



# Policy Brief

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## Overview

The diverse impact of small arms and light weapons (SALW) on women, men, girls and boys has rarely been considered in the formulation of small-arms policy, small-arms collection or control, or even in small-arms research. Understanding of how prolific SALW reinforce and maintain gender- and age-specific violence before, during and after conflict has to improve considerably. This policy brief examines the connection between guns and gender and discusses methodological challenges and priorities in gendered small-arms research, policy and advocacy. Stereotypes have to give way to an understanding of the multiple roles of both small-arms users and victims, as gender is only one among many social categories defining individuals' approaches to and experience of small-arms violence. Fortunately, new and encouraging policy initiatives have emerged, although significant gains are yet to be made towards achieving inclusive policy implementation and improving weapons collection programmes; disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR); and security sector reform (SSR) activities.

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## *Sexed Pistols: The Gendered Impacts of Prolific Small Arms*

EVERY DAY, SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS (SALW) kill, maim, wound and threaten millions of adults and children. The victims are combatants and civilians in war zones or communities in degraded "peacetime" environments characterized by large-scale criminal or political violence, and can also be found in "societies at peace" where SALW may be used in cases of domestic violence or shooting sprees. Due to their widespread availability, mobility and ease of use, prolific SALW play a significant role in maintaining social dislocation, destabilization, insecurity and crime in the build-up to war, in wartime and in the aftermath of violent conflict. Small arms are misused within domestic settings as well as in public spaces, and they affect everyone in the community regardless of sex or age.

Although the impacts of these weapons can be vastly different for women, men, girls and boys, a careful consideration of gender and age has been rare in the formulation of small-arms policy, small-arms collection or control, or even in small-arms research. One important means to counter their effects is to increase our understanding of the role played by prolific SALW in reinforcing and maintaining gender- and age-specific violence before, during and after conflict.

### **Guns and Gender?**

In the early 1990s, at the beginning of the small-arms policy and research debate, the humanitarian and human rights perspectives of the issue received significant consideration. After 1998, as the debate moved into international forums, this concern was slowly eroded and replaced with technical discourse on arms collection, stockpiling and destruction to the extent that most of the international and regional documents on small arms – the majority crafted after 1998 – failed to mention the impacts of weapons on people's lives at all. Research and policy on small-arms (mis)use, and discussions of the human beings responsible for it, were conspicuously absent.

As conversations on small arms and light weapons have continued, however, the voices of non-mainstream actors have become more audible, questioning the absence of analysis of the people behind the guns. As a result, discussions in academic and policy circles have become more informed and complex, fuelled by

debates in the field of human security, which challenges the traditional focus on state and national security. Current work on small arms has begun to look beyond simply “counting the weapons” and is, instead, increasingly focusing on the devastating human impact of their

firearms-related injuries in places with poor infrastructure and record-keeping capacities underpins the lack of quantitative sex- and age-disaggregated data and qualitative information on the experiences, views and actions of women, men, girls and boys in

## “How do gender ideologies, which shape and constrain the behaviour of women and men, influence people’s attitudes to small arms?”

misuse. Norms and policies on preventing the proliferation and misuse of small arms, in the meantime, have also continued to evolve at local, national, regional and international levels.

While this far-reaching conversation has begun to impact on policy decisions, there is still an unasked question: how do gender ideologies, which shape and constrain the behaviour of women and men, influence people’s attitudes to small arms? Remarkably little attention has focused on the fact that gun ownership and misuse are highly gendered phenomena and brutally reinforce unequal social hierarchies that give men dominance over women, exclude young people from access to social, political and economic power, exacerbate race and class tensions in violence-prone communities and allow the repression of sexual minorities.

Understanding gender differences in approaches to, and the use of, small arms is not yet standard practice, and inadequate data have been collected on how males and females are differently impacted by prolific weapons. A combination of a lack of political interest and will, scarce resources and the sheer difficulty of keeping track of

gun-prolific societies. As a result, there is little scientific evidence with which to influence the development of gender- and age-responsive programmes to curtail the impacts of guns.

Although rates of gender-based violence are universally high, there continues to be a general lack of political interest in the underlying causes in order to respond better to such violence. There have been few efforts globally to connect SALW proliferation with domestic violence. Rather, there remains a tendency to see “domestic” violence as a private problem, a perspective that frequently provides impunity for its perpetrators.

It is, however, not only the domestic impacts of SALW that are ignored. A paucity of specific research on gender has resulted in an absence of broadly based surveys and data production from which to draw concrete conclusions on how social stereotypes are shaped to support the use of violence. Few consolidated efforts have been made to understand how actors in weapons-prolific contexts are driven by ideals about appropriate male and female behaviour when it comes to small-arms possession and use.

### Methodological Challenges

Much of the existent literature focuses on technical or quantitative aspects of SALW-linked violence, such as public health impacts; but despite the passing of United Nations Security Council

security-related decision-making globally. Feminist theories also offer the best means to address other issues of difference that are of concern to us as we work towards understanding the root causes of armed violence, such as

“The majority of the official data on small arms and light weapons are not disaggregated by sex and age.”

Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325, 2000, which calls for the inclusion of women in all aspects of peace and security), women’s peacebuilding and violence prevention initiatives, undertaken either autonomously or in support of efforts initiated by men, are often overlooked and remain invisible beyond the immediate community they touch. The attraction of many men to the ownership, display and misuse of small arms remains under-remarked and insufficiently addressed in arms control interventions. Community arms control efforts as a whole continue to receive little respect or support in official circles.

Several methodological difficulties make it a challenging undertaking to put forward recommendations for future gender-aware small-arms work with respect to policy formulation and implementation, and research needs. First, in gendered research on small arms, feminist theories and methodologies offer very useful approaches to research design and implementation, as well as insights into how to process the data, describe the findings and develop policy. Such approaches not only challenge the existing exclusion of gendered perspectives and activism on small arms, but, more than that, they aim to support the broader political claim that women and marginalized men have the right to participate in all aspects of

race, ethnicity, class, age, ability and location (rural/urban).

Second, much of the official data on small arms and light weapons are not disaggregated by sex and age. Moreover, women have been inadequately consulted when such research is planned and data are collected. Young people are a neglected constituency when it comes to understanding and combating the problem, even though young men represent a particularly significant number of those who are attracted to firearms and the power they confer. The lack of detailed data poses difficulties for researchers as they attempt to measure and assess the different impacts of small arms on women, men, girls and boys. Alternative ways have to be found to describe in detail how communities are affected by readily available small arms. Researchers should try to collect sex and age-disaggregated data themselves, and employ interdisciplinary research methodologies to identify indicators other than exclusively focussing on numbers of people killed by guns or numbers of weapons collected. Such qualitative data can be collected by diverse methods, including interviews, focus groups, oral accounts of experiences, and researchers’ personal observations.

Third, it is important to consider the differences between the people being researched and the researcher.

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Are those interviewed going to be safe if they talk to a researcher? Will they benefit from these interviews? Are women and men differently informed about debates on small arms in the context they are in, and is this difference recognized in the corridors of power? To reflect on such issues, researchers need to include local voices, stories and experiences.

Fourth, researchers need to be prepared to explore stereotypes and question readily accepted concepts and definitions of women’s, men’s, girls’ and boys’ attitudes to small arms in their societies. Dichotomies include weapons in public versus private spaces; the perceptions of small arms as protection or threat; and the role of women as peacemakers versus that of fighters or inciters of violence.

### **Sex and Stereotypes**

There are many different ways of “becoming a woman or man” and expressing “masculinity or femininity” in any socio-cultural environment and historical context. It is important, therefore, to be subtle when looking at how prolific small arms impact on the changing social constructions of male and female roles. For example, the assumption that all men are attracted to violence and guns is problematic, making it difficult or impossible for them to organize and participate in defining new images of successful masculinity that do not rely on violence. Similarly, an assumption that women are not technically knowledgeable about guns and therefore cannot contribute to their control means that women’s activism to get rid of guns is often overlooked. Such exclusionary stereotypes make it harder to find, and celebrate, alternative understandings and expressions of masculinity and femininity that contribute to the suc-

cess of peacebuilding and other human security initiatives.

### **Multiple Roles**

Women and men play a myriad of roles in peace, conflict and post-conflict situations, and these roles are often in flux or contradict social expectations about appropriate masculine and feminine behaviour. These realities have to be kept in mind when discussing small-arms misuse, violence, conflict, power and security. There are many women active in disarmament work, but women are also combatants and gun users. Women can play roles that actively or passively support or encourage small-arms violence, or they can work actively to control them. While women are all too frequently victimized when guns proliferate, in many societies it is men, especially young men, who are disproportionately affected by small-arms violence.

During the transition from conflict to peace, opportunities may arise for unequal gender relations to be transformed, creating new opportunities for women to participate in political, social and cultural affairs and for men to reject violence. It is important to facilitate these opportunities for social change.

### **Gender as One of Many Social Categories**

Sex-role stereotyping is not the only source of exclusion from security decision-making: cultural influences, class, location, age and ability are also important determinants of how individuals relate to both small arms and disarmament processes. Sometimes men and women of a certain class or ethnicity will have more in common with each other than with people of the same sex who are from different social groupings. Thus, when discussing the issue of small arms, the implications of

gender difference cannot be examined in isolation from other social categories.

### **New and Encouraging Policy Initiatives**

Following the first UN summit on small arms and light weapons (United

States Conference on Small Arms and Light Weapons (2006), the UN Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS, 2006), the South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC) initiative, and

“The complexity of the gender, security and small-arms nexus can be expressed by reframing the small-arms problem as a human security issue.”

Nations Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects) held in 2001 in New York, there has been an increasing understanding that gender perspectives need to be incorporated into small-arms policy work, programming and research in order to achieve sustainable human security. While the implementation of the 2001 Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat, and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (UN Document A/CONF.192/15) turned out to be a rather technical and legalistic exercise, UNSCR 1325 set the policy framework and has recently been supplemented by UNSCRs 1820 (2008), 1888 and 1889 (2009). Other opportunities to bring gender awareness to small-arms and human security policy, programming and research include UNSCR 1612 (2005) on children and armed conflict, the Nairobi Protocol for the Prevention, Control and Reduction of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the Great Lakes Region and the Horn of Africa (2004), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee guidelines on disarmament, the Geneva Declaration on Armed Vio-

lence and Development (2006), the UN Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS, 2006), the South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC) initiative, and the International Small Arms Control Standards (ISACS). An important new tool is the Gender and Security Sector Reform (SSR) Toolkit published in 2008 by the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (UN-INSTRAW), the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR).

In order to encapsulate better the complexity of the gender, security and small-arms nexus, it can be useful to reframe the small-arms problem as a human security issue. This creates the opportunity to undertake activism and research from broader perspectives, including development, human rights, health and humanitarianism. Often, recourse to traditional justice can be an effective and culturally appropriate means to manage small arms and small-arms violence, but it needs to be kept in mind that traditional justice can also be problematic, failing to provide legal remedy to those not in power, including women, children, ethnic and sexual minorities and those in a socio-economically disadvantaged position.

While men are often killed by strangers with guns, women are more at risk of armed violence from intimate partners or other men known to them. The presence of a gun in the home increases the likelihood that domestic violence will result in death. However, much current national policy does not adequately address cases where gun owners are perpetrators of domestic violence, nor does it consider that guns in private homes can increase the lethality of interpersonal violence. National legislation should be updated to incorporate a gender perspective in small-arms legislation and a small-arms control perspective in domestic violence legislation. Civil society research, advocacy and campaigning, with a focus on the gender-specific impacts of reducing gun violence, can make significant contributions to new national gun control laws.

An audit on national legislation on gun laws should be conducted to move beyond legalistic and technical concerns and explore areas for potential improvement based on the UN Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons. The security sector, including private security companies, and the judiciary should also be better trained to respond effectively and sensitively to all forms of violence against women.

### **Towards Inclusive Policy Implementation**

It is important to involve both women and men in the planning and development of disarmament policy and its implementation, for example, by consulting both men and women in threat assessment surveys, designing information campaigns that reach both the private and public spheres, and identifying community-based incentives for weapons collection. Community-based solutions should be prioritised because externally imposed ones may be less

effective when they counter or ignore already existing local practices.

### **Improving on Weapons Collection Programmes**

Historically, post-conflict weapons collection programmes and disarmament projects have not taken the interests of men and women into account equally. As a result, the success of such projects may have been compromised. Women can play a significant role in encouraging men in their families and mobilizing communities through peace movements to give up their weapons, although this is not a simple, linear process.

Weapons collection programmes implemented by international agencies or foreign governments often do not carefully consider local realities, traditions or concerns. This negligence may end up alienating the communities who are the intended beneficiaries of such programmes. When communities are offered development aid incentives in return for giving up their weapons, women (if they are consulted at all) may request very different projects than men. There is also evidence that women will hand in weapons for no other reward than that of having proactively contributed to making their personal and community spaces safer, which does not support the commonly-held belief that weapons cannot be collected without material incentives.

### **DDR and SSR Processes**

UNSCR 1325 and other UN initiatives such as the Office for Disarmament Affairs' 2003 Gender Action Plan promote and commit member states to include gender considerations in post-conflict disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) and other disarmament exercises. However, evidence shows that gender concerns are still overlooked in the

planning and execution of such processes.

Increasingly, conflicts include both female and male combatants. Evidence shows that leaders often either do not give females their own arms or they prevent them from keeping arms after peace accords are signed. As a result, many female ex-combatants and other women associated with fighting forces are not included in disarmament programmes. Even when women are still armed, DDR processes primarily address male combatants. Women and girls are forced to self-demobilize and reintegrate as best as they can, often with devastating personal impacts.

### **Priorities for Research and Activism**

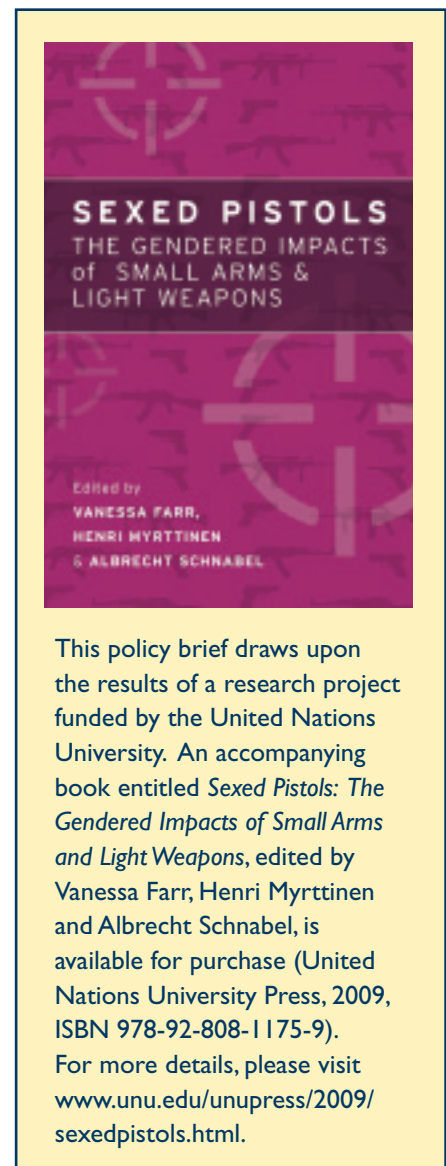
Further research is urgently needed on various questions, such as the glorification of gun possession and the impact of interventions to end gun violence against women. All organizations, researchers and actors collecting data should disaggregate by sex and age prior to conducting analyses in order to make research, findings and resulting recommendations more convincing, more comprehensive and more likely to advance current methods to control weapons. Indicators to measure the impacts of gender difference in the uptake and use of small arms would be a useful contribution to both academic analysis and policy development.

Activist work from NGOs at the local and international levels is challenging the silencing of women's and men's gendered experiences of small-arms violence. The qualitative, action-oriented research these NGOs produce should be valued, and networks to appreciate the depth of issues and develop local and national capacity to present solutions to problems should be strengthened. Only then will we be

able to feed meaningful research into effective policy to reduce small-arms violence globally. The full impact of small arms on the lives of women, girls, men and boys can only be reduced if researchers, policy analysts and activists take the following steps:

- Demand that strict controls on firearms are enforced by local, national and regional authorities.
  - Demand that laws underpinning discrimination and violence against women be repealed.
  - Insist on collecting gender- and age-disaggregated data on firearm injuries and firearm ownership and use, and on the importance of analysing these data through a gender lens.
  - Try to understand the diversity of women's, men's and children's attitudes towards small arms. If they support gun control measures, how do they demonstrate this support? If they support gun ownership, how do they express this? How is gun ownership naturalized in a society so that less and less people resist their presence? Do men, women and children participate differently in this naturalization process?
  - Carefully ascertain the perspectives and insights of marginalized groups, including women and children when conducting field research on small-arms proliferation and misuse.
  - Ask standard questions about the supply side of small weapons from a different perspective, by ascertaining whether, for example, gun-runners also smuggle women and children to do exploitative and illegal work; or whether women are involved in running munitions and weapons, and if so why and for what profit?
  - Pay attention to community perspectives on activities related to small-arms misuse.
- Ask whether men, women and children are differently affected by small-arms proliferation in the aftermath of conflicts. This means discovering what each group thinks would make them secure, how they understand any mechanisms that may be in place to protect civilians and demobilized soldiers from easily available guns, and whether a culture of firearm ownership for self-protection has begun to arise and, if so, how each group understands this phenomenon.
  - Analyse resistance to being drawn into arms ownership and misuse. Which social actors say no to guns? Why? How can they be supported and protected? Such questions would help to determine the extent to which a society has adapted itself to living with violent conflict, from which can be ascertained people's sense of whether peace and non-violence are possible and desirable. Such questions also offer a means to identify activities that arise at the grassroots level (such as peace groups or volunteer organizations that counsel victims of gun violence), which are frequently overlooked as peacebuilding initiatives but have significant potential if given proper support.

The pervasiveness of small arms and light weapons, their ease of use and their lethal impact on everyone from combatants to innocent passers-by make this problem an ideal platform from which to institute gender-aware policy, research and activism. There is a serious need to gather data on how different social actors perceive small arms, and to consistently and systematically use existing analytical tools to understand the effects of gender ideologies on attitudes to, and the misuse of, these arms.





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**INSIDE:**

## Policy Brief

### *Sexed Pistols: The Gendered Impacts of Prolific Small Arms*

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