

REVCON POLICY BRIEF

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Presented at the First Review Conference on the Implementation of the UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects, New York, 26 June–7 July 2006

Hitting the Target Men and Guns

INTRODUCTION

When gender perspectives are considered in relation to small arms and light weapons availability and misuse, women usually spring to mind—primarily in their role as ‘victims’ and secondarily as supposedly ‘natural’ peacemakers. This view not only provides an incomplete picture of the roles of women and girls with regard to gun violence, but it also excludes men and boys as a gendered category. An acknowledgement and exploration of the role of masculinity—that is of the widespread social norms and expectations of what it means to be a man—in relation to the demand and misuse of small arms is urgently needed to better inform effective policymaking and efforts to control the illicit trade in small arms *in all its aspects*.

Across cultures, most acts of violence are committed by men; men and boys also account for the overwhelming majority of firearm-related deaths and injuries. While some research suggests that there may be some biological basis for men’s and boys’ propensity for violence, the vast majority of research affirms that the connection between masculinity and guns is the result of socialisation into violent expressions of manhood and cultures in which gun misuse by boys and

men is socially expected or accepted.¹ Ultimately, the question of easy access to weapons is crucial: when small arms are tightly controlled, it is less possible for them to be misused or to flow into the illicit market, even in cultures where violent expressions of masculinity are condoned.

It is equally important to acknowledge that a large majority of men—whether in war affected settings, countries riddled with violent crime or ‘peaceful’ societies—choose not to engage in violence. Just as there are social factors driving men—more than women—to carry and use firearms, other social conditions help many men and boys not to opt for violence and guns. This is an area for both future research and programming activities—focussing on those men and boys in violent or war-affected settings who shun armed violence and survive.

This policy brief explores the diverse roles that men and boys play in relation to guns—as perpetrators, victims, survivors and agents of change—and suggests the need to encourage more positive and peaceful expressions of masculinity. It calls on States gathered at the Review Conference on the implementation of the Programme of Action on small arms to adopt a more holistic approach to gender in their statements and in the outcome document, in order to recognise the diverse roles and needs of men and women, girls and boys. Rectifying the omission of the alarming rates of victimisation of men and boys from small arms related violence is well within the reach of government officials. The focus of this brief on men and boys does not minimise the particular impacts of the uncontrolled arms trade and armed violence on women and girls, including sexual violence at gunpoint of small arms and light weapons. Nor does it underestimate the diverse roles played by women and girls in armed conflict and violent crime—as victims, carers, perpetrators, survivors. The distinction between ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ is not always clear in the case of gun violence, and does not necessarily follow gender fault lines. In sum, it challenges the common but inaccurate view

At the RevCon, States should recognise that . . .

1. Attention to gender means treating men, women, girls and boys, as groups with particular needs and diverse roles.
2. The complex relationships between masculinity, youth and gun related violence and trafficking is a key demand factor for small arms and light weapons.
3. Restricting access to guns, particularly among young men, is an appropriate strategy to reduce firearm related violence. This goal can be achieved through strengthened legislation, better law enforcement and awareness raising.
4. Social, economic and political empowerment of youth—male and female—are important violence prevention and weapons control strategies.

that women and girls are always the victims of gun-related and other forms of gender-based violence, and that boys and men are always the perpetrators.²

IN THE PROGRAMME OF ACTION (PoA)

The PoA inaccurately combines women, children and the elderly as a homogenous group and limits this reference to the preamble, in which States are: ‘Gravely concerned about [the illicit trade in small arms’] devastating consequences for children . . . as well as the negative impact on women and the elderly. . .’³ Recent research shows that age and sex are important indicators of whether a person will misuse small arms. Men and boys, who comprise the majority of direct victims, survivors and perpetrators of gun violence, receive no explicit mention. The implications of this omission for the full implementation of the PoA remain unexplored.

“ . . . the 2001 Programme of Action does not adequately . . . take into account the gendered implications of this problem given the negative effect which gun violence has on women’s personal security and well being and the fact that men, particularly young men, constitute the vast majority of perpetrators and victims of armed violence. We urge these aspects to be taken up at the Review Conference.”

—Trinidad and Tobago statement at the January 2006 PrepCom⁴

THE REALITY

- Violence is the leading cause of death for people aged 15 to 44 years worldwide, accounting for 14% of deaths among males and 7% of deaths among females.⁵
- Men are three to six times more likely than women to commit homicide.⁶
- Over 90% of gun-related homicides occur among men.⁷
- According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), there is an ‘alarming increase’ in suicide among young people aged 15 to 25 years worldwide.⁸

- Of those who commit suicide with a gun, 88% are men and 12% are women.⁹
- Exposure to small arms violence, more common among boys, approximately doubles the probability that an adolescent will perpetrate serious violence during the two subsequent years.¹⁰
- In some countries, gun-related violence leads to demographic imbalances. Brazil currently has nearly 200,000 fewer men than women in the age range 15–29. It is estimated that in 50 years time, there will be six million men missing from the Brazilian population mostly as a result of death in traffic accidents and homicide—the vast majority of the latter being gun-related.¹¹
- Men’s victimisation from gun-related homicide varies tremendously by region. The WHO has estimated that in 2000 there were 155,000 deaths worldwide of young men ages 15–29 by homicide (the majority of these gun-related). Of these, close to half (72,000), were in the Americas.¹² This means that the risk of dying from homicide for a young man aged 15–29 in the Americas region is nearly 28 times higher than the average worldwide risk.¹³

BEFORE YOU ASK . . .

1. Is this really a serious concern, we already have gender references in the PoA and surely don’t need any more?

The problem is that the current gender references in the Programme of Action do not give an accurate picture of the gender implications of the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons *in all its aspects*. The relationship between masculinity and gun violence, in particular, receives no mention. Thinking about how we raise boys and encourage men to use violence must be part of the solution since the socialisation of boys and men appears to be one of the causes of weapons trafficking and firearms-related violence.

2. Aren’t women and children the largest number of victims?

Among people who die from gun violence, men and boys are the largest group of direct victims in every setting. Women suffer in different ways, being threatened, coerced, abused at gun point, or having to care for male survivors of gun violence. Women, girls and boys are often described as ‘vulnerable groups’ when in fact they are groups of people who often find themselves in vulnerable situations. Such inaccuracy is rectifiable in the outcome document with minor language additions.

3. Isn't this just another way to demonise men?!

Recognising the link between masculinities, youth, and gun violence is not about demonising men. On the contrary, attention has to be given to men's resiliency, i.e. the factors that lead the majority of men, even in settings where armed violence is prevalent, to resist resorting to gun violence. These 'counter-demand' factors exist and need to be strengthened.

“Applying a gender perspective to the small arms issue means understanding the different ways that men, women, boys and girls engage in armed violence, are affected by it, and respond to it. This is key to developing effective solutions to the problem.”

—EU statement to the January 2006 PrepCom

KEY ISSUES AND RATIONALE FOR ACTION

Guns are used to commit various types of violence, from self-directed violence or suicide, to violence in the home, interpersonal violence (crime) and collective violence (war or armed conflict). Overwhelmingly, violence is committed by men, and often younger men, suggesting that gender and age are key factors in the demand for guns. Most forms of violence can be considered to be related to gender—whether men's violence against women or men's violence against other men. Even self-directed violence may have a gender dimension: some accounts of men's suicide attempts suggest that men commit or attempt suicide when they feel they are not able to live up to the mandates or societal demands of being 'real' men.¹⁴

Male violence is often explained as an expression of male dominance in society. The reality however is more subtle: at an aggregate level men may be in power, but at the individual level, research suggests that many men actually feel powerless, while at the same time feeling entitled to power in whatever form it comes—status, respect, money, a job, or women. Violence is therefore frequently about men seeking what they believe is rightfully theirs.

Guns play a special role in this equation. Men often feel the need to publicly demonstrate that they are 'real men,'

and a gun is helpful in making this point. In times of war, men and boys are actively encouraged and often coerced into taking up the roles of combatants. In countries characterised by violence, war, or high levels of gun possession, older men may give young men guns as part of a rite of passage from boyhood into manhood. Guns may also be positively associated with manhood in contexts where their use was valued and encouraged as part of a widely supported rebellion or insurrection, such as the AK-47 symbol of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa.¹⁵ Some of the most violent conflict settings in Africa have seen deliberate attempts by insurgency leaders to exploit the sense of powerlessness that many young men—unemployed and lacking status—may feel. In Rwanda, Nigeria, Liberia, Uganda and Sierra Leone, local leaders have played up the frustrations of young men and actively encouraged, coerced and manipulated young men and boys to take up and use arms.¹⁶

Beyond gender, age is another variable that constitutes a strong predictor of violence. Men under the age of 30 are overrepresented in crime and prison statistics, as well as being more likely than older men to commit homicide.¹⁷ This correlation often leads to a general fear of young men, particularly low income young men or those from marginalised ethnic groups.¹⁸

Research among young men involved in organised armed violence in ten countries found that carrying guns is seen as an effective means of gaining status and respect, among both male and female peers.¹⁹ Soldiers, snipers, other gun users and armed male role models in television, film and violent computer games are often cult heroes, with guns routinely glorified in the popular media.²⁰ These factors could also explain the prevalence of firearms as a method of suicide among men. Given the likelihood that guns will be misused, clearly restricting access to small arms and light weapons, particularly by young men, is a valid policy to reduce armed violence.

Participation in the illicit trade and armed violence appears to be heavily influenced by how societies raise and socialise boys. Survey research in the US, Brazil and India has found that boys and young men who hold more traditional and rigid views about manhood are more likely to have participated in delinquency, to have been arrested or to report having used violence against women.²¹

Of course not all men and boys in all societies are prone to violence, nor are all those who own weapons bound to misuse them. Even in violence-ridden areas, most men

do not engage in violence, and the number of combatants is relatively low, even if their social impacts are disproportionately high. However, research has demonstrated that people exposed to violence have a greater chance of reproducing violence: this is why men and boys can be both victims and perpetrators of gun violence, and why it is often the case that perpetrators will themselves be victims of a form of violence.²² A key determinant is the level of acceptability of violence—and particularly armed violence—in a given society as a legitimate means to acquire social or economic objectives that men feel entitled to or feel are denied to them.²³ Rather than a result of biology or demography, men's recourse to armed violence is therefore a complex social phenomenon, with norms and conditions encouraging violence and others restraining it.

A complementary approach to reducing small arms violence and illicit trafficking is to strengthen those factors that help men and boys shun inappropriate firearms possession and violence. Protective factors include stable relationship(s) with people (family members, peers, teachers, etc.) who would be disappointed by violent behaviour; access to alternative livelihoods and identities for self worth (e.g., being a good student), being able to reflect on risks and the personal 'costs' of engaging in violence; finding an alternative peer group that does not support violence (which might be organised around sports, music or other cultural expressions); reduced personal exposure to violence; having views about what it means to be a man that

do not involve feelings of superiority to women or manhood using violence; and an acceptability of men expressing fear.²⁴ Some promising programmes are presented below.

Approaches targeting youth in war and transitional settings are particularly important. In times of war, young men in particular face strong appeals to violence, on top of an already difficult transition to adulthood, disrupted education and lack of employment opportunities.²⁵ Post-war reconstruction programmes must therefore pay specific attention to youth, including young men and boys, and support integration of youth into communities. It is important not to discriminate between youth who have actively participated in the violence and those who have not, to avoid stigmatisation and marginalisation. Programmes ideally should also focus on livelihoods, education and political empowerment. Efforts engaging young men and women in such settings must also recognise that demobilisation requires more than just offering tools for work. It means providing young people, in particular, with non-violent ways to achieve a sense of identity and respect in their societies.

“The answer to the youth challenge is not to further marginalise or paint male youth as fearsome security threats. . . . It is, in fact, quite the opposite: Unemployed, undereducated young men require positive engagement and appropriate empowerment, and participatory financial and programme support.”²⁶

It is important that reconstruction programmes support youth where they are. Nations recovering from war are often characterised by rapid urbanisation, while most reintegration programmes favour rural development, leading to a schism between choices and realities.²⁷ In fact, a return to pre-war socio-economic patterns is not necessarily desirable, as these might have contributed to the emergence of the conflict. Some youth will often choose to move to urban areas in the aftermath of armed conflict, and adequate programmes designed for income generation, empowerment and advocacy must therefore be established in those areas.



A string of bullets is held around the neck of a Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) soldier on his way to peace talks between the Southern Sudanese government and the LRA, 11 June 2006. © Panos pictures/Petterik Wiggers

SOLUTIONS IN ACTION

Two main approaches can be taken to dissociate masculinities, guns and violence. The first one seeks to restrict access to guns by those most likely to misuse them, including youth, people with a history of family violence or people with a mental illness or having suffered a loss and therefore at increased risk of suicide. This approach can be achieved through awareness-raising programmes, community policing or strengthened legislation, such as laws that require spousal notification of firearms licenses (profiled below for Australia, Canada, South Africa and the United States). The absence of information on countries in post-war transition makes identifying replicable activities challenging and points to the need for supporting efforts in such contexts. Alternatively, other programmes focus on reducing the propensity to violence, either through working with perpetrators of violence, or by encouraging resiliency, promoting alternative notions of masculinity based on non-violence and care, and social, economic and political empowerment of youth.

Spousal notification laws

Given the particular role of legally owned guns in the murder, injury and intimidation of women and children in the home,²⁸ several countries have instituted screening mechanisms to prevent gun acquisition by men with a history of family violence, whether or not it resulted in a criminal conviction. Canada requires current and former spouses to be notified before a gun licence may be issued. South Africa and Australia have specific prohibitions on issuing licences to those with a history of family violence. In the US, federal law makes it a criminal offence to possess a gun while subject to an intimate partner violence restraining order, and eleven US states have laws that prevent individuals with a history of intimate partner violence from purchasing or possessing a firearm.²⁹

Age limits

Brazil is an example of a country that has significantly strengthened its national firearms legislation to reduce and strictly regulate civilian access to small arms and light weapons. The 2003 law specifically raised the age limit from 21 to 25 based on evidence that young men were dying and being injured in the greatest numbers in Brazil due to easy access to weapons. Most other nations set the age limit for legal acquisition of a gun at 18, with some such as South Africa having raised it to 21. The Brazilian standard however compels States with similar alarming small arms homicide



"Smurf" is a gang member from the mara 18 in Pabon prison, Guatemala, April 2006. In Guatemala many gang members are armed with weapons left over from the civil war. Photo by Heidi Schumann

rates to consider the question of age, gender and access in concrete terms.

Perpetrator programmes that include a focus on guns

The first programmes targeting perpetrators were developed in the late 1970s in the US.³⁰ They have now been proven moderately successful at preventing further abuse. The largest-scale evaluation to date found that those who completed the programmes were two-thirds less likely to physically re-assault their partners than those who dropped out of them, even controlling for demographic and behavioural factors that might otherwise explain this difference. A survey of 74 such programmes from 38 countries found that the topics most frequently touched upon in such programmes include masculinity, intimate partnership and non-violent conflict resolution.

Young men, leadership and resiliency

A number of promising programmes are being implemented that seek to shift rigid and sometimes violent attitudes about being a man. ‘Men As Partners’ in South Africa³¹ works in collaboration with the military, unions and schools to engage men in alternative views about manhood, as does the ‘Conscientising Male Adolescents’ project in Nigeria and the ‘Program H’ initiative in Latin America and India.³² These programmes aim to create alternative, non-violent peer groups, put young men in contact with adult men who serve as mentors and non-violent role models, and often tap into popular youth culture by making it ‘cool’ to be non-violent. Impact evaluation of Program H in Brazil found significant changes in young men’s attitudes after the intervention—attitudes that were highly related to use of violence against women and other forms of violence.³³

The ‘White Ribbon Campaign’³⁴ works in a similar vein. This global campaign which started in Canada in the early 1990s after a man who had not been accepted into a graduate programme in Montreal entered a classroom and killed fourteen female students in revenge, consists of men speaking out against violence against women. It is active in more than 40 countries worldwide. Similarly, in the US, the Family Violence Prevention Fund coordinates an initiative called ‘Coaching Boys to Men’, that engages coaches, parents and teachers to talk to boys about reducing violence against girls and women and to reduce violent behaviour in general.³⁵ This programme can be undertaken in a variety of settings and is worthy of investigation.

In 2005, a group of organisations came together to form a global network to engage men and boys in gender equality and violence reduction. ‘MenEngage’ seeks to assist the hundreds of mostly small programmes working worldwide to engage boys and men in questioning rigid and sometimes violent views of manhood and, in the process, improve the health and well-being of men, boys, women and girls.³⁶

Youth programming in post-war settings

The ‘Alliance for African Youth Employment’ was launched in 2004 by the International Youth Foundation with the US Agency for International Development (USAID), Nokia and Lions Club.³⁷ Both USAID and Nokia have collectively committed over USD 1.8 million to the initiative. Over five years, the Alliance will promote employability and employment for more than 35,000 disadvantaged young people aged 14 to 29 living in rapidly urbanizing areas of South Africa, Malawi, Mozambique and Rwanda. Young people will receive not only job training, but also career



Children playing with toy guns in the Mannenberg township near Cape Town, South Africa, August 1999. © AP Photo/Obed Zilwa

counseling, direct placement in internships and jobs and the skills to create their own businesses. Indeed, most successful job creation programmes for youth recognise that, for young men in particular, employment is both about having income but also a source of identity and respect.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Attention to gender means treating men, women, girls and boys, as groups with particular needs and with diverse roles. The complex relationships between masculinity, youth and gun violence is a key demand factor for small arms and light weapons that needs to be addressed.
2. Curbing access to guns, particularly by young men, is an appropriate strategy to reduce gun violence. This can be done through identifying the problem, strengthening legislation, better law enforcement and awareness raising.
3. Social, economic and political empowerment of youth—male and female—is an important violence prevention strategy, particularly in situations recovering from war. The particular needs of youth should be addressed holistically, through community-based programmes.
4. Non violent expressions of masculinity should be promoted and men’s roles as caregivers given a greater focus. Group-based activities can also provide positive identity and group empowerment, as well as leadership, teamwork and personal ‘governance’ skills.³⁸

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

1. Impacts—Generating data and information that is disaggregated by sex and age to better identify impacts and policies is crucial. How can States developing information collection systems or National Action Plans as called for in the PoA be supported to develop or amend information collection efforts to create more accurate data that is broken down by such variables as gender and age?

2. Resiliency—Why do most men and boys avoid or decide against armed violence? In war or crime affected communities, what makes some men choose non-violence over others? Are there strategies that can be put in place to bolster such resiliency?

3. Status—The achievement of particular status drives many men and boys to participate in armed violence. Why is this so, and what can be learned from asking men in various contexts about this pressure to achieve status through violence? How can men and boys be empowered to resist using violence to achieve their goals, for example through the creation of viable economic alternatives that in turn will promote social and cultural change? □

ENDNOTES

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- 2 Barker, Gary and Christine Ricardo (2005), *Young men and the construction of masculinity in sub-Saharan Africa: Implications for HIV/Aids, conflict and violence*, background document prepared for the World Bank
- 3 *UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All its Aspects*, UN Doc. A/CONF.192/15. Available at <http://disarmament2.un.org/cab/poa.html>
- 4 For a full analysis of statements at the Preparatory Committee for the UN Conference to Review Progress Made in the Implementation of the PoA, January 2006 see HD Centre et al (2006), *Overview of Governmental Statements made at the small arms PrepCom* available at www.hdcentre.org/UN+process+on+small+arms+control
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- 21 Barker, Gary (2005)
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- 23 *Small Arms Survey 2006: Unfinished Business*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 306
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- 25 World Bank (2005), 'Youth in post-conflict settings', *Youth Development Notes*, Vol. 1, No. 1, September, p. 2
- 26 Sommers, Marc (2006), *Fearing Africa's Young Men: The case of Rwanda*. World Bank, Social Development Papers, Conflict Prevention & Reconstruction, Paper No. 32, p. 14
- 27 *ibid*, p. 4
- 28 Hemenway, David et al (2002), 'Firearm availability and female homicide victimization rates across 25 populous high-income countries', *Journal of the American Medical Women's Association*, Vol, 57, pp. 100–4
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- 30 Rothman, Emily F et al (2003), *Intervening with Perpetrators of Intimate Partner Violence: A Global Perspective*, World Health Organisation, Geneva, p. 2
- 31 See www.engenderhealth.org/ia/wwwm/pdf/map-sa.pdf
- 32 See www.promundo.org.br
- 33 Barker, Gary (2005)
- 34 See www.whiteribbon.ca
- 35 See www.endabuse.org
- 36 Founding members of the network are EngenderHealth (US), Instituto Promundo (Brazil), Save the Children-Sweden, the Family Violence Prevention Fund (US) and Sahayog (India).
- 37 See www.iyfnet.org/document.cfm/30/626
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KEY RESOURCES

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The photo exhibition 'Men and Guns' is a collection of portraits from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, south Sudan, Colombia, Guatemala and El Salvador. Interviews with men and boys highlight a range of relationships: victims, survivors, perpetrators and agents for change. It is available for display and contains 20–25 portraits.

ABOUT THE CENTRE FOR HUMANITARIAN DIALOGUE

The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD Centre) is an independent foundation whose purpose is to prevent human suffering in war. Our humanitarian approach starts from the premise that preventing and resolving

armed conflict is the surest means of doing so, and to this end we promote and facilitate dialogue between belligerents. Through our work, we seek to contribute to efforts to improve the global response to armed conflict. Our operational engagements are complemented by policy and analytical work focused on civilian protection, mediation techniques, transitional issues, and arms and security matters. The Human Security and Small Arms Programme began in 2001. It includes a range of projects that aim to draw attention to the human cost of small arms availability and misuse, and to identify policy options for action by governments and other actors.

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ABOUT INSTITUTO PROMUNDO

Instituto Promundo is based in Rio de Janeiro and works nationally and internationally to carry out research and develop social technologies to advance the potential of children and youth in Brazil and the global South. Among its activities, Promundo coordinates the Program H Alliance, a network of organisations working in Latin America, Asia, the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa to engage young men in promoting gender equality and violence reduction. Program H activities include an educational curriculum for engaging boys and men in questioning rigid views about manhood, 'lifestyle' campaigns to promote non-violent versions of manhood and evaluation tools for measuring changes in the behavior of boys and men. Promundo provides technical assistance and carries out research on gender socialisation and violence (including violence against women, against children and between men) in collaboration with the Brazilian government, the UN and the World Bank.

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