

**In Harm's Way: Girls in Settings of Endemic Armed Violence**

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**Guyana: Young women's role and response to gun violence  
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Madam Chair, members of the panel, and esteemed guests,

It is an honour for me to be invited to this panel. Thank you to the Women's Network of IANSA for the opportunity to share my thoughts with you about the epidemic of armed violence in Guyana, and its impact on women and girls.

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 young people are learning the harsh realities of life – and death - because of illicit guns.

Guyana is a small country with a population of around 750,000. We are at peace. However, current statistics from the Police Force in our capital city Georgetown, home to around one third of the population, show that at least 150,000 people are in possession of illegal guns in Georgetown alone.

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 1970'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 '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 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 considered to be a transit point, we experience the tragic consequences of the availability and access to guns that pass through our country, some of which remain when the traders have long gone.

We live in a patriarchal society with great social pressure placed on young men to bring home resources for their family. When violence, and specifically armed violence, becomes a legitimate means of gaining respect and security that may otherwise be out of reach, the gun becomes particularly attractive.

But we know that the attitudes of women and girls can sometimes contribute to the powerful cultural conditioning that endorses gun ownership by young men and boys. Indeed, some women occupy active roles in the cycle of violence, through smuggling, transporting and hiding weapons. A girl or woman who has little access to power or resources may feel she can gain status through association with a man who owns or uses a gun.

In communities where respect and leadership is associated with access to means of violence, the perceived gains for women can be important. Often girls and young women are assigned a passive position in these communities but may be involved in gun violence in less obvious ways.

For example, teenage girls and young women wanting to join violent male gangs may be forced into having sex and ferrying guns, knives and drugs. These girls often want to join 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.

However, it is clear that many do not achieve the levels of protection or respect they had imagined. At least 2 women or girls are attacked or killed in Guyana every day. Most incidents are never investigated.

I think we are all familiar with the most obvious consequences of armed violence – death, injury and disability – but the impacts are far reaching and go beyond the victim involved to his or her family, friends and wider community. As stated in the Beijing Platform for Action, it creates a climate of fear, affects access to education, healthcare and generally reduces the resources available for social development, and enables violation of the rights of the girl child, amongst others.

In addition to physical risk and harm, the presence of guns encourages violent rather than peaceful resolution of problems; exacerbates community tensions, and increases the threshold of violence; negates measures to build confidence and security; is an obstacle to development; discourages investment and tourism; and contributes to human rights violations.

This all seems insurmountable but we at the YWCA believe that the change has to start with us. This is why we are here, and why we are using the Beijing Platform of Action to respond to the impact of gun violence on girls and young women through programmes and initiatives to empower them and support their role as peace educators within their families and communities.

Armed violence clearly affects our lives and we are constantly working to find strategies and tools to respond to this.

We all know that education that fosters a culture of peace, and which upholds justice and tolerance is essential to achieving a more peaceful society and should begin at an early age. Another priority is to increase the participation of women in conflict resolution at decision making levels.

Both young men and women must be able to recognise the costs of gun culture to their own safety, and to that of their community. Former gang members – male and female - are among those who can act most effectively for change, and challenge the link between violent masculinities and guns.

Thank you....