THEME 4
WOMEN, MEN AND GUN VIOLENCE: OPTIONS FOR ACTION

The term gender has become a synonym for women when gender actually refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, and attributes of men *and* women in a given society (as opposed to 'sex', which is biologically determined). Applying a gender perspective to the small arms issue—understanding the different ways that *men, women, boys, and girls* engage in, are affected by, and respond to gun violence—is key to developing effective solutions to the problem.

This theme explores two key concepts—gender equity and gender specificity—as they impact gun violence. A gender equity approach implies working with both men and women to *reduce risks* and *bolster resilience* to insecurity and violence. Gender specificity means examining the different impacts on men and women of armed violence—and then developing programmes that take into account these particular risks.

DIFFERENTIATED IMPACTS FOR WOMEN AND MEN

A growing global effort to collect information on gun violence that is broken down into age, ethnicity, and sex is helping challenge some over-generalisations that hinder more refined understanding of the impacts of small arms misuse. These include statements like '80% of the victims of armed violence are women and children'.[1] This claim may be true in some contexts, particularly recent wars in some African nations; but in general, it is primarily men—young, poor, socially marginalised men most of all—who are killed or injured from gun violence.[2] Men are also more likely to commit gun violence: in almost every country, a disproportionate percentage of gun owners and users are men.[3] Statistics from situations of war and peace show that:

- over 90 per cent of gun-related homicides occur among men;[4]

Relevance to UN Programme of Action

The PoA has few references to gender. Men, who make up the largest number of direct victims and perpetrators of gun violence, receive no explicit mention. Women are referred to as particularly vulnerable, along with children and the elderly: 'Gravely concerned about its [the illicit trade in small arms] devastating consequences for children . . . as well as the negative impact on women and the elderly . . .' (Preamble). The implications of how the omission of men's vulnerabilities to gun violence and the weak references to women affects implementation remain unexplored.

- boys are involved in 80 per cent of the accidental shootings that kill about 400 children and injure another 3,000 in the US each year;[5] and
- of those who commit suicide with a gun, 88 per cent are men and 12 per cent are women.[6]

Although women are not the majority of homicide victims, when they are killed—and it is overwhelmingly men who kill them—guns are often a preferred weapon. Studies on the murder of women (referred to here as 'femicide', or 'intimate femicide' if the perpetrator is a current or ex-partner, or a rejected would-be lover) show that guns can be a lethal element in displays of men's power over women. In South Africa, one murdered woman in five is killed with a legally owned gun.[7] Some 50 per cent of women murdered each year are killed by men known intimately to them—four women a day, or one every six hours.[8] The intimate femicide rate was estimated at 8.8 per 100,000 female population 14 years and older, the highest ever reported on the murder of women anywhere in the world where it has been studied.

UNDERSTANDING GENDERED EFFECTS

The misuse of small arms affects communities on many levels, making it challenging to quantify who is worst harmed by the ready availability and misuse of guns. Improved data collection is one part of bridging this knowledge gap. Small arms researchers and analysts can play a more active part in the collection of sex-disaggregated data on who is killed and injured by firearms and under what circumstances. As gun violence does not always result in death, but generates a range of indirect impacts, it is important that research be complemented with qualitative analysis to provide a fuller picture of the breadth of the effects of gun violence on women and girls, men and boys.

It is critical to note that women are subject to a disproportionate range of non-fatal threats due to the misuse of small arms, often commensurate with their low status or lack of legal protection in many contexts: peace or war, developed or developing nations.[9] Accounts from both war zones and 'peaceful' communities illustrate the risks to women and girls from gun violence or the threat of it: 'They took K.M. who is 12 years old, in the open air. Her father was killed by the Janjawid in Um Baru, the rest of the family ran away and she was captured . . . more than six people used her as a wife (raped her); she stayed with the Janjawid and the military for more than 10 days'.[10]

Small arms and light weapons do not necessarily have to be fired to pose a serious security threat and are often used to threaten and intimidate. Gun 'brandishing' (prominently displaying, waving, or otherwise drawing attention to the weapon) is a common form of intimidation, especially against women: 'He would take the gun out of his pocket and put it over there. It would be right in front of me. He didn't point it at me, he just let me know it was there'.[11] Globally, multiple, or 'family' murders (including of women and children) appear to be more common where guns are used in the home to intimidate and perpetrate intimate partner violence. A high percentage of these murders conclude with the suicide of the perpetrator.[12]

CHOICES AND ACTION

A common but unhelpful stereotype in analysis of armed violence identifies women as *victims* (often with children), while men are seen as violent *perpetrators*. Clearly, not all men are violent or pro-gun (just as not all women are naturally suited for conflict resolution), and research and policy attention is needed to better understand why many men and boys choose *not* to engage in gun violence. In order to improve the effectiveness of policies and programmes to prevent gun misuse, additional research is needed on those who seek to 'do the right thing' and avoid violent behaviours, as well as on the ways that women and girls may sustain, encourage, or commit gun violence.

1. Men, masculinities, and guns

Across cultures, the largest number of acts of violence are committed by men. This behaviour appears to be the product of society and history rather than biology: men's near monopoly of gun use can be seen as a manifestation of a lifetime's socialisation into violent expressions of manhood and cultures in which male gun use is regarded as the norm.[13]

In times of war, men and boys are actively encouraged and often coerced into taking up the roles of combatants. In countries characterised by violence, war, or high levels of gun possession, young men may use guns as part of a rite of passage from boyhood into manhood. Guns may also be positively associated with manhood in contexts where their use was valued and encouraged as part of a widely supported liberation movement, such as the AK-47 as a symbol of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa.[14] Even in peacetime, boys may be socialised into a familiarity and fascination with guns, or gun-like toys.[15] In the US, where boys are the most frequent victims of accidental shootings, studies show they neither learn to distinguish toy guns from real ones, nor can resist touching a gun if they find it by accident.[16] Research among young men involved in organised armed violence in ten countries finds that carrying guns is seen as an effective means of gaining status and respect.[17] Soldiers, snipers, other gun users, and armed male role models in television, film, and violent computer games are often cult heroes, with guns routinely glorified in the popular media.[18]

Men dominate both the formal security sectors of States, such as the military and police, as well as non-state armed groups, gangs, and militias.[19] It is also important to think about *which* men are most vulnerable to taking up arms. It is usually poor, marginalised men who take up badly paid and unprotected jobs in the informal security sector,[20] end up in armed gangs, and are recruited or volunteer to fight wars. From Boston to Bangkok, men are using guns 'in order to prove their masculinity, or to defend their masculine honour, or to challenge others'.[21]

In wartime, many men make significant efforts to stay out of the fighting and go to great lengths to protect their families. The number of combatants and people involved in violence has in fact been relatively low in recent conflicts. Even in settings where gang involvement by young people may be prevalent, the vast majority of young men do not participate in gang activities, and when interviewed,

A Liberian aid worker sits next to an educational poster aimed at preventing rape and violence against women, Monrovia (Liberia), 8 August 2003. © AP Photo/Ben Curtis

most young men in these settings say that they fear gangs and gang-related violence.[22] It is important to understand why *and* how large numbers of young men do not use arms and violence, and actively oppose such violence.

A number of promising programmes are being implemented to shift rigid and sometimes violent attitudes about being a man. 'Men As Partners' in South Africa[23] works in collaboration with the military, unions, and schools to engage men in alternative views about manhood, as does the Conscientizing Male Adolescents' project in Nigeria and the 'Program H' initiative in Latin America and India[24]. Another striking example is the 'White Ribbon Campaign'[25], started in Canada in the early 1990s after a man who had not been accepted into a graduate programme in Montreal entered a classroom and killed fourteen female students. The campaign—of men speaking out against violence against women—is now active in some 30 countries worldwide.

2. Women's multiple roles

Although much of their work goes unrecognised, women play multiple roles in times of war and unique roles in the aftermath. Though women have been largely excluded from formal security policy making, there are many examples of women working at the local level to build peace, prevent violence, and encourage disarmament all over the world. The US Million Mom March[26], the Israeli Women in Black[27], the Sierra Leonean Mano River Women's Peace Network[28], and the Bougainvillean Inter-Church Women's Forum are just a few examples.

> *"I realized how dangerous it was to have a gun in my home [after nearly pulling the trigger during a fight with her husband]. I hid it in the house and told my husband it was stolen from my car. This was before I heard about the Arms Exchange Programme – I heard about the weapons exchange and decided to get rid of it once and for all. Now I am not so scared".*[29]

In Brazil, by contrast, interviews with young women reveal how they can facilitate men's use of violence by hiding or transporting guns, drugs and money, ferrying messages to criminals in prison, or acting as a lookout for police or rival gangs. They also subscribe to the image that a gun-toting man is sexy and desirable: 'Sometimes guys will even borrow guns, just to walk around with them, to show off for the girls. . . . They use them because they know that pretty girls will go out with them'.[30] This is significant, given that in 2001, 24 young men in Rio de Janeiro city were killed with a gun for every one woman who died the same way.[31] One highly effective civil society effort to address the problem in the country resulted in the 2001 "Choose Gun Free! Its Your Weapon or Me" campaign, which aimed to encourage women not to condone male violence.

3. National gun laws and consequences for safety

Improving national gun laws can have important and positive consequences when analysed from a gender perspective. Following the world's largest peacetime massacre by a single gunman in May

1996, Australia's laws were harmonised and improved by mid-1998.[32] The resulting laws included a ban on the ownership of semi-automatic and pump-action rifles and shotguns, and clauses prohibiting civilians from owning a range of weapons. There was also a five-year minimum prohibition against owning guns for those who are subject to restraining orders or have been convicted of any violent offence. In some states, prohibitions of up to ten years are being issued. Registration of small arms was regarded as essential for police to be able to effectively remove weapons in situations of intimate partner violence and enforce prohibition orders.

The new law included a buy-back component that resulted in the collection and destruction of one-fifth of the entire national gun stockpile. As tools to murder both men and women, guns are now simply less available, a phenomenon that may also be contributing to a reduction in the overall homicide rates, as would-be killers substitute guns with other, less lethal, weapons.[33] From 1996 to 2001, the gun homicide rate for women dropped 65 per cent, compared to a 54 per cent drop for men. During the same period, the overall gun death rate for women (including suicides) dropped 56 per cent, compared to a 40 per cent reduction for men.[34]

4. Building gender-aware programmes

Policy analysts, researchers and programme planners often speak exclusively to men about finding solutions to security problems, from how to undertake disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) to the need to find alternatives to oppressive policing. Researchers and planners (who are themselves mainly men) often fail to consider the implications of both men and women's roles in fighting forces, do not design consultation processes to involve women, or do not recognise existing anti-violence activities usually led by women. The gender-blind approach has entrenched the misconceived notion that women have no interest in, knowledge about, or influence over attitudes to gun use and possession, or disarmament.

> *I know some [organisations] that deal with former combatant boys. They help to rehabilitate them, send them to school, help them to be engineers, teachers, whatever [they] want to be. They provide food, clothing, [and] medical facilities. But I don't know of any kind of rehabilitation centres for women. Most of the women only tell their friends [that they were combatants]. You hardly find women combatants saying that the government should try to help them.*
>
> —Agnes from Liberia[35]

Sierra Leone provides an example of the impacts of this failure. While the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) was initially praised as 'a success and a model for [a] robust and successful mandate that moved from peacekeeping to sustainable peace building', for 'a successful disarmament and demobilization programme', and for its ongoing work in reintegration, the mission is now known to have initially failed women and girls involved in fighting forces.[36] Determining who qualified to join the programme was a complex process, which UNAMSIL

tackled by collecting basic information from combatants that included identifying the person's commander, a test in which a weapon was dismantled and reassembled, and strict guidelines on what qualified as a weapon. Eligibility requirements almost guaranteed the exclusion of females, especially girls, who were rarely eligible for the 'one person, one weapon' approach. The results of this approach are difficult to assess because reliable figures are unavailable, but one estimate suggests that while at least 10,000 women are thought to have been associated with armed groups, of the 72,490 demobilised adult combatants, only 4,751 were women; and of the 6,787 children, a mere 506 (7.46 per cent) were girls.[37]

I felt powerful when I had a gun. As long as you are holding a gun, you have power over those who don't. It gave me more status and power.

—Girl who was a part of an armed group in Sierra Leone[38]

As in other places, Sierra Leonean women and girls associated with fighting forces report being forced to hand over their guns to their commanders and claim that these guns were then sold on to civilians who reaped the benefits, which included material support, retraining, and placement in reintegration programmes. The ease with which girls and women were intimidated was compounded by the fact that first-hand information often did not reach them. For the most part, the girls are now living on the streets in Freetown, and report high levels of drug and alcohol addiction, depression, frustration, and violent rage, which have also been directed at the authorities.[39]

In 2002, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan observed:

In order to be successful, DDR initiatives must be based on a concrete understanding of which combatants are women, men, girls, and boys. Recent analyses of DDR processes from a gender perspective have highlighted that women combatants are often invisible and their needs are overlooked.[40]

The Secretary-General has offered regular updates on how the UN is implementing its commitment to gender mainstreaming. Areas of progress include the appointment of ten full-time gender adviser positions in 17 peacekeeping operations and in the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), new standard operating procedures on DDR in which gender issues are taken into account, the development of more gender-sensitive approaches to early warning efforts, and a proposal to further advance gender-equitable participation in all aspects of the elections process.[41] Investment in training and institutional support would further help advance these processes.

The Department for Disarmament Affairs gender mainstreaming plan defines gender balance as 'a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs . . .'

—UN Department for Disarmament Affairs Gender Mainstreaming Plan[42]

RECOMMENDATIONS

Adopting a gender perspective to our understanding of the phenomenon of gun violence is crucial to designing and implementing strategies to reduce the widespread human security impacts it produces. We can no longer afford to remain in the dark about the complexities of how men and women view, use, and misuse guns, and how those attitudes and behaviours translate into risks and vulnerabilities. As the international community approaches the 2006 RevCon, States should make a number of bold and essential steps to mainstream gender considerations into small arms policymaking:

1. Fully meet existing international norms relating to gender and gun violence. There are numerous international standards that protect women's rights to equality, non-discrimination, and to protection against gender-based violence. International law places obligations on States to prevent and punish violence against women, and, where they fail to take adequate steps to do so, it may amount to a human rights violation, even when such violence is perpetrated by private actors. The prohibition of discrimination implies that women must be treated equally in all realms of social, political and economic life, and women's equal and full participation in decision-making concerning protection against gun violence is the surest means to ensure their concerns are addressed. (See Annex 4 for relevant instruments of international law)

2. DDR programmers and planners should give particular attention to Article 13 of Security Council Resolution 1325. It calls on 'all those involved in the planning for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration to consider the different needs of female and male ex-combatants and to take into account the needs of their dependants'. This call to action ranges from those who study DDR programmes to those who implement them, and additionally can include greater consideration of the gender composition of teams working on DDR processes for the UN and governments.

3. Direct attention to young men as a group particularly vulnerable to gun violence. Evidence clearly suggests that young men are exposed to a range of risks that can be mitigated at different levels by governments and NGO activity through targeted programming and early intervention to tap into positive, non-violent models of manhood. A small number of interventions have begun to work with young men to question some of the traditional norms related to manhood that may encourage various forms of violence, including use/ownership of firearms. In addition to educational opportunities and meaningful employment opportunities for low-income young men, there is also a need for gender-specific attention to how boys are raised and comprehensive efforts—involving governments, civil society, families, and communities—to promote non-violent models of manhood.

4. Restrict the acquisition of guns and ammunition by those who commit intimate partner or family violence. Standards are required to ensure that perpetrators of intimate partner violence—and those particularly at risk of perpetrating it—do not have access to guns. That means legal prohibitions on

gun ownership for abusers and that record keeping and other supporting mechanisms should be in place to enforce them. Law enforcement should have the authority and mandate to confiscate guns on the basis of likely threat, not prior conviction of intimate partner violence. International standards should be agreed to encourage such laws at a national level.

5. Train law enforcement officials to better understand the small arms issues related to the prevention of gender-based violence. Local law enforcement officers are often the first to respond to, and intervene in, instances of gender-based violence (including homophobic attacks). Police must therefore be trained to enforce laws such as prohibitions on the ownership of firearms. Law enforcement officers also need to be accountable for the safety and appropriate use of their own guns, particularly if such guns are not stored between shifts in police stations.

6. Include the perspectives of men and women in the development of policies to prevent gun violence. Male decision makers dominate research and policy on small arms control and violence prevention. States can develop mechanisms, such as panels, consultative committees, and recruitment processes to ensure that women (the suggested international minimum is 30 per cent) are involved in decision-making and other activities that inform security policies, such as changes to national gun laws, or disarmament and development activities. In addition, gauging the opinions of civil society actors, particularly women's organisations, is important given the low priority often accorded to their views and expertise.

7. Consolidate what is already known, identify gaps, and generate more information. Increasing our knowledge of the impacts of small arms (mis)use on men and women, and girls and boys and making it accessible is the most effective way to inform better policy. It is critical that this information be disaggregated by sex in order to develop the most accurate picture possible of quantitative impacts. Countries can include appropriate categories into existing information collection efforts. In addition, qualitative studies are also important to further investigate the roles of men and women in war, cultural norms about the demand for guns, and issues related to intimate partner violence. Those countries with capacity can consider supporting this type of action-oriented research and policy development.

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2 WHO (2002), *World Report on Violence and Health,* p. 25

3 In terms of gender, this trend is generally reflective of other forms of interpersonal violence as well. For example, studies show that boys are more likely than girls to carry guns to school, to have been in a fight, and to have witnessed violence outside the home. See WHO (2002), *World Report on Violence and Health*.

4 WHO (2002), pp. 274–275

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