**Introduction**

Despite being disproportionately impacted by violence and conflict, women have been—and continue to be—underrepresented in nearly every area of the United Nations small arms process. Though women are sometimes directly involved, such as in peace talks, they are almost always outnumbered by men. Since women are one of the demographics most severely affected by armed conflict, it is imperative that they be included in all planning, implementation, and evaluation of processes related to small arms and light weapons (SALW).

This paper examines the direct and indirect impacts of gun violence on women and explains why it is crucial that women be equally included in all decision making, implementation, and evaluation against the proliferation and misuse of SALW. Additionally, it illustrates the evolving language and attitudes regarding women’s participation in the UN small arms process. Finally, the paper identifies existing limitations and makes recommendations for increasing the scope of women’s inclusion and participation in global action against gun violence.

Above all, this paper will demonstrate that in order to attain peace and security, the comprehensive participation of women at all levels must be backed up by norms, political will, and concrete actions.

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**Impacts of Gun Violence and Conflict on Women**

“Although entire communities suffer the consequences of armed conflict, women and girls are particularly affected because of their status in society and their sex.”

In war, order and stability disintegrates—families are torn apart, men, women, and sometimes even children are drawn into combat; people are displaced, homes may be destroyed and women are left particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. It is estimated that 90 percent of current war casualties are civilians, the majority of whom are women and children. In a world where civilians are increasingly the primary targets of war, this bodes poorly for the treatment and rights of women.

Regardless of the context where occurs, violence against women is exacerbated and facilitated by the presence of guns and other SALW. The current number of firearms in the world exceeds 875 million and will continue to increase. In conflict, SALW are involved in the majority of deaths as well as human rights violations. While not unique to conflicts, the consequences of SALW proliferation include murder, intimidation, rape, torture, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, threats and humiliation, forced prostitution, and trafficking of women and girls.

In addition to direct gun violence, sexual assault has been systematized as a war strategy, deployed to terrorize civilian communities. Sexual violence at gunpoint is a threat for every woman, but it is especially common in conflict situations. During the Yugoslav Wars, for example, more than 20,000 women were raped as a deliberate policy of warfare. To keep girls safe and off the streets in conflict-ridden environments, it is common for parents to take them out of...
The link between SALW and violence against women is not only evident in times of war. Although Brazil is not in a state of conflict, homicide rates are the same as those in war-torn countries and a woman is assaulted every 15 seconds. Female victims who filed complaints at Rio de Janeiro’s Special Police Station for Crimes Against Women (DEAMS), answered a questionnaire on different forms of violence. The findings showed that of the 615 women who responded to the questionnaire, 86 percent knew their perpetrators and 68 percent said they were threatened with firearms. Even in less violent areas, the guns constitute a serious hazard. In a situation of domestic abuse, a woman is five times more likely to be killed by her partner if a gun is present.

Disoriented and Displaced

The UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has noted that refugee flows are now primarily driven by armed conflict and violence. For women in dire situations, being a refugee doesn’t just mean leaving home; it also means fear, lack of access to health services, and the risks of malnutrition and exploitation.

“The population movements and breakdown of social controls engendered by armed conflict encourage, in their turn, rape and prostitution as well as sexual slavery to serve combatants. Unwanted pregnancies and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, particularly HIV/AIDS, are the collateral physical effects of this human degradation.”

At least 75 percent of displaced people are women and children, and, in some refugee populations, they comprise 90 percent. Upon losing a husband, father, or son to armed conflict or gun violence, women’s lives are instantly changed and marked by grief, stress, and often a struggle for basic needs. With few options in their flight from armed violence, women are left to navigate life in refugee camps on their own (often with young, elderly, or disabled family members in their care). In these camps, they are extremely vulnerable to violence and exploitation. Rather than having to use the same restrooms and showers as men, many women and girls report avoiding eating or drinking for days on end. Armed violence – and the resulting chaos – make it seem as if nowhere is safe.

Women as Stakeholders

“...Only a new era of international cooperation among governments and peoples based on a spirit of partnership, an equitable, international social and economic environment, and a radical transformation of the relationship between women and men to one of full and equal partnership will enable the world to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.” - Beijing Platform for Action

Because women are uniquely impacted by gun violence, they must be significantly included in the search for solutions. As stakeholders profoundly affected by the havoc wreaked by SALW, they are entitled to equal and adequate representation within all levels of decision making, implementation, and evaluation. This has positive implications for peace, development, and the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Studies have shown that, “when it comes to solving complex problems through innovative solutions,” such as addressing the proliferation of SALW, “a diverse group of competent performers almost always outperforms a homogenous group by quite a large margin.”

The importance of viewing women as stakeholders rather than just as victims or passive beneficiaries has been brought into the mainstream over the years through momentous occasions, such as the World Conferences on Women (particularly that of Beijing in 1995) and the Convention on

9 “War hits home when it hits women and girls.” UNICEF. https://www.unicef.org/graca/women.htm
15 “War hits home when it hits women and girls.” UNICEF, op cit
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979. UN Women (created in 2011, and now the centralized UN agency for all women’s issues), has also served as an effective mechanism to raise women’s voices within the UN system. UN Women is the Secretariat of the Commission on the Status of Women, a body that has tirelessly advocated for more leadership roles for women in the field of peace and conflict. In 2010, Trinidad and Tobago introduced the first General Assembly resolution on the topic of women and disarmament, and resolutions on the topic have been adopted in most years since then.

Finally, all seven of the UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCRs) on Women, Peace, and Security have played instrumental roles in creating a framework to address the disproportionate and unique impacts of armed violence and conflict on women. From UNSCR 1325 in 2000 to UNSCR 2122 in 2013, it has grown increasingly apparent that the unique challenges and needs of women in times of crisis can only be adequately addressed through their comprehensive involvement at all levels.

Despite these developments, progress is slow, as shown in this infographic by UN Women:

These findings are consistent with many studies on gender, representation, and policy making. For example, a 2017 study of 500 leaders in US foreign policy found that 80% were men. Additionally, “only 28 percent of male national security experts considered gender equality an important foreign-policy goal—compared to 45 percent of women.”

However, there is hope. The ceasefire negotiations between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) were the first of their kind to include a gender subcommittee. Composed of members from both parties, the subcommittee’s goal was to make sure that the peace agreement adequately addressed the gender-specific impacts of the conflict. By calling for the comprehensive inclusion of Colombian women in decision making on issues like sexual violence and land-based conflicts, it set a long-needed precedent for peace negotiations worldwide.

In adopting the Women, Peace, and Security Act, the majority of the US House of Representatives recognized that, “from negotiating a peace agreement in Syria to combating the spread of ISIS, women’s inclusion must be a core priority.”

Implementation

“...Women in situations of armed conflict and post-conflict situations continue to be often considered as victims and not as actors in addressing and resolving situations of armed conflict and stressing the need to focus not only on protection of women but also on their empowerment in peacebuilding.” - UNSCR 1889

While the inclusion of women in all decision-making processes is indeed necessary for sustainable peace, it is crucial to also acknowledge the

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https://www.fes.de/internet/gender/beijing/chapter1.html
23 “Conflict Prevention and Resolution.” UN Women. 
24 The most recent resolution was A/RES/71/56 adopted ion December 2016.
28 Ibid.
29 Fawcett Society. “'There is no peace without women!: Gender and the Colombian peace process.” Fawcett Society. 
https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/blog/no-peace-without-women-gender-columbian-peace-process
30 Ibid.
impact of gender-inclusive implementation.

Currently, women are vastly underrepresented in global peacekeeping forces, and even more so in national forces. A 2016 study on revealed that women constituted only 3 percent of military peacekeepers and 9 percent of the police force. This is despite the evidence that increasing the number of women in security forces has a positive effect on achieving stability, reducing corruption, building trust between citizens and law enforcement, and preventing radicalization. Furthermore, women’s unique experiences allow them to address the gendered aspects of violence: data from 40 countries show a positive correlation between the proportion of female police and increased reporting rates of sexual assault.

Increasing the number of women in security and peacekeeping forces decreases the chance that women and children in the communities will suffer from violence, but the increase must be substantial. The presence of a small handful of women in any institution is insufficient, as marginalization or competition can inhibit progress. Experts theorize that true institutional change can only occur once the rate of representation reaches a critical mass of 20-30%. Reaching this critical mass in national, regional, and international security forces would profoundly impact peace and security, and would undoubtedly address the gendered dimensions of SALW proliferation and violence.

Evaluation

Positive change in women’s representation cannot occur without adequate reporting procedures and review processes. One such example can be found in the national reporting apparatus for the implementation of the Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (PoA).

Programme of Action

Unanimously adopted by UN Member States in 2001, the PoA is a politically binding instrument setting out actions to counter the illicit trade, misuse, and proliferation of SALW. By signing onto this framework, states commit to a long list of steps that include “developing, adopting and strengthening SALW national legislation, SALW transfer controls, destruction of weapons that are confiscated, seized, or collected, as well as fostering international cooperation and assistance with a view to strengthening the ability of states to identify and trace illicit arms and light weapons.” A companion agreement, the International Tracing Instrument (ITI) was adopted in 2005. In order to review the progress made in PoA implementation, four types of conferences are held under the auspices of the UN General Assembly:

1. UN General Assembly First Committee on Disarmament (annual)
2. Biennial Meeting of States (every two years)
3. Review Conference of the PoA (every six years)
4. Meetings of Government Experts (occasionally)

UN General Assembly First Committee on Disarmament: Each October, Member States, together with civil society, assemble at UN Headquarters to discuss the implementation of the PoA and other related instruments by making statements and voting on resolutions. The statements delivered in each session express the priorities and concerns of national government and regional groupings, and the votes provide a strong indication of the extent to which states are committed to topics in question. Although the resolutions voted on are not legally binding, they have a normative dimension; “that is, they can indicate the establishment of customs, standards, and guidelines for appropriate behavior.” This creation of norms is especially important when dealing with a topic like women’s representation in SALW control efforts, because gender is so inextricably bound up in cultural standards. The First Committee statements are interesting in this regard, as they “reveal important fault lines in the disarmament debate that impede progress in... peace and security”, such as how women are viewed within this field.

Biennial Meetings of States: Established by the text of the PoA, Biennial Meetings of States are convened every two years to report on implementation of the agreement. Through this conference, states can reinforce their
commitments to curbing the illicit trade and misuse of SALW, identify ways to increase political will, and negotiate more technical matters, such as resource allocation. In addition to issuing statements in the sessions, countries are provided with a reporting template and are encouraged to routinely submit an account of the measures that have been taken nationally to implement the PoA. Though not all countries submit reports and the reporting template itself needs to be expanded, these meetings have a large role to play in the creation and evolution of international norms.

**Review Conference:** Through this conference, representatives from Member States, international organizations, and civil society are able to jointly review progress on the PoA’s implementation, identify current barriers, and provide recommendations for improvement. Similar to First Committee discussions and Biennial Meetings of States, delegates issue statements and reports reflecting their own countries’ priorities and actions. What distinguishes a Review Conference from the other two evaluation mechanisms is the fact that at the Review Conference, Member States are able to alter the text of the PoA itself—though no alteration was made at the First (2006) or Second (2012) Review Conference.

**Meetings of Government Experts:** Open-ended Meetings of Governmental Experts (MGE) on the Implementation of the PoA are occasionally convened in New York. The purpose is to address key implementation challenges and opportunities relating to particular issues and themes, including international cooperation and assistance, marking and record-keeping, cooperation in tracing, national frameworks, regional cooperation, and capacity-building. The U.N. Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) provides support on substantive issues with the assistance of expert technical presentations. The 2012 Review Conference provided a six-year roadmap for meetings under the PoA-SALW and the ITI, including the Second Meeting of Governmental Experts (MGE2) in 2015.

Other than the general rules of diplomatic language, there is no standard template for statements in meetings on the implementation of the PoA. In this regard, states are able to freely promote issues that they deem important, such as the equal engagement of women in the UN small arms process. By contrast, the written national and regional reports submitted in advance of the Biennial Meetings of States are quite different. States are encouraged to fill out a specific template covering a list of measures taken to curb the illicit trade and misuse of SALW. Nowhere however, are the gendered dimensions of SALW proliferation addressed; neither in planning, implementation, or evaluation. If there are no indicators for women’s involvement in the campaign against armed violence, how can states be held accountable? A handful of countries have included issues of gender within their responses, but they are the exception. The lack of gender-specific indicators within the PoA reporting apparatus is detrimental to inclusion, and therefore to peace and security.

The absence of gender from the PoA reporting procedures reflects a gap in the PoA itself. The 2001 consensus text did not consider women as stakeholders. In the entire Programme of Action, women are only mentioned once:

“We, the States, ... Gravely concerned about its devastating consequences on children... as well as the negative impact on women and the elderly... Resolve therefore to prevent, combat and eradicate the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons in all its aspects” - Programme of Action, Art I, Paragraph 6 (2001)

While it has been borne out in many studies that women suffer greatly from the havoc wreaked on communities by the spread and use of SALW, this passage institutionalizes their lack of agency. Instead of being viewed as stakeholders, they are regarded as victims alongside children and the elderly. While progress has been made over the years and countries have found ways to get past the inadequate reporting procedures for women’s participation, substantial change will require the evaluation mechanisms, in accordance with planning and implementation, to reflect the critical importance of equal representation and inclusion.

**Women in Disarmament Discourse**

Over time, it is evident that women have been increasingly viewed as stakeholders with an important role to play in efforts against the proliferation of SALW. The number of states that have only mentioned women as victims of SALW has decreased slightly, but that is compensated for by the overwhelming swell in gender-inclusive language. This suggests evolution of norms on women’s inclusion over time. These norms directly affect political will on the part of Member States, but political will has its limits. It is imperative that Member States’ language not be empty rhetoric—their statements and commitments must be backed up with action.

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48 "Reporting Template." [http://www.poa-iss.org/Poa/poa.aspx](http://www.poa-iss.org/Poa/poa.aspx)
Recommendations

Despite progress that has been made, it is clear that much remains to be done. For the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, particularly SDG 5 on Women and SDG 16 on Peace and Security, women must be comprehensively involved in the UN small arms process at all levels. To this end, it is necessary to “include women as equal stakeholders in policy making, decision making, programming and budgeting of small arms-related activities and processes – as well as in DDR planning and in national legislation – so as to ensure that gender specific needs, perspectives, and experiences are fully addressed.”

These actions can and should be taken by the UN system, Member States, and Civil Society:

1. In order to collect more data on how gender interacts with SALW, there needs to be more funding and training for studies that produce gender-disaggregated data and more thorough styles of data collection/analysis.

2. To maximize progress at the local level, arms- and gender-based organizations should be united under National Action Plans on SALW and UNSCR 1325.

3. Reports on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development should take disarmament and SALW control measures into account.

4. Indicators relating to gender in all reporting mechanisms for the PoA are required. Without adequate evaluation processes, states are not held accountable.

All of these recommendations fall under the umbrella of treating women as stakeholders, not just victims or passive beneficiaries. The propagation of this norm would also have positive external effects on language pertaining to other disenfranchised groups and on implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Conclusion

As the third Review Conference on the PoA approaches, it is more important than ever to push for equal representation and participation in the campaign against the proliferation of SALW. If backed by changing norms, strong political will, and concrete actions on behalf of the international community, nothing is impossible.

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