

Gender and the PoA: including all voices

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Girls at gunpoint: experiences from the DRC

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Madam Chair, distinguished guests, and members of the panel,

In the last decade, the DRC has been the epicenter of brutal conflicts which have destroyed the East of the country. The Congo war has been called the deadliest war after World War 2 and the worst place to be for a woman. Why?

These conflicts involve several armed groups which have committed mass violations of human rights without any respect for international human rights or humanitarian law. Since war started in nineteen ninety six, guns have spread throughout the country. Another war in nineteen ninety eight has made things worse.

Now over 1 million small arms circulate in the Great Lakes region. Data on arms transfers is difficult to acquire but we know at least 11 African countries are among the world's producers of ammunition for small arms and light weapons, and 6 of them share borders with the DRC. Militias with guns have the power to terrorise, kill, burn homes, and rape.

The civilian population has been the main target. For the last 12 years thousands of proxy militia have used rape as a weapon of war, tool of terror and humiliation.

Armed groups and soldiers have raped at gunpoint and murdered thousands of women and girls with impunity - from babies to grandmothers in some parts of Eastern Congo – in front of their family and community.

The only way for the population to survive is to flee. For those unable to escape, the rapes are brutal. The bodies of Congolese women and girls are being used as battle grounds.

Many, abandoned by their families and communities, are condemned to live in poverty. They suffer horrific sexual violence, displacement, and other forms of exploitation including human trafficking.

The link between sexual violence in conflict and the illicit arms trade indicate that there is a need to introduce gender equality and the prohibition of violence against women, including sexual violence, as per UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820, in the implementation of the Programme of Action.

The Guidelines for Gender Mainstreaming the Programme of Action on small arms give examples of how criminal networks are trafficking illicit small arms as well as narcotics and minerals.

According to the National Commission for DDR, militias prefer to recruit children who can be easily led through drugs and manipulation. In fact, there is growing evidence of marijuana crops being cultivated in the East of the country to supply militias with drugs. A child soldier addicted to, or influenced by, drugs can kill easily.

We must address the human rights, security and livelihoods needs of women and girls drawn into trafficking networks, and offer alternatives to men who rely on trafficking to make a living.

As outlined in the Guidelines for Gender Mainstreaming the Programme of Action on small arms, in DDR processes the focus on ex-combatants must consider the roles of women and girls as voluntary participants in conflict, and those coerced as combatants, carriers, messengers, sex-slaves and/or cooks in combatant groups. This approach links disarmament to the essence of DDR – to reduce violence, and promote peaceful and sustainable development.

Through implementing the Gender Guidelines we can ensure that future agreements on small arms incorporate gendered language, and insist on the full and equal participation of women in the small arms process. There are small steps towards progress.

For example, last year Congolese women participated in a workshop on the marking of weapons with the police and army. This was an effort by the National Commission on Small Arms, and the Regional Centre on Small Arms and Light Weapons (RECSA) to involve women in the process of marking and tracing of small arms, but we need more ...

There is still an urgent need to fully address the community dimension of small arms control, and to support local initiatives, many of which are led by women. For me it is clear. States should promote local voices and solutions by building on the disarmament and peacebuilding activities of grassroots civil society groups, particularly women's groups.

The use of illicit small arms in violence against women and girls is an issue that demands more attention.

We must ensure that women and girls - 54% of the world's population – are included as a priority, and a resource, for tackling the problem in all its complexity. We must also recognise that men and boys need programmes to help them reject armed violence.

Thank you for attention.