

Gender and the PoA: including all voices

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Guyana: Young women's role and response to gun violence

Glynis Alonzo-Beaton, YWCA - Guyana

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

I am General Secretary of the YWCA – Guyana, part of the global movement of women and girls leading social and economic changes in over 120 countries. We are concerned about the increase in the levels and lethality of violence within our society, one within which our people are learning the harsh realities of life – and death - because of illicit small arms.

Guyana is a small country with a population of around 770,000. There are no official statistics on the number of illegal guns in the country but the national Police Force acknowledges that illicit guns are a source of concern. Statistics show that most robberies are committed with guns and the availability of illicit weapons is a major challenge for the Force. There has also been an increase in the rental of illegal guns, most of which are used for criminal purposes. Despite the number of gun crimes, gun seizures have decreased in recent years.

Guyana has an under-developed justice system with few judges, police officers and professionals. With such weak governance and a poor legal framework, the illicit gun trade flourishes.

Although Guyana is usually only considered as a transit point, we experience the tragic consequences of the availability and access to guns that pass through our country long after the illicit brokers and traffickers have gone.

The daily headlines say it all: a mass shooting; an attempted murder; the suicide of a teenage girl with her father's pistol; a child caught in the crossfire; children shot dead in a gang related revenge attack. Why?

Since the 70's and 80's weapons have poured into the region from a variety of sources, mainly due to the illicit drugs trade. This is linked to organised crime and gang violence but a worrying trend is the recruitment of young people who feel the need to arm themselves for self-protection and 'turf' battles. The resulting 'small arms race' has created levels of armed violence at epidemic proportions.

Guns are also used to protect contraband during transportation and are smuggled alongside drugs, often by the same people using the same routes - the hundreds of miles of border and rivers as well as coastline, small ports and clandestine air strips.

Guyana is a patriarchal society with great social pressure placed on young men to bring home resources for their family. When armed violence becomes a legitimate means of gaining respect and security that may

otherwise be out of reach, the gun becomes particularly attractive. The perceived gains for women can also be important.

Many girls and young women want to join violent male gangs to raise their own profile or to seek protection and, as a result, may be asked to store and transport guns for male gang members. It is clear that many do not achieve the levels of protection or respect they had imagined. Every day at least 2 women or girls are attacked or killed. Most incidents are never investigated.

This all seems insurmountable but we at the YWCA believe that the change has to start with us. It is clear to us that eliminating the illicit trade in small arms requires the participation of all: men as well as women. It's why I am here, to draw attention to the importance of adopting a gender sensitive approach in our strategies and work to combat illicit small arms.

Just as young men and women are experiencing the impact of gun violence, they are also beginning to recognise the costs of illicit guns to their own safety and to their communities. Those who have survived gun violence are speaking out about their experiences but we need meaningful action from policy makers and our elected officials, particularly gender responsive action, if we have any hope of undermining the trade of illicit small arms in and through Guyana.

The Guidelines for Gender Mainstreaming the PoA provide key recommendations and case studies that highlight potential solutions to the illicit trade in small arms. Gender considerations need to be addressed in all stages of the process: information gathering, planning, implementation and monitoring.

We must ensure that both women and men are actively involved in the development and implementation of programmes and initiatives that build on their roles as peace educators within their families and communities. In addition, adequate economic opportunities and survival strategies for men, women, boys and girls must be created in order to provide alternatives to the route of gun violence.

Thank you....