

Sexual violence and the use of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) are among the most severe hardships for women in conflict and post-conflict contexts. The risk of being exposed to rape or armed violence is an all too common impediment in women's daily life activities. The Eastern African Sub-regional Support Initiative for the Advancement of Women, working in eight countries in Africa, advocates the inclusion of the human security aspect in the discussions on gender and SALW.

Gender and violence:

Small arms – a human security issue

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They march and chant in unison. Women, all dressed in black from head to toe. Their head ties all the same. Black polythene bags. These black polythene bags are a sign of rape. The same uniform on 99 per cent of the marchers. The day is hot and dusty but the demonstrators are energetic, angry and passionate. I am one of them. I am donning a black T-shirt. On the back, the words 'Komesha ubakaji' – Kiswahili for 'Stop the Rapes' – and on the front, 'Mimi, wewe, sisi sote tukomeshe ubakaji', 'You and I, all of us can stop the rapes'.

We were in Rutshuru, Goma, in North Kivu Province of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in December 2010, where women from the Great Lakes region held a peaceful walk condemning the increase in mass rapes in the country. The women drawn from Kenya, Burundi, Rwanda and Sierra Leone joined their female counterparts in Congo to urge the government to combat the culture of impunity and end the sexual violence. More than 2,000 women marched along the Rutshuru roads, waving placards bearing anti-rape messages. According to a Human Rights Watch report released that year, 10 victims of sexual violence are reported daily in Bukavu hospital in South Kivu and at least 16,000 cases of fistula have been reported since 2000. Over 200 girls and women were attacked, raped and defiled recently in Rutshuru. As we marched, young men sat idly by the roadside and called out derogatorily, 'Do you want to be raped?'

The women presented petition requests to the DRC government that include a commitment to strengthen

the implementation of the Sexual and Gender Based Violence law that sets a penalty of 25 years for the perpetrators. They also called upon the National Assembly to enact laws and ensure that women are incorporated in the post-conflict peacebuilding of their country.

"The law should be protecting us", the women chanted as they marched on the streets. For 32-year old Justine Ritondeyeubusa, a normal day, fending for her family, turned out to be the most traumatic day to-date. While on her farm last year, harvesting beans at noon, a group of five armed men ambushed her, dragged her to the heart of the forest where they repeatedly raped

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her until the next morning, leaving her for dead. Today, she would rather stay indoors and wait for her husband to risk his life on their farm, which is in the mountainous Rutshuru area where rebels reside. "There is a lot of food on my farm but I cannot go out, because I fear I will be raped again", Justine says. She was in hospital for eight months undergoing reconstructive surgery to her reproductive organs that were badly

bruised. Her hip was also dislocated from the rape experience.

Mr Camara Sinduvasi, 50, was the only man in the procession and joined the women in condemning rape cases that have become prevalent in the North Kivu province. Tens of thousands of women and girls in the DRC have become victims of sexual violence over the past fifteen years.

Small arms linked with women's rights

But how is this linked to small arms and light weapons (SALW) and what is the significance of Mr Camara as the lone supporter of the women in the march?

Guns such as small arms and light weapons have rarely been associated with women's rights. Guns are considered a masculine thing and so women just do not come into it. However, the impact of armed violence on women should not be underestimated – women are often targets of certain types of violence involving small arms, particularly domestic violence and rape. Gender is relevant to the discussion of small arms, since a disproportionate percentage of the owners and users of small arms are men, both in conflict and non-conflict situations (Cukier, 2000)¹. In most countries of the world, women make up at least half of the population. Because of this, it is important to include women in arms control and disarmament initiatives simply as a matter of democratising peace and security processes. It is also a progressive move towards gender equality, and a sign of commitment towards inclusive development processes.

Gender based violence is used as a deliberate and strategic weapon in warfare between different parties in many conflict settings around the world. By causing as much humiliation as possible, often directly in front of the husband and children, the perpetrators spread fear and chaos. In the majority of cases the perpetrators are men. Hence, no men joined our march apart from the lone man who was brave enough to stand up and be counted, because he had witnessed first hand the humiliation of rape of close female family members.

Studies from around the world have shown how the presence of firearms can significantly increase the risk that domestic violence results in fatalities. In many conflict situations, small arms have been used to threaten women and communities and to perpetrate sexual violence. Small arms do not necessarily have to be fired to pose a serious security threat. The visible impact of small arms includes lives lost, injury and psychosocial trauma, while indirect impacts include death and injury of family and peers, displacement, and reduced access to, or quality of, health. If there were no proliferation of illegal small arms in the DRC, would there be the same high level of impunity and almost casual attitude to rapes? The answer is 'no'.

Despite increased discussion around gender and SALW, it is still not an established practice to incorporate gender considerations in SALW policies in the region. The work to limit the proliferation of SALW is dominated by technical processes, such as marking and tracing, disarmament, collection, destruction and storage of arms, and not by human security elements. The human security elements are those that take into consideration the human impact of small arms, both present and in the future, and aspirations to address and mitigate these impacts. It is important to understand how communities are constructed and how different groups, including women and men, perceive their situations.

However, even at this level, discussions on the relationship between gender and small arms have tended to focus on documentation of women's experiences with SALW rather than the understanding of conflict and their effects. The low level of participation of women and youth in SALW activities is an indication that they are not effectively involved. It

is important to ensure that stakeholders are fully skilled in understanding gender and gender mainstreaming to be able to address the needs of both genders in SALW programmes across the region.

Regional basis for gender issues

This is one of the reasons why the Eastern African Sub-regional Support Initiative for the Advancement of Women (EASSI), a women's rights organisation, became involved in the gender dimensions of small arms to ensure inclusion and elaboration of gender issues in planned interventions. Since 2006, EASSI has evolved into a lead organisation in the advocacy for the gender dimensions of SALW in East Africa.

To ground its work in the five east African states of Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda, EASSI began by conducting a gender audit of SALW National Action Plans. This would be the basis for future work in the region. The results were obvious: none of the National Action Plans on small arms management had a gender dimension, let alone a human security element. Out of this audit, EASSI prepared a document on engendering the East African Community SALW strategy. This led to EASSI being requested to provide technical support to the Regional Centre on Small Arms (RECSA) on the development of a gender policy on SALW in the Great Lakes Region and Horn of Africa.

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The involvement of women was promoted through experience sharing visits among women affected by conflict, for the purposes of sharing coping/mitigation mechanisms. This involved women and men affected by conflict participating in exchange visits. The first one was a visit to Kenya by women from Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia and Tanzania in early 2008, fol-

lowing the post election violence. This grew into a project known as the Regional Women's Voices for Peace. Other exchange visits have involved Kenyans coming to northern Uganda, which was involved in a 20-year war with the Lord's Resistance Army, as well as women and men from northern Uganda travelling to Burundi and Kenya, respectively. During these visits, participants freely share their experiences and learn the coping mechanisms from one another.

Another part of EASSI's regional work has involved the introduction of gender mentorship programmes to develop a critical mass of young, passionate and informed advocates to demystify the security sector and encourage greater involvement by women and girls as reformers. Since 2009, EASSI has trained over 500 security sector personnel on gender mainstreaming in both regional and national workshops. These personnel have gone on to train others. In Burundi, gender mainstreaming training has become one of the key programmes implemented by the office of the National Focal Point on Small Arms. Recently, RECSA invited EASSI to conduct gender mainstreaming training for its members in Ethiopia, DRC, Djibouti and the Central African Republic at regional level which cascaded into national trainings in each of these countries. This regional work has translated into more awareness on the need for gender mainstreaming in the security sector in Eastern Africa.

Daily life limits

The fear of being attacked may limit women's freedom of movement, can prevent them from carrying out their daily activities, from fetching water and firewood, and from taking public transportation to work. Again, many women do not seek help or report their experiences of violence, often due to limited availability of services, stigma or fear. Cockburn argues that understanding the 'continuum effect' in violence enables us to seek out possibilities for interrupting the continuum. By intervening at one point in the sequence, we may be able to reduce violence at another.²

Violence against women is often less evident than the deaths and injuries of men fighting in armed conflict or as gang members in violent drug wars. Yet women and girls are often victimised, or affected in other ways, in all armed

violence settings. Women and girls are also common targets of sexual violence in armed conflict and fragile states, and they suffer disproportionately from its indirect consequences.

The economic and social effects of armed violence are devastating. In addition to the costs of lost productivity, medical treatment for injured victims, and loss of income, women especially suffer additional indirect effects. In many situations, when their husbands are killed, women and children lose access to their homes and livelihood and are forced to choose prostitution, commercial labour, or domestic servitude in order to survive.

Even if women are not primarily gun wielders, their victimisation is enabled by these weapons. They are the weapons of choice in domestic violence, in political violence and in sexual violence. The issue of masculinity also plays in. Men and youth are often attracted to owning guns because of the power it affords them. Women, for example in Latin America and Jamaica, are also attracted to men who own guns, believing they are protected and secure. Often they are proved wrong. On the contrary, they are often subject to intimate partner violence.

Because of this, it is necessary to integrate gender perspectives and understandings of violence in arms control work in conflict and non-conflict situations. Doing so can help programmes, policies and projects to address armed violence and the proliferation of small arms comprehensively.

Gender violence in peacetime

Two crucial areas of concern, the proliferation of SALW and the link between gender and SALW in the National Action Plans, speak to women in armed conflict and violence against women. In 2005, EASSI, under its 'women in the peace processes programme' realised that there were many barriers to women's enjoyment of peace even after cessation of war. One of the major causes was the existence of small arms and light weapons that continue to proliferate, whether in conflict periods or peacetime in EASSI's member states.

The durability of small arms ensures that once they are present in a country, they present a continuous risk, especially in societies where there are large accumulations of weapons. They fre-

quently outlast peace agreements and are taken up again in the post-conflict periods by criminal gangs, vigilantes, dissidents and individuals concerned about personal security. In some places, the low cost and availability of firearms can promote what experts call a 'culture

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of violence', where gun ownership becomes a symbol of power and status and gun violence a first resort for the settlement of personal or political disputes. In Africa, it has become more dangerous to be a woman fetching water or collecting firewood than a fighter on the frontline.

Many of the doors that we knocked on did not reveal receptivity to the idea of human security, let alone a gender perspective to small arms and light weapons. They were doors of military men and experts in peace and conflict resolution. They told us that small arms are a security issue. We said that small arms are a human security issue and that the two cannot be separated. In order to determine the extent to which the two issues are currently connected in existing policies, we undertook a small analysis of National Action Plans on Small Arms Control and Management of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. It was not an easy survey, as we were denied information for the reason that it was confidential and not a matter for the public domain. We persevered and used information available on the Internet. The results were glaringly obvious: There was no 'gender' in any of the National Plans.

This convinced us to begin to highlight the link between gender and small arms at every forum and opportunity. The link we made was that women's rights are human rights and that the effect of small arms and light weapons on women should be discussed at the negotiation table, because it has a larger

bearing on the possibility of achieving sustainable development.

We came up with a regional SALW Gender Institute that would build the capacity of government officials on the link between gender and small arms. This initially began as annual one month intensive trainings at EASSI headquarters in Kampala, Uganda. The trainings began in a small way with countries sending only one staff member. They were conducted using a curriculum that EASSI developed and pretested in 2008. After the trainings, each participant would go back to their country and train others there. As we speak, we have trained over 800 participants from the security sector, through our alumni in Burundi, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Rwanda, and the trainings have been decentralised to the national level, since we have many converts to the gender cause. Countries are including gender issues in their national action plans on small arms management and inviting women's organisations to be part of their committees on small arms at grassroots level.

In March, we collaborated with the East African Community in Arusha, Tanzania, and the German Society for International Cooperation to launch the first ever Gender Week, the theme of which was the gender dimensions of small arms. This included exhibitions, demonstrations and workshops creating awareness on the negative effects of small arms on women, the triple effects of disempowerment, sexual degradation and poverty. The campaigns have not remained at national and regional level but have been taken up at a global level.

In conclusion, violence against women is a global problem and an international security threat, which might reach catastrophic proportions when used as a strategic weapon in warfare as a way to terrorise, humiliate and break down women and society as a whole. In this context small arms act as a multiplier of violence impacting on women, both directly and indirectly. 🌿

1 Cukier, Wendy (2000). Gender and Small Arms. A Special Report for the Small Arms Yearbook Project, Geneva.

2 Corey Barr with Sarah Masters: Why Women? Effective Engagement in Small Arms Control, p. 18. IANSA Women's network, Oct 2011.