forces, armed rebel groups, armed criminal gangs, and also immediate family members and intimate partners. Studies both in Africa and other conflict areas indicate that domestic abuse increases both during and after conflict.¹⁰ This can be for a number of reasons: acceptance of violence as a means to assert power and resolve conflicts; the changing role of women in society; lawlessness and a climate of impunity; weak or absent security provision such as effective policing, and hidden male trauma.

Women, war and DDR

Women's experience of war

Women's experience of war is manifold – as soldiers, as victims of armed conflict, as 'war booty', and as single heads of households. In armed conflicts, sexual violence against women is often seen as a weapon of war, both to dishonour the woman and the enemy. For example in Sierra Leone and Uganda, rebel commanders forcibly recruited or took young women as "wives" and in Algeria women were seen as a legitimate target and part of the 'war booty'.¹¹

One of the most common experiences for many women during times of armed conflict is the double bind of an increase in their domestic burden coupled with an expanded economic role. For instance, in Southern Sudan, women have been forced to take on additional roles usually reserved for the men or young boys of the family – having to sow and cultivate fields, brew and sell beer, and trade goods in the market place. Although many women maintain these extended roles once their men return from war, they often do not benefit from the concomitant social and economic power that goes with this increased responsibility. This burden is often carried over to the girl children in the family resulting in among other things, interrupted schooling. These changing roles can further exacerbate existing tensions within families and communities, contributing to ongoing cycles of violence.

Women's experience of demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR)

Armed conflict is highly gendered and women's experiences will have been different from those of men. These differences are central to determining women's particular needs and priorities in the post-war period and can include: returning to their own community; access to essential services such as water and electricity; attempting to restore normalcy for their children and other family members; specific health care needs such as treatment for sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS.¹² It is important to note however, that it cannot be assumed that all women will share the same concerns and priorities.

It is now widely recognised that most DDR processes have failed to sufficiently address the needs and concerns of women and girls involved in fighting forces, rendering them invisible.¹³ For example, in Sierra Leone women combatants were largely excluded from the DDR process, failing to benefit from a variety of programmes such as retraining and placement in reintegration programmes.¹⁴ Out of the estimated 10,000 women associated with the armed groups in Sierra Leone, only 4,751 of the 72,490 demobilized adult combatants were women.¹⁵ One of the contributing factors was the eligibility criteria of the programme. For example, the 'one person, one weapon' approach almost guaranteed the exclusion of females, especially girls as many of the women and girls associated with the fighting forces reported being forced to hand over their guns to their commanders. Follow up regarding reintegration support for women was also poor, with only an estimated five percent of all demobilized women soldiers participating in the Stopgap programme.¹⁶

10 See Hudson, H. 1998. "A feminist perspective on human security in Africa." *Monograph 20* Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria. pp. 22-98; Turshen, Meredith and Clotilde Twagiramariya, eds. 1998. *What Women Do in Wartime: Gender and Conflict in Africa*. London and New York: Zed Books.

11 CICS, 2005.

12 See IDDRS 5.10, "Women, gender and DDR" (<http://www.unddr.org/iddrs/>).

13 UN. 2002. Women, Peace and Security. Study submitted by the Secretary-General pursuant to Resolution 1325, cited in HDC. 2005.

14 Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2005.

15 Mazurana, D et al. 2002, as cited in Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2005. See suggested reading.

16 This programme was aimed at facilitating combatants reintegration into their communities, which included some vocational training.

Failure to include the views and ideas of women can lead to an impoverished understanding of the peace process and the post-conflict reconstruction phase. For many women, even some of the concepts such as post-conflict, reintegration and rehabilitation may be problematic. For one, the violence does not stop once hostilities have ceased. Women do not necessarily want to return to their previous existence which may have been one of economic dependence and subordination but rather seek the transformation of society in which their rights are recognised.¹⁷

Intimate partner violence

Although policy makers and UN agencies have paid more attention to the needs and concerns of women combatants over the last few years, the phenomenon of domestic or family violence has largely been ignored. Intimate partner violence is one of the most common forms of gender based violence, yet it is also one of the most hidden and subject to the social and cultural norms operating within a particular society – all factors that impact on and influence the approach to the different types of intervention programmes adopted.¹⁸ Cross-cultural studies have shown that this form of violence is prevalent in most societies, with

Intimate partner violence is one of the most common forms of gender based violence, yet it is also one of the most hidden.

intimate partner violence prevalent in societies with high levels of violence and conflict.¹⁹ The link between sexual abuse and other forms of violence is most acute within intimate partner violence. For example, the WHO multi-country study (which only includes data for three African countries, namely Ethiopia, Namibia and United Republic of Tanzania), found a substantial overlap between experiences of physical and sexual violence.²⁰

In Africa the data on the extent of domestic violence and in particular intimate partner violence is very limited. The only national prevalence study on intimate partner violence was conducted in South Africa in 1999. The study found that almost half of all women murdered were killed by their intimate partners, translating into a prevalence rate of 8.8 per 100,000 of the female population aged 14 years and older – the highest rate ever reported anywhere in the world.²¹ Women who died at the hands of their intimate partners were also more likely to have

been killed by a legal firearm than women killed by non-intimates: this means that the ownership of a legal firearm is one of the main risk factors in the murder of intimate female partners.²² The presence of a gun in the home has been shown to influence rates of suicides, accidental shootings, and family murders.²³

One of the challenges facing both policy makers and practitioners is the widely held view (supported by several studies)²⁴ that women often perceive violence against women, including wife beating, as acceptable and in some instances as justifiable, suggesting therefore that 'women's justification for violence are deeply rooted in the notion of traditional gendered roles of women and men.'²⁵ This observation is particularly relevant given the changing economic and domestic roles that women often adopt both during and after situations of armed conflict and in rapidly changing urban environments. Another challenge is the view (held across much of Africa), that as intimate partner violence usually occurs within the domestic domain, it is therefore a 'private matter' and best addressed within existing family structures such as elders councils or mediation efforts. In fact, cross cultural studies show that 'where domestic violence was not considered to be a private matter, it was less common.'²⁶

17 Chinkin, C. 2003. Peace Agreements as a Means of Promoting Gender Equality and Ensuring Participation of Women. UN. Division for the Advancement of Women. EGM/PEACE/2003/BP.1.

18 Counts 1992 cited in Mathews, S in WHO Report on Violence and Health in Africa (2008).

19 Levinson, D. 1989. *Family violence in cross-cultural perspective*. CA: Thousand Oaks. cited in Mathews, S in Who Report on Violence and Health in Africa (2008).

20 Mathews, S. in WHO Report on Violence and Health in Africa (2008).

21 Mathews, S. et al. 2004. *ibid*.

22 In the SA study one in every five perpetrators of intimate femicide owned a legal firearm, compared to 3.5 percent of non-intimate perpetrators.

23 Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2005.

24 Studies by Fawole et al. 2005; Oyediran and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2003 cited in Mathews, S in WHO Report on Violence and Health in Africa (2008).

25 Mathews, S. in WHO Report on Violence and Health in Africa (2008). This included: when a woman argued with her husband, was perceived as neglecting her children, disobeyed her husband or elders, refused to have sex or was suspected of infidelity.

26 Counts, 1992 cited in Mathews, S in WHO Report on Violence and Health in Africa (2008).

Impact of Armed Violence

Women and war

It is now well recognised that the human cost of armed violence spreads beyond combatants, criminals and state security forces to civilians. Coupled with the uneven distribution of conflict deaths among men this has had a devastating impact on livelihoods, the social composition of communities and gender demographics, putting an enormous burden on women. This has been particularly evident in places such as Southern Sudan, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Algeria.²⁷ In Bahr-el-Gazaal and the Upper Nile, for example, there were more than two women to every male resident. Another example is Somalia, where 40 percent of households are headed by women, increasing dramatically to 75 percent in the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps.

One of the biggest direct impacts of armed conflict (the third biggest after casualties and injury) is the creation of refugees and internally displaced persons. This is a particular feature of armed conflict and war rather than of armed criminality, with Northern Kenya being an exception.²⁸ One of the most devastating impacts of displacement is the loss of access to land, property, jobs, and traditional support structures. Other negative effects include the lack of access to health and social services, increased mortality and morbidity, and increased food insecurity. In addition, displaced people become more vulnerable to infectious and communicable diseases such as HIV/AIDS and TB. On top of all these additional concerns, what is most startling is that IDPs are vulnerable to further violence, with women and girls particularly vulnerable to sexual assault or forced to trade sexual favours for food, shelter or protection.²⁹ These women face an additional burden when returning to their homes which can include rejection by family and community members, the potential loss of a spouse and possible prohibition of future marriage, often leaving them destitute and without shelter or livelihood.

For many refugees and displaced persons the move from the countryside to urban areas has had a negative effect, with many being forced to beg or rely on casual labour, including survival sex. The massive influx of people into cities also puts a strain on already inadequate infrastructure and services, and as in the case of Algeria, led to an acute housing crisis.³⁰ In addition, increases in the number of disabled persons places an enormous burden on the health and social services. In Algeria for instance, approximately five percent of its total population is disabled.³¹

Intimate partner violence

Although one of the direct consequences of violence is undoubtedly injuries, and sometimes death, it also increases a women's risk of future ill health. One of the most common impacts of intimate partner violence is that women are more likely to report poor health, including poor quality of life. In addition, mental health problems, emotional distress and suicidal behaviour are common among women who have suffered partner violence.³²

Perhaps one of the most significant impacts is the link between intimate partner violence and HIV/AIDS, which has enormous social and economic implications, including reduced economic activity, disintegration of families and weakened social cohesion. Studies carried out in Tanzania, Kenya and South Africa found that HIV positive women were more likely to report having experienced intimate partner violence.³³

Data on health and other impacts remains sketchy. One of the reasons for this may be that many women are reluctant to report incidents of domestic violence, citing fear of further attacks, feelings of shame and guilt and lack of support structures.³⁴

27 For more detail on this refer to CICS, 2005.

28 CICS. 2005. This is linked to the upsurge in livestock raiding and is discussed in more detail in the Armed Violence and Pastoralism paper.

29 CICS, 2005.

30 Ibid.

31 The 1998 population census estimated this to be 1.6million people. El Watan. 3 March 2003 cited in CICS 2005.

32 WHO. 2005. WHO Multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women.

33 Dunkel, et al. 2004; Maman et al, 2003: cited in WHO Report on Violence and Health in Africa.

34 WHO. 2005.

International and Regional Instruments

There are several international agreements which set standards that protect women's rights to equality, non-discrimination and protection against gender-based violence, whether in times of war or peace, including the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against women (1994), the (1995) Beijing Platform for Action and the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (2000).³⁵ Resolution 1325 calls on "all actors, when negotiating and implementing peace agreements, to adopt a gender perspective." This means ensuring the active participation of women in all stages of the peace process and paying attention to gender mainstreaming³⁶ in the negotiation of the substance of the agreement.³⁷ In these various instruments the obligations on States to act, range from preventing and punishing gender-based violence through to ensuring that women are included in peace-keeping processes including conflict resolution and DDR. The Windhoek Declaration (2000), the only regional declaration of its kind, calls on states to ensure that women are involved at all levels and in all aspects of the peace process, which includes peace-keeping, reconciliation and peace-building.

In general, however, international agreements on women's security are very rarely recognized or reflected in other security-related discussions. An analysis of small arms agreements shows that, "[a]lthough weapons proliferation is often culturally sanctioned and upheld by the manipulation of gender ideologies, gender goes entirely unremarked in all documents which were not explicitly conceived to focus on gender mainstreaming."³⁸

As with women in war, the recognition of intimate partner violence as a health and human rights issue is recent. It was only in 1992 that The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) condemned violence against women. At a regional level the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights (1981) – a significant document which specifically address the complexities of Africa – fails to deal comprehensively with the issue of discrimination and violence against women. The Charter's provisions on women's rights are limited as it conceptualizes women's rights related to familial duties.



Women from all over Côte d'Ivoire gather to celebrate International Women's Day at the Palais de la Culture in Abidjan. Côte d'Ivoire. (UN Photo/Ky Chung)

35 www.peacewomen.org/un/sc/1325.html.

36 Gender mainstreaming refers to a process of assessing the implication for women and men of any planned action, policies or programmes at all levels; and to ensure that women's and men's concerns are integrated into the design, implementation, and evaluation of all policies and programmes at all levels.

37 Chinkin, C. 2003

38 Farr, V. 2002. "A gendered analysis of international agreements on small arms and light weapons," in *Gender perspectives on small arms and light weapons: regional and international concerns*. Bonn International Center for Conversion, Brief 24.

Interventions

Women and demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration

As part of the UN's commitment to gender mainstreaming it has instituted a number of changes which include: the appointment of ten full-time gender advisors in 17 peace-keeping operations and in the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO); new standard DDR operating procedures which take gender issues into account; and the development of more gender-sensitive approaches to early warning efforts.³⁹ While these are encouraging advances, it remains to be seen how recommendations for gender mainstreaming will actually be put into operation. In countries with new DDR processes, like Sudan, there is still a great deal of resistance to the view that women should participate in all aspects of peace and security. The UN has also set up a Joint Action to Stop Rape in War, as a means to consolidate prevention and coordinate responses to the particular kinds of violence women endure in conflict situations.⁴⁰

Family violence

A concerted effort has been underway over the past decade through combined advocacy efforts by non-governmental organizations, international aid agencies and academics to raise public awareness and influence governmental responses to violence against women.⁴¹ This includes the dissemination of research for example that points to both 'risk and protective factors.'

For men, in particular, witnessing their mother being abused is a significant risk factor for future partner violence and having no post school training was the only demographic risk factor associated with partner violence. For women, education is also crucial: having a 'secondary school education or higher' seemed to reduce the risk of being a victim of partner violence, suggesting a degree of confidence and empowerment.⁴²

A number of 'protective factors' appear to help men reject inappropriate firearms possession and violence, including: restricting access to guns by those most likely to misuse them (such as men with a history of violence); and social programmes teaching alternative views on masculinity.

It is clear that without the active participation of women in all spheres of the prevention of armed violence – from voicing their particular needs and concerns, through to the design, implementation and evaluation of intervention programmes – that lasting solutions will not be found.

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39 UN News Centre, New York, 20 October 2004, cited in HDC 2005. IDDRS, *ibid*.

40 See www.stoprape.now.org.

41 Eillsberg, M. 2006. Violence against women and the Millennium development Goals: Facilitating women's access to support. *International Journal of Gynaecology & Obstetrics*. 94:325-32.

42 Mathews, S. in WHO Report on Violence and Health in Africa (2008).

Conclusion

Although there is still not sufficient information on the particular impacts of armed violence on women and girls, there is a growing body of research on the issue, as briefly highlighted in this paper. Perhaps the most important issues to focus on include:

- Understanding the different ways in which men and women respond to and are affected by armed violence is critical to the development of appropriate and gender-sensitive interventions and programmes – whether in post-war or urban violence contexts or in the home.
- Intimate partner violence is one of the most common forms of gender based violence, yet it is also one of the most hidden, and subject to the social and cultural norms operating within a particular society – all factors that impact on and influence the approach to and types of intervention programmes adopted.
- Promoting the active participation of women in the design and implementation and evaluation of armed violence prevention and reduction programmes is key to building a peaceful future.

Suggested Readings

1. Breines, Ingeborg, Robert Connel and Ingrid Eide. 2000. Male roles, masculinities and violence: A culture of peace perspective. UNNESCO Publishing, Cultures of Peace Series. Available at: www.unesco.org
2. Mazurana, Dyan. 2004. Women in Armed Opposition Groups speak on War, Protection and Obligations under International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law. Report of a workshop organised by Geneva Call and the programme for the Study of International Organization(s). Available at: www.genevacall.org
3. Koen, K. 2006. Claiming space. Reconfiguring women's roles in post-conflict situations. ISS Paper 121. Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies.
4. Mathews, S. WHO Report on Violence and Health in Africa. To be published in 2008.
5. Farr, Vanessa. 2006. "Gender Analysis as a Tool for Multilateral Negotiators in the Small Arms Context." *Disarmament as Humanitarian Action: From Perspective to Practice*. Eds. John Borrie and Vanessa Randin Martin. UNIDIR: Geneva: 109-129.
6. The IANSA Women's Portal <http://www.iansa.org/women/index.php> . Join IANSA by e-mailing women@iansa.org.

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