

Why Women?

Challenges for women's participation in small arms control and disarmament

It is clear that women's participation in small arms control and disarmament is critical.

Nevertheless, women face a number of challenges that serve to hinder their participation in this and other areas of peace and security. These challenges can be broken down into two main categories: challenges relating to women's situational positioning and exclusion from legislation and policies; the marginalisation of the human aspect in action and discourse; and sidelining gender in security discussions.

Unequal positioning and exclusion from legislation and policies

The most fundamental challenge to women's participation in small arms control and disarmament is their unequal positioning in patriarchal societies which hinders their abilities to participate in political affairs more generally. This is particularly true in relation to issues of peace and security. In many societies and contexts, security concerns are seen as a more masculine area and there is a perception that women don't have anything to add to security discussions. Because of these general beliefs and traditional gender roles, women tend not to be allowed the space to participate in discussions around security measures and policies.

**"...for a woman to get engaged in small arms work, she would challenge her role as a docile, friendly housewife."
– Julia Knittel**

In many cases, gender and women's issues are excluded in security discussions and legislation. There are contextual factors that limit women's participation in small arms control as well as more broadly. Economic constraints play a large role with poverty and lack of resources playing a role in limiting women's ability to participate. In addition to social and economic impediments, women may be faced with violence and threats of violence and may not be able to safely participate in security discussions. Security discussions are often removed from and don't take into account the reality of women's situations on the ground. Because of this, security decisions are often less effective in addressing security matters, including security issues surrounding women's participation in security processes.

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.

Another challenge is ensuring that policies and legislation take women, women's issues and a gender perspective into account. Women's participation in legislative bodies is important to address this.

Nevertheless, it is critical to realise that the presence of women in a policy-making body does not automatically ensure that women's issues or a gender perspective is integrated into policies and legislation.



Marginalisation of the human aspect and gender in action and discourse

Action and discourse around small arms control and disarmament serve in specific ways to limit and restrict women's participation. For instance, much of the discourse surrounding small arms control is focused on technical issues such as firearms transfers, firearms ownership, trade, stock management issues, firearms marking, and tracing mechanisms. While these technical issues are very important, focusing on technical issues can overshadow the human aspects and consequences of arms proliferation and armed violence making the issue abstract. Women's organisations are often active in raising awareness on the impact of armed violence on individuals and communities. Keeping a focus on technical issues can thereby further exclude and sideline women's participation. The technical discourse as well as women's lack of economic empowerment and lack of resources in many situations negatively impacts women's preparedness to engage effectively in security discussions.

There are challenges in terms of knowledge of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and gender issues in institutions working on small arms control and disarmament initiatives. For instance, while Resolution 1325 squarely places the issue of gender and women's issues in the area of security, there has been some hesitation expressed about raising the issue of gender in the First Committee of the General Assembly. By sidelining gender and women's issues in this and other international security forums, there is an implicit undermining of the purpose of Resolution 1325. This poses the risk that the responsibility for women's issues will be passed on to other bodies and committees not related to security and arms control. A related challenge is that many times women's issues and gendered concerns are seen as only women's concerns and not something that men can have opinions on, advocate for, or be involved in. Gender should be addressed as a cross-cutting theme throughout programmes and projects with men as well as women championing gender equality.

"The hard issues are the hardware. The soft issue is the humanity and that humanity is still not being taken seriously. That is really a challenge, to make the key players or the stakeholders take the human aspect seriously and give it the due recognition that it deserves." – Marren Akatsa-Bukachi

Why Women? Areas for action

Despite the deep-rooted and widespread challenges that women face in participating in small arms control and disarmament initiatives, there are ways in which women and men can work together to enhance and bolster women's participation in this and other areas of peace and security.

Education and technical training

Education involving men and women on issues of gender and small arms can help to increase their democratic participation in arms control and disarmament initiatives. Education that is not necessarily related to the topic of small arms and security directly can also help women to better engage. For instance, literacy education, computer training, and how to carry out effective advocacy can bolster women's participation in peace and security processes, including small arms control.

"...the better informed women are, the more women are able to talk in a knowledgeable and articulate way about the way to control arms, the more effective all arms control programmes are likely to be and the more sustainable they are going to be because it implies a whole community participation."

– Vanessa Farr

The technical language that pervades small arms control affects how the issue is interpreted in terms of the human impact of the proliferation of arms. This language can also serve to exclude women in certain contexts and hamper their participation in debates on arms control. One way to address this challenge is through technical training on small arms control, such as marking and tracing. Women can be trained alongside their male counterparts in order to identify weapons and actively participate in investigations, tracing efforts and contribute to data collection. In addition to being the recipients of trainings, women's organisations can be engaged in the development of training programmes to ensure that women's perspectives as users and victims of small arms are reflected in training programmes.

Advocacy and awareness-raising

Education is linked to advocacy and awareness-raising, another crucial aspect of increasing women's participation. Awareness-raising and advocacy should be targeted at multiple levels and should have a variety of messages. One suggestion for further advocacy is showing the actual effects of the proliferation of small arms and armed violence. Additionally, advocacy can be carried out to get more people involved in security discussions by identifying women who are already participating in security matters, but don't necessarily identify with the security agenda. Helping them to recognise their role and its importance will help to build and strengthen the role of women in security discussions.

"We have to keep putting the issue at the forefront of the disarmament agenda."

– Melanie Regimbal

Awareness-raising should focus on forums where the issue has not been raised, but advocacy should also continue to ensure that the issue of women's participation is not pushed to the backburner. Different advocacy strategies are needed for keeping the issue on the disarmament agenda. This is a key area of work of the IANSA Women's Network, which sponsors and supports women from around the world to participate in advocacy and lobbying, such as addressing delegates at UN events and side events.

Support for women's groups and groups working on gender equality

There are already many initiatives going on at various levels led by women and involving women in security issues. Recognising these initiatives and working to support women doing this work is another area for action. Another issue is making connections between areas of work that activists are already doing. For instance, as has been highlighted, there is often a divide between women's rights activism and activism focused on small arms control by women and women's organisations. Finding ways to support women's participation and to support collaboration between organisations is a key area for future efforts. Another important area of work is working with men and women to address masculinities that valorise the possession and use of weapons and, in some cases, violence against women. This can also include supporting non-violent men and women working to challenge violent masculinities.

"Women are used to historically having to deal with daily security concerns, daily peace issues, and they are usually driven by a very human focus or also a very practical approach. That's why I think it's also important to ensure the participation of women and of women's groups in small arms control initiatives."

– Rita Santos

