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Measuring the impacts of small arms on war zone and post-conflict societies

PEACEBUILDING

BY VANESSA FARR

women, men and the

# struggle to disarm<sup>1</sup>

**O**ver the past few decades, Africa has seen a growth in the number of internal conflicts, involving members of different ethnic, religious or political groupings within one country, which sometimes spill over into cross-national clashes across borders. In these wars, increasing numbers of civilians are caught up in the fighting, internally displaced into unsafe areas, or forced to flee their country altogether.

The gendered effects of these wars are significant. Not only do levels of gender-based violence increase in public spaces, but those who are traumatised by war and then demobilised frequently carry on the fight inside their own homes, turning the violence they have witnessed or perpetrated inwards and expressing their rage and pain in

attacks on those who are nearest to them. As Thandi Modise, Deputy President of the African National Congress in South Africa has stated, the “clichéd definition of not being at war” has little relevance for women and children in many conflict and post-conflict zones. “In South Africa today,” she observes, “there is increasing domestic violence, an increase in child abuse. So we cannot say South Africa is at peace.”<sup>2</sup>

Small arms and light weapons (SALW), because of their widespread availability, mobility and ease of use, play a central role in wartime and then maintain social dislocation, destabilisation, insecurity and crime in the aftermath. One means to counter their effect is to increase understanding of the role played by prolific small weapons in rein-

forcing and maintaining gender-specific expressions of violence before, during and after conflict.

## How Small Arms Disrupt Traditional Gender Roles

The chaos and instability brought about by the large-scale forced movement of civilians has caused unprecedented levels of social disruption. Modern wars take place everywhere, and increasingly, the civilian sphere in which women, children and the elderly live has been expressly targeted for violation. Even if people use traditional methods of indicating their neutrality or vulnerability such as waving a white flag or taking refuge in a church, they are not immune from attack. What people used to think of as safe spaces are violated: girls and boys are routinely kidnapped from schools to join irregular forces, and women are robbed, raped, or abducted as they try to do their work in the fields or marketplaces.

Small arms, which are both lightweight and easy to use, facilitate this encroachment on civilian space. Easily accessed lethal weapons mean that women and children are more vulnerable to attack, but also, that they are being drawn into conflicts in new ways. With easy-to-use weapons in their hands, they are becoming skilled members of militarised forces and participate actively in the violence of war. These 'non-traditional' fighters are a threat to deeply entrenched traditions about how, and by whom, wars are waged. When women and children are involved as fighters, the reactions are shock and horror. And for the people in humanitarian and relief agencies who plan and manage disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) processes at the end of a war, working with these unconventional combatants can present a logistical nightmare.

Contemporary wars, then, have given rise to a large-scale destabilisation of social and cultural constructs about warfare itself. In particular, the ways in which modern armed conflict is waged, particularly because of ready access to small weapons, have affected traditions that maintain power relations between the sexes and contribute to the formation of male and female identity.

## Gendered Differences in Attitudes to SALW

Traditionally, women are thought of as hating guns

and men as being fascinated by them. In some African cultures, it is taboo for women to know anything about arms or to touch weapons of any kind, while men have to know about and bear arms to prove that they are adults in that community. This is changing, however. In wars that are being waged in Africa today, many of the guns in circulation are easy-to-use, lightweight and durable, so that armed women and children can kill with as much ease and proficiency as men. Sometimes, warlords will deliberately use women and children to fight because they want to take advantage of the shock of being attacked by someone people think of as 'vulnerable'. Using women and children as fighters breaks down cultures and traditions of care and protection and destabilises communities in terrifying ways: it is a kind of psychological warfare that leaves very deep scars.

One of the challenges facing researchers and aid workers who try to clean up the mess of war is that there is not enough knowledge about the ways in which the use of accessible SALW rely on, as well as transform, the gender ideologies of a society under attack. The humanitarian impacts of small arms are being studied, but until recently, there has been too little awareness of the need to consider, identify and articulate how men and women are differently affected by their misuse.

Even though few formal studies have been presented on this problem, stories from the field suggest that women, men and children do not have equal access to SALW and are differently impacted by their misuse both during and after conflict; and there are many debates about whether women, men and children have different attitudes to the widespread presence of guns. Since the effects of small arms misuse are so widespread, special care has to be taken to document different perspectives on the problem. Otherwise it will be difficult to develop better means to improve human security by curtailing the effects of the millions of small arms currently in circulation.

## SALW and the 'Continuum of Violence'

One place to start this work is to acknowledge that a

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characteristic of war, which frequently continues in the aftermath, is to violently disrupt political, social and cultural traditions. This destruction of values always has particular implications for gender relations. Small arms play a significant part in the process of social destruction, and their continued presence has a profound impact on how a society reshapes itself after conflict. Yet, to date, international attention has focused quite narrowly on where weapons are coming from and whether they are legally owned rather than the political dimensions of the small arms trade. There has also been a tendency to characterise the problem of small arms as one which results from 'illicit' or 'criminal' activity. Such thinking does not help develop meaningful actions to tackle the effects of

these weapons and the structural violence in which they are embedded.

From a gender perspective, a shift in attitude to the impact of small arms and light weapons, whether they are legitimately owned and subject to gun laws or not, is long overdue. For many years, gender researchers have refused to understand violence in a fragmented way. They are not interested in arguing that there is a difference between violence that occurs in the domestic sphere in 'peace time' and violence that happens in times of war. They also do not think it matters whether women are abused at the point of a weapon that is legally owned or one that is not. Instead, they want to highlight the fact that violence is not private and individualised, but socially and structurally produced by political

systems that put men in positions of dominance over women and maintain the status quo through aggression. From the researchers' perspective, an exclusive focus on the high levels of political violence which occur in and after a war, or on the technical problems posed by weapons proliferation, can hide the effects of other violence such as domestic abuse that is often socially sanctioned, predating war and continuing in peacetime.

Most wars do not aim for social transformation; so after a war ends, there is little sense in hoping people will suddenly change. Those who think violence is an appropriate response to conflict or stress are more likely to carry that attitude forward, especially when the society they live in does not make an effort to change its traditions to embrace peace. As a result, women's bodies may become the 'shock absorbers' of the social breakdown that results from war. South Africa is a prime example of how, long after a war has officially come to an end, women suffer terrible abuse. Easily available guns, and social attitudes that tolerate gun ownership and use, are also contributors to women's insecurity in a post-war situation.

This is one reason why gender-aware research on the impacts of small arms proliferation is so important: through it, it should be possible to trace the links between 'everyday' violence and the 'unspeakable' extremes of violence seen in conflict situations. These links are supported, to a large extent, by gender ideologies which promote and glorify male superiority and condone male aggression towards women and children. Gender-aware peace researchers are challenging ideologies which preserve and support the continuation of violence in all societies - those which are caught up in violent conflict as well as those that are supposedly 'at peace'.

An approach to human security which is interested in investigating the meaning of gender-based violence in different social contexts is helpful for research on the effects of prolific small arms and light weapons. In recent years, a small number of gender-disaggregated studies of firearm-related violence, produced mostly in high-income countries in the North, have shown that women and children are far more likely to be harmed by firearms in countries where guns are seen as necessary commodities than in places where they are

strictly controlled. Showing that guns are particularly dangerous if they are kept at home, these studies prove that many popular ideas about what guns can do are really myths. In violent societies, large numbers of guns support expressions of violent masculinity.

In a study in South Africa, researchers found that men who kill their female partners are not seen as having committed an unthinkable act. Instead, other men were able to understand, if not actually forgive, the idea that a man should feel provoked to murder his female intimate. In some instances, the fact that he had become uncontrollably angry with a woman even gained him sympathy. Frighteningly, legal officers were among those who believed it was appropriate for a man to be driven to murder if he thought this wife had been unfaithful. They saw a violent response as understandable in such circumstances, and gave lenient sentences in support of this belief.<sup>3</sup>

Attitudes such as this condone violence against women, and can only be overcome by activism that is based on carefully documented evidence about how firearms impact on women's lives. In particular, accurate statistics need to be gathered to develop new, far-reaching legislation. This is particularly significant in Africa, because many countries still do not have effective domestic gun control laws. That they need to be upgraded within terms that are gender-aware and responsive to the particular needs of women is essential for the peaceful development of the region.

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### **What Women Think of Small Arms and Light Weapons**

Globally, while far more men than women die at the point of a gun, the easy availability of SALW plays a powerful role in maintaining male dominance and facilitates the perpetration of violence against women in conflict zones. It is not useful, however, to consider the impact of weapons proliferation on women in terms which portray women as victims and men as perpetrators. Instead, the

complex ways in which the widespread presence of guns and other light weapons support ideologies of masculinity and femininity have to be analysed.

In many societies, bearing arms carries a significant cultural meaning. It is seen as a right and is interwoven with social rituals such as a young man's coming of age. Women's 'proper' role, in such societies, is to support men's right to carry a weapon; but very few observers have commented on how important it is that women play a cultural role in normalising gun ownership. In some societies, such as the cattle-raiding Karamojong of Uganda, women actively encourage men to use arms in raids as their increased success improves the economic position of the family unit.<sup>4</sup> In countries like South Africa, even though "research shows that the gun women, and by association children, most need to fear, is the one owned by their husband, boyfriend, or father," some women are helping normalise the increase in privately-owned weapons by upholding the belief that their male partner needs a gun to protect them.<sup>5</sup>

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Such attitudes show us that women cannot always be characterised as innately peace-loving and fundamentally opposed to the presence and use of arms. Women's responses to weapons, like those of men, are complex: this is why it is important to improve the knowledge of how women are drawn into the proliferation and normalisation of firearms and gun-related violence, and how they internalise and carry out their supportive role in gun-dominated societies.

By insisting on initiatives to understand the complexity of women's relationships to small arms, peace activists can pay more attention to what women are doing to reduce the impact of such weapons. While some women will choose to support arms proliferation, others may play key roles in resistance. This is especially true since it is women who bear the brunt of domestic violence, and women who understand that the presence of firearms increases the likelihood that they might die at the hands of their husbands, lovers, fathers, brothers or sons. Women activists often play leading

roles in civil society initiatives to build peace. They support efforts to control firearms, work as volunteer counsellors to assist victims of gun violence, create grassroots community initiatives to help protect children in gang-infested areas, or even run informal witness protection programmes in places where official police support is limited. In most countries, it is women who bear the major burden of caring for those who are injured or disabled by gunfire. Recognising that children are often involved in gun violence, either intentionally or by accident, women are often at the forefront of firearm education initiatives aimed at youth.

### The Need for Practical Strategies

The rhetoric of 'gender mainstreaming' has permeated international agreements in recent years, but practical strategies for ensuring that the needs of women and men receive equal attention have been more difficult to implement. The pervasiveness of small arms and light weapons, their ease of use, and their lethal impact on everyone from combatants to innocent passers-by makes this problem, however, an ideal platform from which to institute gender-aware policy, research and activism.

The Beijing Platform of Action, the Windhoek Declaration and Resolution 1325 offer formal avenues through which to hold governments and international agencies responsible for tackling gender-based violence perpetrated with small arms.<sup>6</sup> These resources support policy and legal reform as well as providing strong platforms for consciousness-raising and other forms of social and political activism. The documents are not powerful, however, if there is no political will to insist that gender differences must be taken into account in any work that is done to contain SALW.

### The Challenges Ahead

A greater commitment to gathering sex-disaggregated data on the effects of small arms is essential: without it, there is little chance of overcoming the silence about who bears the real costs of light weapons proliferation. However, it is not easy to do this work in recent war zones because data collection on firearm-related violence is frequently haphazard, hand-collated for the purposes of regional but not national statistics, and otherwise unsystematic.<sup>7</sup>

Often, officials do not want to answer questions about firearms-related violence and resist talking about attacks on women. As a result of social taboos and unsympathetic security and legal systems, both women and men refuse to speak about sexual violence so it is difficult to collect accurate statistics on how bad things really are.

What this lack of information suggests is that civil society organisations involved in gun control should make a particular effort to develop awareness-raising and training models through which to institute a new culture of data collection. They must emphasise that information on the sex of both the victims and the perpetrators of firearm violence must be gathered. Governments and local authorities must be lobbied to standardise data-collection, because recording and analysing these figures is arguably the most important first step in challenging the indifference and denial which currently attend cases of gender-based violence that are facilitated by the use of a gun.

There is a need to provide a clear picture of the difficulties that women face when guns are pervasive, when people believe a man without a weapon is not a man, and when most crimes are reported, judged and punished by men. Only with proper information about the effects of pervasive small arms will it be possible to convince opinion leaders, policy makers and the general public that easily available guns are especially dangerous to women, decrease their options and freedom of choice, and deny them the right to lead a safe and full life. Such information will also contribute to the understanding of the ways in which dangerous images of masculinity are upheld in violent societies, and play an important part in reinforcing on-going activism to encourage positive expressions of male identity. ♀

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## Endnotes

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- 1 A longer version of this paper has been published as 'Men, women and guns: Understanding how gender ideologies support small arms and light weapons proliferation', *BICC Conversion Survey 2003: Global Disarmament, Demilitarization and Demobilization*, Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2003, pp 120-133.
- 2 Vanessa Farr, 'How do we know we are at peace? Reflections on the Aftermath Conference', *Agenda*, vol 43, 2000; Robert Muggah and Martin Griffiths, *Reconsidering the Tools of War: Small Arms and Humanitarian Action*, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2002.
- 3 Lisa Vetten, 'Man Shoots Wife': Intimate Femicide in Gauteng South Africa', *Crime and Conflict*, vol 6, 1996.
- 4 See Vanessa Farr and Kiflemarion Gebre-Wold, eds. *Gender Perspectives on Small Arms and Light Weapons: Regional and International Concerns*. BICC Brief 24. Bonn: Bonn International Center for Conversion, 2002.
- 5 Adele Kirsten, Press Release, Gun Free South Africa, 2002 p 35.
- 6 <http://www.undp.org/fwcw/plat.htm>;  
[http://www.reliefweb.int/library/GHARKit/FilesFeb2001/windhoek\\_declaration.htm](http://www.reliefweb.int/library/GHARKit/FilesFeb2001/windhoek_declaration.htm);  
[http://www.un.org/events/res\\_1325e.pdf](http://www.un.org/events/res_1325e.pdf).
- 7 Katharine McKenzie, *Domestic Gun Control Policy in Ten SADC Countries*, Johannesburg: Gun Free South Africa, 1999.