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Guns, War and the Domestic Battlefield

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As guns proliferate in a worldwide market with few controls, many get diverted from state and rebel armies to petty criminals and 'the man in the street'.

Sexual and domestic violence is becoming more deadly.

There is a class of weapons known to arms manufacturers, arms traders and arms control activists as 'SALW': Small Arms and Light Weapons. The 'small arms' part of the category refers to revolvers, self-loading pistols, rifles and shotguns - the sort of firearm a police officer, security guard, criminal or law-abiding hobbyist might own. It also includes the assault rifles and sub-machine guns that are the weapons of choice of army patrols and insurgent militias. The 'light weapon' category refers to bigger stuff, up to and including the portable anti-aircraft missile launcher. SALW do not excite as much public concern as nuclear devices and chemical weapons, but arguably, given their daily worldwide toll of death and injury, they too could be seen as 'weapons of mass destruction'.

The Small Arms Survey¹ estimates there are currently around 900 million such weapons in circulation worldwide and that they cause around half a million deaths annually. These arms are produced by more than a thousand manufacturing companies located in nearly a hundred countries. Recorded world trade in SALW, including parts and ammunition, hovers at around \$300 billion a year. The USA is by far the biggest single exporting country, with more than three times the figure of its nearest competitor, Germany. Only a quarter of small arms and light weapons are thought to be in the armouries of

state security sectors, the remainder are in the hands of non-state militias or civilians. Three-fifths of the deaths they cause occur in armed conflict, while two-fifths take place far from the battlefield – or rather they happen in the battlefield of everyday life, in murders (56%), suicides (14%) and accidents (5%).²

Research and policy discussions reflecting a concern about the proliferation of SALW began in the early 1990s, as the collapse of the Soviet Union released huge numbers of second-hand weapons into shady markets. By the millennium there had been sufficient investigation, documentation and agitation by concerned governments and international NGOs to stir an official response. In July 2001 the United Nations organized a Conference on the Illicit Trade of Small Arms and Light Weapons in All its Aspects. It was a high-level inter-governmental affair, but non-governmental organizations were present too, lobbying for action. Key among them was the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA), a global alliance of 800 civil society organisations in 120 countries working to stop the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons. The NGOs scored a notable success. The Conference resulted in a UN Programme of Action committing every signatory country to a series of steps to curb the manufacture, trading and possession of small arms and light weapons. Governments were required to establish an agency, some kind of 'national focal point', to have oversight of the efforts of the several ministries, departments and agencies that in any given country would be concerned in implementing the Programme.³

Men are overwhelmingly the sex that, whether legally or illegally, manufactures, markets and transports, buys and sells, and eventually fires guns. Perhaps it is an entrancement with firearms that likewise brings men in disproportionate numbers into the movement to 'take the toys from the boys'. The policy-makers, military personnel, security specialists, technical experts and anti-gun activists that peopled the corridors of the United Nations at the UN Conference on Small Arms (and continued to be there as the UN went on to prepare for an Arms Trade Treaty) were almost all men.

Women however have a keen interest in the small arms issue, and they were not entirely absent. Those who were there to welcome the publication of the UN Programme of Action were dismayed to note that its authors, notwithstanding the UN's commitment to 'gender mainstreaming', had been unable to write more than four mildly gendered words. They were buried in Clause 6 of the Preamble, which noted the devastating consequences of small arms and light weapons on children, as well as the 'negative impact on women' (and the elderly).⁴ The intimate connection between men and guns, inescapably evident in statistics from around the world, was simply not deemed a policy issue.

So women set about producing evidence and argument. A significant feminist researcher on guns was Vanessa Farr, then working at the Bonn International Centre for Conversion. In 2002 she and Kiflemariam Gebre-Wold produced a substantial briefing paper, *Gender Perspectives on Small Arms and Light Weapons: Regional and International Concerns*.⁵ Then, with Albert Schnabel at the United Nations University, she assembled a team and funding for a cross-national project on gender and SALW. From this source and others, in the next few years, regional studies began to appear.⁶ Many showed that, while gun crime is overwhelmingly committed by men, men are also the huge majority of victims. Brazil is typical, with men accounting for more than 90% of all gun-related deaths and injuries.⁷ The problem is that such statistics are misleading. On the one hand they make women appear to lack all agency with regard to guns. On the other, perversely, they make women's firearm deaths seem negligible.

In 2003 women of IANSA, Amnesty International and Oxfam International, three NGOs allied in the project 'Control Arms', produced a report that began to correct this view.⁸ *The Impact of Guns on Women's Lives* showed that while women and femininity are not wedded to guns in the way of men and masculinity, nonetheless women and girls are sometimes implicated in SALW activity. They increasingly serve in national armies and police forces. They are recruited to insurgent militias, sometimes as forced conscripts, sometimes as motivated volunteers. However, as is often pointed out, women

bearing and using guns are frequently also abused by the men who command them. They are simultaneously the perpetrators and victims of violence. Women often assist men by storing, smuggling and hiding weapons. And some women are seduced by the glamour of gun-owning men. 'Girls go out with guys who use guns because they want a good life, easy money, brand-name clothes, feeling superior to others...If she goes out with a regular working guy her life won't be like that'.⁹

The much-heralded UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on *Women, Peace and Security*, had focused attention on the circumstances of women in armed conflict. However, it had done little to increase understanding of the negative effect of guns on women in non-conflict situations. Whether in war or peace, women are viewed as men's property. In war, militaries often engage in campaigns of rape to reduce enemy men by appropriating 'their' women. In non-war situations too domestic battering and rape, in and out of marriage, are often intended to enforce a man's property rights over a particular woman. The risk of death in intimate partner violence is much greater when there is a firearm in the home. In the USA for instance, access to a gun increases five-fold the risk of a woman being killed by her husband or partner.¹⁰ Guns, and controlling violence exerted by men over women, span the time-space continuum of war and peace.

Meanwhile, a Women's Network was coming together in IANSA, linking women's organizations addressing the gun issue in many countries. It soon had 350 individual and group members. Funds were raised for a fulltime coordinator to support women's interventions. Sarah Masters was appointed to the post in 2007, and she and the activists of the Women's Network began to get a hearing in New York. For the first review conference on the UN Programme of Action in 2006 the Centre for Human Dialogue had already written a policy brief bravely outing the 'M' word: 'Hitting the target: men and guns'. At the 2008 Biennial Meeting of States on SALW the women achieved a side event on armed domestic violence. At the 2010 Biennial they launched 'Guidelines for gender mainstreaming for the effective implementation of the UN Programme of Action'.

Now the activism of the IANSA Women's Network has come together in a Disarm Domestic Violence campaign that is insisting, as national governments put the Programme into effect, that new laws and procedures take into account the protection of women from guns in the home and community. One aspect of revised gun legislation is invariably greater control over civilian access to guns. Anyone seeking to acquire a firearm will have to apply for a licence in order to buy it. Anyone currently in possession of one will have to bring it in to the authorities and apply for a licence. The question is, what will the conditions of licensing be? If a criminal record is to disqualify an applicant from getting a licence, what kinds of crime will count? Most women believe a licence should be refused if the applicant has been convicted of rape or domestic violence. Some go further and would like the law to give a spouse or partner a simple power of veto, on the grounds that 'the woman knows best'. Some men on the contrary argue that to overturn men's historic authority in such a way would destabilize family, community and society.

By 2009 the United Nations University study had generated enough material on the gendered impacts of small arms and light weapons to result in a volume evocatively titled *Sexed Pistols*.¹¹ Vanessa Farr and her co-editors assembled evidence and argument from thirteen countries. The gun / masculinity connection was central. 'Small arms facilitate and contribute to a cycle of violence, fear and further arming. While a wide range of factors fuel this cycle in many regions of the world, "gun culture" and "the culture of violence" are tightly coupled, and also tightly linked to notions of masculinity and male identity.'¹² The editors concluded that the 'corner-stone of controlling and managing small arms' is 'to encourage positive, peaceful expressions of male identity'.¹³ Starting, perhaps, among the politicians, military planners, chiefs of police, security experts and technical whizz-kids of the international anti-SALW movement before moving on to the man in khaki fatigues and the lad in a hooded anorak.

NOTES:

¹ I draw here on material published by the Small Arms Survey, Geneva, on its website <www.smallarmssurvey.org> accessed March 2011, and in its annual publications, *Small Arms Survey 2008: Risk and Resilience*, and *Small Arms Survey 2009: Shadows of War*.

² IANSA: International Action Network on Small Arms (2007) *Gun Violence: The Global Crisis*. Quarto Leaflet. <www.iansa.org>

³ UNDP: United Nations Development Programme (2008) *The Establishment and Functioning of National Small Arms and Light Weapons Commissions*. April. Published by the Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery, United Nations Development Programme, Geneva. <www.undep.org/cpr/documents/sa_control/SALWGuide_English.pdf> accessed 4 March 2011.

⁴ *United Nations 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. Accessed at <<http://www.poa-iss.org/PoA/poahtml.aspx>> 4 March 2011.

⁵ Farr, Vanessa A. and Gebre-Wold Kiflemariam (eds) (2002) *Gender Perspectives on Small Arms and Light Weapons: Regional and International Concerns*. Brief 24. Published by Bonn International Center for Conversion. July. <<http://www.bicc.de/publications/briefs/brief-24.html>> accessed 4 March 2011.

⁶ For example, Blessing, Jasmin, Henri Myrntinen, Nicola Popovic and Nicole Stolze (2010) *"Como te haces entender?" Gender and gun cultures in the Caribbean context*. Working Paper Series of the Gender, Peace and Security Programme of UN-INSTRAW, the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. <www.un-instraw.org/>. Also Moura, see footnote 7.

⁷ Moura, Tatiana (2007) *Invisible Faces of Armed Violence: a Case Study on Rio de Janeiro*. Published by: Centre for Social Studies (CES), University of Coimbra <www.uc.pt/en> and Viva Rio. <www.vivario.org.br>

⁸ Control Arms Campaign (2003) *The Impact of Guns on Women's Lives*. Published by Amnesty International, the International Action Network on Small Arms and Oxfam International. <www.controlarms.org>

⁹ Viva Rio, cited in Control Arms 2003: 30.

¹⁰ As footnote 8.

¹¹ Farr, Vanessa, Henri Myrntinen and Albrecht Schnabel (eds) (2009) *Sexed Pistols: The Gendered Impacts of Small Arms and Light Weapons*. Tokyo, New York and Paris: United Nations University Press.

¹² Cukier, Wendy and James Cairns (2009) 'Gender, attitudes and the regulation of small arms: implications for action' in Farr, Vanessa, Henri Myrntinen and Albrecht Schnabel (eds) *Sexed Pistols: The Gendered Impacts of Small Arms and Light Weapons*. Tokyo, New York and Paris: United Nations University Press. P.30.

¹³ Farr, Vanessa, Henri Myrntinen and Albrecht Schnabel (2009) 'Conclusions: recommendations for further research and activism' in Farr, Vanessa, Henri Myrntinen and Albrecht Schnabel (eds) *Sexed Pistols: The Gendered Impacts of Small Arms and Light Weapons*. Tokyo, New York and Paris: United Nations University Press. P.432