



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

Benefits of integrating Gender Issues in SALW-Control Paper presented by the Gender Section

OSCE Meeting to Review the OSCE Document on
Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW)
and Its Supplementary Decisions

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Introduction

Both the issues of promoting gender equality and of addressing small arms and light weapons (SALW) have long-since been on the agenda of the Organisation for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE).

The OSCE adopted Ministerial Council Decision 14/04, entitled “2004 OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality” and Ministerial Council Decision 14/05 (MC 14/05), entitled “Women in Conflict Prevention, Crisis Management and Post-Conflict Rehabilitation”, integrating the commitments outlined by UN Security Council Resolution 1325: to increase representation of women in all decision-making levels within the field of security and to incorporate a gender perspective into the activities, policies, programmes and projects of the OSCE.

On the issue of SALW, the Organization published the OSCE Document in 2000, complimented in 2003 by the OSCE Handbook on Best Practices and subsequently enhanced with periodical updates.

To date, none of the OSCE Documents on SALW have included gender issues. It is now clear, however, that any further update on the OSCE document on SALW must take into account OSCE commitments regarding Gender Equality.

An initial analysis of the OSCE document reveals that it focuses, almost exclusively, on the technical aspects of SALW control, with little consideration given to the social, cultural and gendered context of SALW ownership, display, use, misuse, and possession of arms information.

With regards to the inclusion of gender, the Ministerial Council Decision MC 14/05 states that

‘...the knowledge, skills and experience of both women and men are essential to peace, sustainable democracy, economic development and therefore to security and stability in the OSCE region,’ (OSCE, 2005, 1),

yet gives little guidance on how equal gender participation can be achieved in practice. Since SALW control programmes are part of the larger security objectives of the OSCE, the adoption of Ministerial Council Decision MC 14/05 necessitates a gender-analysis of any

policy or project on SALW. The inclusion of a gendered perspective will greatly enhance the efficiency of SALW control.

Gender and SALW

This paper refers to the aforementioned technical categories outlined in the OSCE Document on SALW (OSCE, 2000, footnote p.1), but also looks at those SALW possessed by rogue actors and criminal organizations. Throughout OSCE member states, this category of weaponry poses a far greater danger to human security than SALW held in the stockpiles of respective state security forces.

In order to understand the linkages between SALW and gender, it is first necessary to understand the differentiated connections between weaponry and men and women, and how this gendered distinction impacts programmes aimed at increasing security and stability.

Men and boys have traditionally been associated with weapons; a relationship that has been reinforced through cultural norms and traditions (e.g. national myths, war memorials, movies, video games), social rituals (e.g. hunting, gang membership), and political mechanisms (e.g. army conscription, equating national history with a narrative of armed conflict, protection of the community by way of armed forces). Men and boys, across the globe are overwhelmingly the main perpetrators of small arms violence, be it in conflict situations, post-conflict areas or even in regions considered to be at peace. Men and boys also constitute the majority of victims of SALW related killings.

Despite the statistical dominance of men and boys as the perpetrators and victims of direct SALW related violence (i.e. wounding or death), it would be incorrect to view this as a solely male issue. Women and girls are also victims of SALW related violence. Yet, often, in more indirect ways, and for longer periods of time, not apparent in casualty statistics, women and girls make up a growing population of armed violence victims. In both conflict situations and in peacetime, SALW are often used to force women and girls to subjugate themselves sexually or to submit themselves to the will of the gun-wielding perpetrator in other ways. In countries with relatively high levels of gun ownership, this type of weaponry is also used in conjunction with gender-based violence and intimate femicide, i.e. the killing of women by close relatives, friends or partners. Women are often singled out as victims of small arms violence to take revenge for real or perceived slights, as has been the case in numerous school and university shooting sprees in various OSCE member states.

Additionally, it would be wrong to cast girls and women as merely helpless the victims within the debate on SALW. This simplistic viewpoint devalues the resilience shown by women and girls in the face of violence and relegates them to a position of powerlessness, a position that is both a false representation of reality and highly demeaning. This viewpoint invalidates their ability to actively address issues related to conflict and security. In addition, this victim-oriented discourse obscures the multiple ways in which women and girls, just like boys and men, can be agents of peace or of war. Women, like men, are equally able to pull a trigger, buy ammunition and hide and smuggle weapons. One gendered tactic which women have employed in conflict situations is to shame men into committing acts of violence by publicly or privately questioning their masculinity. A very obvious example of this is the 'White Feathers' campaign in the United Kingdom, aimed at shaming men into signing up to fight in the trenches in World War I. This tactic can, and has been successfully used to urge men to give up weapons or refrain from using violence in places as diverse as Albania, Brazil, Sudan and Papua New Guinea.

Benefits of integrating gender issues in SALW-control

Effective SALW control and arms collection processes are crucial to the establishment of sustainable security and stability, as evidenced in numerous post-conflict areas within the OSCE region over the past two decades. While a purely technical approach is sufficient for addressing SALW related issues such as marking, destruction, or stockpiling, addressing the broader impacts of SALW requires an investigation into the social and cultural context in which these weapons are owned and used. As outlined above, there tend to be major differences in ownership patterns, the use of, as well as vulnerability to SALW between men and women, regardless of private or official utilization. In order to effectively address SALW related issues, these differences must be taken into account in policy formulation and implementation.

A key area where a gendered approach is crucial is in the reduction of small arms proliferation. In situations where public security is not guaranteed and/or masculine role expectations are linked to gun ownership, it is crucial to have an understanding of the social dynamics at work in order for SALW control to be effective. As indicated above, women and girls often play key roles in dissuading men and boys from storing, displaying or using SALW. Women have also often been effective agents in the promotion of community participation in SALW control schemes such as, 'exchanging weapons for development.' To date, women's participation in the design, promotion and implementation of SALW control has been very limited, with some notable exceptions in the Western Balkans. At the same time, while increasing the involvement of women and girls, SALW control programmes also need to take into account the cultural significance of SALW with regard to masculine identities, in order to avoid a perceived 'emasculatation' of society which can lead to a societal backlash against SALW control.

As evidence from the field has shown, if societal security is not established following the disarmament process, women may end up paying a high price for the perceived increase in insecurity. For disarmament processes to be truly sustainable, they must take into account the social and cultural context in which they are being implemented. This includes the various expectations, hopes and fears expressed by girls and women, men and boys regarding these weapons.

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