

Why is women's participation important in small arms control and disarmament?

For some, answers to the question "why women?" in the area of small arms control may seem obvious or straightforward.

However, recent events, such as negotiations on General Assembly Resolution 65/69, show that perhaps the multitude of answers to this question can be easily overlooked if women and women's advocates don't make them abundantly clear. Such instances have also shown that perhaps we have taken women's participation for granted and assumed that it was clear why women's participation is important. This brief outlines a few of the many reasons that women should be involved in small arms control and disarmament initiatives.

Involving those who are directly and indirectly affected



Women's participation in small arms control and disarmament is important because women are affected by armed violence both directly and indirectly. The proliferation and use of small arms has different effects on men, women, boys and girls. While men and boys make up the majority of the users and direct victims of small arms, women are also impacted by arms proliferation and armed violence in specific ways. Small arms can facilitate and aggravate violence against women and girls whether in conflict or in peace. Studies from around the world have shown how the presence of a firearm can significantly increase the chances that domestic violence results in a fatality. In many conflict situations, small arms and light weapons have been used to threaten women and communities to facilitate the perpetration of sexual violence. Women are also affected indirectly by arms proliferation when family members and loved ones are harmed or killed in armed violence. In many situations, they become heads of the household and have the sole responsibility for providing for their families.

"...even if they are not primarily gun wielders, their victimisation is facilitated with the aid of these weapons. They are the weapons of choice in domestic violence, in political violence and in sexual violence."

– Jasmin Galace

Recognising existing engagement and leadership

Women's participation is important in small arms control and disarmament because women are often active in security issues informally and formally and at various levels. They have proposals and ideas on addressing armed violence.



"Women should have a say because, in fact, they want to have a say."

– Rita Santos

Women have played a major role in initiatives aimed at reducing the availability and misuse of weapons around the world and their efforts have been seen at local, national and international levels. Women have been involved in disarmament campaigns and gun buy-back programmes in many countries, for example in Albania and Argentina. Women take leading roles in national policy-making, from advocating for the adoption of legislation and participating in the drafting of firearms and domestic violence laws, to raising awareness of existing regulations and working to improve implementation. Women activists have pushed for the Arms Trade Treaty to include women and gender issues, including gender-based violence. While women's participation at the local and national levels has had positive effects, their involvement usually happens in an informal way and women continue to be excluded from formal decision-making processes about peace and security issues. Women should be involved in all levels of arms control and disarmament processes, including informal as well as formal initiatives.

Taking into account the various roles in promoting and participating in gun violence

"I've never heard anyone talking about the perspective of women who are gangsters... there's no perspective, there's nothing in the media." – Marren Akatsa-Bukachi

On a more negative side, women also play various roles in supporting gun cultures and the masculinities that valorise the ownership and use of a gun. Research in countries such as Brazil and Jamaica has showed that women may gravitate towards men with guns for a sense of protection. Women can also be gun carriers themselves. For example, many women own handguns for the purpose of self-defence. Women also participate as fighters in armed forces, including as part of guerrilla armies, armed forces of various states, and in gangs. Women and girls actively participate in many of the world's conflicts, either willingly, through coercion, economic pressure or because they have been abducted and forced to serve as members of armed groups. Women's participation in small arms control and disarmament initiatives is important because of these different roles in actively participating in and indirectly supporting gun cultures. Because of these different roles, women can bring in different perspectives and knowledge of gun cultures and armed violence.

Better understanding the problem

It is widely recognised that issues around peace and security, including armed violence and small arms, have different direct and indirect effects on men, women, boys and girls. Different actors have different perceptions of security and of what constitutes a threat to their security. For women, violence in wartime runs along a continuum of violence that they also experience in post-conflict periods and in peacetime. Understanding the gendered realities of violence and the connections between domestic violence that happens in non-conflict affected contexts and sexual violence in wartime can help to reveal the gendered power divisions that play a role in the perpetration of violence and the response to such violence.

“You can’t deal with guns and small arms and light weapons without a gender perspective and get at their full meaning and their full impact.” – Cynthia Cockburn

Because of this, it is necessary to integrate gender perspectives and understandings of violence in arms control work in conflict and non-conflict affected situations. Doing so can help programmes, policies and projects address armed violence and the proliferation of small arms more comprehensively. Giving women the space to participate in arms control and disarmament initiatives can help to democratise peace and security, providing opportunities for different perspectives and ideas to be taken into account.

Making programmes more effective



Women’s participation in small arms control and disarmament initiatives can help to make projects and programmes more effective. Women have unique perspectives that can strengthen project planning and implementation efforts. Because of this, women’s perspectives should be integrated into project design from the beginning. For example, women’s participation during the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process in Liberia improved the dissemination of information on the DDR process leading to greater numbers of ex-combatants participating.

The information in this brief is further developed in the report *Why Women? Effective engagement for small arms control (2011)*, by Corey Barr with Sarah Masters, available at: <http://www.iansa-women.org/node/710>.

The IANSA Women’s Network (WN) is the only international network focused on the connections between gender, women’s rights, small arms and armed violence. We are grateful to Oxfam Novib and the Government of Norway for their support.

“It is not about feminism, it is about business.

Member States give us money to implement projects and if I implement a project that only affects 50 per cent of the population, that is bad business.” – Agnes Marcaillou

Women have also played important roles in either convincing men to hand in their weapons or in handing in weapons themselves. There is a general conception that women do not have a great deal of knowledge about small arms and therefore do not have a place in control processes or planning and implementation. However, experience shows that women are often very knowledgeable about guns, including how they work and where they are stored. This knowledge can bolster programme activities.

Democratising peace and security



In most countries, women make up at least half of the population. Because of this, it is also important to include women in arms control and disarmament initiatives simply as a matter of democratising peace and security processes. In a vicious cycle, the presence of prolific numbers of arms can hinder democratic processes and the participation of women in various aspects of peace and security, including participation in the area of small arms control. Various international and national standards and documents have stressed the importance of women’s participation in peace and security generally and conventional arms control specifically. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 emphasises the importance of women’s participation in peace and security processes, but does not specifically mention arms control. Despite this, the resolution has been used in some instances to advocate for women’s participation in small arms control. Additionally, in September 2010, during the 65th UN General Assembly meeting, Trinidad and Tobago announced that it would introduce a resolution on women, disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation in the First Committee on Disarmament and International Security. The adoption of the resolution marked the first time that the General Assembly formally addressed the links between women and disarmament.

“The democratisation of discussions of security is one of the most fundamental things that we can do in order to make the world safe from the prolific arms that exist in it right now.” – Vanessa Farr