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Gender-Based Violence and the ATT: Perspectives from East Africa
The Arms Trade Treaty: Addressing the impacts of the international arms trade on gender based violence
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Ladies and gentlemen,

I want to begin by sharing this poem. It moved me deeply and I want to share it with all of you.

Women feel together in a Complete World

What does it feel like to hide under the bed with your children, when bombs burst outside your door?

What does it feel like to see your young daughters go off for firewood, and return raped, violated?

What does it feel like to see your adult son step outside your village home door, to be shot and killed by waiting enemy insurgents?

What does it feel like to be a young bride seeking refuge in a closet during conflict, going into labour with your first child, and medical care elusive?

What does it feel like to experience your home, your dreams, even your family, evaporate in war, and for which you are innocent, helpless?

What does it feel like to believe in social justice, human rights, dignity of woman and man and child, and yet starve, to be displaced constantly?

Have no real citizenship or identity during conflict, lose your possessions and yet protect the family as best you can, try to be strong outside, but inside feel pain, anguish, despair, tears.....tears.

The reason why the poem moved me so is because I am a Kenyan statistic, a victim or survivor of gun violence. This happened to me 8 years ago. On two separate occasions whilst with my family, I was threatened with rape at gunpoint, if I did not hand money over to the robbers. Guns were waved in my face and in the faces of my children. The trauma remains.

Like the woman in the poem, hiding with my children, being scared and desperate in our own home did not release us from the fear after the incident. Instead the criminals won. We moved from our home of 15

years into a crowded neighbourhood, in order to blend and become anonymous, away from the eyes of those who may have perpetrated this crime.

The implicit threat of violence is particularly frightening for women. If there are men around with guns, whether they use them or not, women are intimidated.

The threat is in the air.

I work with EASSI, a regional organisation that covers eight countries in Eastern Africa. Many of these are countries recovering from recent conflict or enduring high levels of gun violence.

Peace and security issues, including armed violence and small arms, have different direct and indirect effects on men, women, boys and girls. “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

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.

In my own country, Kenya, parts of the country like Nairobi are no-go zones after 7pm because of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. Women fear being robbed in their houses like I was, or car jacked and raped.

Another example is the Democratic Republic of the Congo. My colleagues and I organized a solidarity visit to Goma in the Eastern DRC in December 2010 as part of the celebration of 16 Days of Activism against Gender Violence. What we saw and experienced only served to confirm our worst fears. Sexual violence of an immeasurable atrocity had been committed against women with the use of firearms. In the majority of cases, women had suffered physical and mental trauma exceeding all understanding of human nature and human imagination. We met over 3,000 women and girls of whom the majority, almost 99 percent had been raped more than once and others several times, mainly because the men were wielding arms.

Many women were raped in front of their family and community under the menace of a firearm. They were kidnapped and enlisted by force to serve in the rebel camps as sexual slaves. Consequently, many women have had unwanted pregnancies, some at a very young age, and they have been reduced to a

state of human wreckage. There have been cases where child soldiers have raped and killed women (young and old), using their firearms like toys, which give them power.

The cases are so numerous that the Congolese hospitals do not have the capacity to help all the victims who come. Numbers of them do not even dare to go for fear of being disgraced and rejected by their community.

These cruelties have been made possible because of the proliferation of small arms in the region of the Great Lakes of Africa to quench the thirst for natural resources of some individuals and organised groups. Women have been reduced to a state of non-existence, suffering the terrible psychological and psychosocial repercussions in an environment of absolute poverty.

In Eastern Africa, my organisation has taken on the task of creating awareness on the links between gender and small arms. This we have done by working closely with government officials in the National Focal Points for the Management of small arms and light weapons. Initially we experienced strong resistance to our education and training programme which is a one month intensive residential training on the gender dimensions of small arms and light weapons and why these should be mainstreamed in their programs.

It has been uphill task. When the participants start the training, they have no notions of gender, of how it relates to violence against women, let alone how it relates to small arms. Small arms experts never talk about the people involved in violence, they only talk about the hardware. The gender training has allowed them understand that gender is central to the human dimension of gun violence and the different impacts on men, women, boys and girls. But it needs to be explicit, otherwise they would never think about it.

Now, as I speak, we have reached over 350 security sector officials since 2010 in a cascade process where our trainees have gone back and trained their colleagues. As a result several have established gender focal points in their own structures and others such as Burundi have established fully fledged programs on capacity enhancement on the links between gender and SALW. Their national policies are increasingly more gender sensitive and gender responsive and even their personnel speak knowledgeably about gender and SALW. Of course we cannot as yet claim victory but these baby steps are the beginning of what I would paraphrase as a walk to freedom.

Now, you are here to negotiate an Arms Trade Treaty. Despite groundbreaking resolutions, such as UN Security Council Resolution 1325 declaring the importance of women's participation in peace processes and women's activism in the field of arms control, women and gender have been largely ignored in the process towards an ATT. 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 programs and projects with men as well as women championing gender.

If the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) is to be an effective legal instrument in regulating the international arms trade, recognition of the specific potential impacts of international transfers on women and their rights should be included. Such an approach would be consistent with broader UN practice of the inclusion of a gender perspective. It would also ensure that the international standards within the ATT to regulate conventional arms comprehensively addresses the full range of potential risks associated with trading and transfers. Accordingly, there should be strong references to gender in the treaty text and the criteria in the treaty should address risks of gender based armed violence.

The ATT is a historic opportunity to prevent gender-based violence at gunpoint. Let's not waste this opportunity.