

SDGs key to restoring women's role in African security issues?

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Although Africa has seen steady progress in terms of gender equality and women's empowerment, women are still underrepresented in functions related to security, disarmament and arms control.

The chairperson of the African Union Commission, Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, has cautioned against the slow implementation of instruments and policies to ensure gender equality on the continent.

She emphasised that 'if we continue at the current pace, we will have to wait another 80 years before we achieve true gender equality'.

The share of cabinet appointments in Africa by function from 2005-2015 shows that a mere 5% of African women cabinet ministers are in charge of law and order; and 4% are in defence and foreign affairs portfolios. This is very low compared to 51%, 25% and 14% in charge of social welfare, treasury and infrastructure, and administration portfolios respectively.

This can be linked to global patterns, with women remaining underrepresented in multilateral disarmament forums dedicated to weapons of mass destruction (WMD), conventional weapons, and a combination of the two.

Article 36, a London-based non-profit organisation found that between 2010 and 2014, the proportion of delegates who were women at forums related to WMD was 25%; and 22% at those related to conventional weapons. Women's

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leadership was also low – with the proportion of women-led delegations at 18% in WMD-related forums, and 14% at conventional weapons forums.



TWEET THIS

Women and men are differently affected by the trade, use and possession of weapons. A [first-of-a-kind report released in April this year](#) links risk assessment and the implementation of the UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (UNPoA) and the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) to the gendered impacts of the trade in arms.

The report highlights that ‘all conventional weapons can – and have been – used to inflict violence on people based on discriminating norms and practices relating to their specific sex or gender role in society’. [Studies also show](#) that the biological, psychological and social effects of the use of nuclear weapons affect women more than they do men. For example, the effects of the 1945 nuclear weapon attacks in Japan were such that ‘the risk of developing and dying from solid cancer due to ionizing radiation exposure was nearly twice as high for women as for men’.

United Nations (UN) [Security Council and General Assembly resolutions](#) have expressly recognised the valuable contribution of women to international peace, security, disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation. The nexus between gender equality and the women, peace and security agenda is in itself valuable. However, much more can and should be achieved in this regard in the African context; specifically by linking these themes closely with sustainable development.

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The UN [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which came into force on 1 January 2016, are a valuable vehicle for strengthening the links between these key issues. Compared to the previous Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the SDGs have widened the scope for the women, peace and security agenda.

[SDG 5 is aimed at achieving gender equality](#) in all spheres of life, empowering all women and girls and ending all forms of discrimination against them. These gender targets – particularly the need to ‘ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making in political, economic and public life’ – are broader and more ambitious than those of the MDGs.

The inclusion of [SDG 16, which speaks to matters of peace, security and justice](#) within the framework of development, has given new impetus to the role of disarmament and arms control as factors that contribute to sustainable development. The targets include the need to promote the rule of law and ensure equal access to justice for all, as well as to ‘significantly reduce illicit ... arms flows... combat all forms of organised crime; and strengthen relevant national institutions...

in particular in developing countries, to prevent violence and combat terrorism and crime’.

Working towards SDG 5 and 16 would reinforce current global, regional and national efforts that aim to close the gap in gender, peace, security and sustainable development. The UNPoA and the ATT are noteworthy examples in this endeavour.

The UNPoA, a framework document, was adopted in 2001. Its preamble notes that ‘small arms and light weapons ... have a wide range of humanitarian and socio-economic consequences and pose a serious threat to peace, reconciliation, safety, security, stability and sustainable development at all levels’. States emphasised the need to **facilitate women’s participation and representation** in the policymaking, planning and implementation processes of the UNPoA. Women’s access to training would contribute to enhancing their role under the framework.

The ATT is a legally binding instrument that obliges states to prevent the flow of arms and related items if such arms are likely to facilitate human rights abuses, war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity in the recipient country. It is the first international treaty to directly acknowledge the link between **gender-based violence** and the international arms trade.

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As states put the SDGs into practice, it will be increasingly necessary to promote the full, equal and effective participation of women in all processes and at all levels. Much is anticipated from African countries, particularly those in West, Central and Southern African that have identified gender equality and empowerment as key sub-regional priorities.

All African countries should pay close attention to areas of development with sluggish progress, including the role of women in peace and security matters. While the MDGs helped states to make progress, far more will need to be done in order to achieve full sustainable development by 2030.

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This ISS Today forms part of a series on gender and security. Also in the series:

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