



**SMALL ARMS  
WORKING GROUP**

**CANADIAN PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER AND  
SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS**

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## **About this Paper**

This briefing was prepared for the Small Arms Working Group of Peacebuild. Designed for the use of organizations and individuals involved in peacebuilding practice and development, the briefing is part of an on-line series that synthesizes information on key issues related to small arms and light weapons and outlines recommendations for action. The support of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) is gratefully acknowledged.

## **The Small Arms Working Group (SAWG)**

SAWG seeks to engage the Canadian peace, disarmament, human rights and development NGO communities in the development and promotion of national and international policies and measures to reverse the diffusion and misuse of small arms and light weapons. Project Ploughshares is the coordinating agency of the working group.

Through meetings, workshops and roundtables on small arms, the Working Group provides a forum, which encourages members to exchange information, share lessons learned and explore specific areas of collaboration and serves as a link between the NGO community and the Canadian government by engaging in small arms policy dialogue with relevant departments.

## **Peacebuild**

Peacebuild, the Canadian Peacebuilding Network, is a member-based network of Canadian-based organizations and individuals actively involved in peacebuilding practice and policy development. Its goal is to engender greater coherence and effectiveness in building peace through fostering collaboration and coordination among diverse stakeholders in Canada and partners overseas.

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## **Project Ploughshares**

Project Ploughshares is the ecumenical peace centre of The Canadian Council of Churches established to work with churches and related organizations, as well as governments and nongovernmental organizations, in Canada and internationally, to identify, develop, and advance approaches that build peace and prevent war. Project Ploughshares is affiliated with the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, Conrad Grebel University College, University of Waterloo, and is a founding member of the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA).

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# Canadian Perspectives on Gender and Small Arms and Light Weapons

By Emily Alexander

Gender is relevant to issues related to small arms and light weapons (SALW) because guns affect women and men differently. The proliferation and misuse of SALW contributes to inequality between women and men and to gender-based violence in countries all over the world, both war-affected and at peace. However, a gender-sensitive approach is not exclusively about women. This approach factors in the special needs of men and women, boys and girls in the formulation of appropriate responses to issues of gender and SALW. For example, young men suffer disproportionately from the direct impacts of SALW use (90 per cent of gun homicide victims are men), while women tend to be victims of the indirect, longer-term consequences.

It is inaccurate to identify women solely as victims and men as perpetrators of violence. Such a view neglects not only the active role that women play globally in civil society-driven disarmament initiatives and peacebuilding, but also the role that women and girls increasingly play as users of guns, as combatants or traffickers.

Even in times of ‘peace’, gender must remain a crosscutting consideration for strategies on combating illicit SALW at national, regional, and global levels.

## Gender and the International Policy Framework on SALW

Despite the fact that small arms affect men and women differently, the UN Program of Action on small arms (PoA) contains only one reference to gender, in paragraph 6 of the Preamble in which states express grave concern about the devastating consequences of the illicit trade in small arms for children, “as well as the negative impact on women and the elderly” (UN 2001). Men are not mentioned at all.

However, significant progress has been made in changing this incorrect impression at UN small arms meetings. A growing number of states have highlighted the importance of gender considerations, both in addressing armed violence and in creating effective disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs. A few states have also emphasized the importance of focusing upon concerns specific to men as well as women.

An important milestone for international norm development took place when UN Security Council Resolution 1325 was passed unanimously on October 31, 2000. It is the first resolution passed by the Security Council that specifically addresses the impact of war on women, and women's contributions to conflict resolution and sustainable peace. Its text recognizes the need to take into account the impact of conflict on women and men, including issues related to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons.

A wide range of practical information has been generated since 2001 to help policymakers include gender considerations in the PoA.<sup>1</sup> The next section looks at some specific implications for small arms and light weapons policy in Canada.

## Canadian Gender Violence and SALW

Research is demonstrating that, where small arms are accessible, they are used in violence in the homes. While men are often killed by strangers with guns, women are more at risk of armed violence from intimate partners or other men known to them.<sup>2</sup> And for every woman killed or injured, many more are threatened by firearms, which become tools for intimidation and physical and psychological abuse.

### Domestic violence and firearms

Intimate partner violence is the most common form of violence against women around the world. In Canada, 85 per cent of murdered women are killed by their intimate partners (Coalition for Gun Control 2005). Access to a gun or a gun in the home will increase the risk that a woman will be killed in the home fivefold (Control Arms 2005, p. 11). However, between 1995, when Canada tightened its gun laws, and 2003, the overall gun murder rate dropped by 15 per cent, while the gun homicide rate for women dropped by 40 per cent (Control Arms 2005, p. 11).

The implementation of some practical measures, including the requirement that Canadian gun owners store their guns securely and keep the ammunition in a separate place, has increased the safety of women in the home. In 1995 the screening process in Canada for the acquisition of a firearm improved with the addition of spousal notification. Canada's firearms law stipulates that the current spouse/common-law partner of the applicant must sign the application for a firearms license. If s/he does not sign it, s/he is contacted by the authorities for further investigation. A further mechanism is the provision of a toll-free telephone number for current and former spouses/partners to use to express their safety concerns. Since 1998, this hotline has received more than 26,000 calls (Coalition for Gun Control 2007).

On November 16, 2007, the current Canadian government reintroduced Bill C-24 to repeal the registration of rifles and shotguns. If this bill passes, it will put more women in danger because these weapons are the ones used most frequently in domestic violence (Coalition for Gun Control 2007).

Effective implementation of firearms laws by police, justice officials, women's shelters, clinics, and NGOs is vital to a safer community. The danger of ineffective implementation is revealed in a case reported by CBC News on December 7, 2007. In 2006, an RCMP police officer returned a shotgun to a man prohibited from owning a gun and previously convicted of assault. That man later killed his wife with a rifle borrowed from a friend and then killed himself with the shotgun.

Many community groups in Canada are responding to armed violence in the home. For example, in September 2008, the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (ACWS) will host the first World Conference of Women's Shelters. This event will present a new opportunity for family violence workers in Alberta and around the world to learn from international experts and each other. The Coalition for Gun Control has been working tirelessly to profile and

address gender issues on small arms since the 1989 murders of 14 women at l'École Polytechnique. More than 70 women's groups have written to politicians in support of the firearms law, which they consider critical in preventing violence against women.

## Canada's International Contribution to the Policy Framework on SALW

A review of how gender language is used at meetings and in UN debates on SALW demonstrates that “gender in the SALW context” is not yet generally discussed “in a way that encompasses the differing social, economic and political effects of these weapons on men and women” (Schroeder & Newhouse 2004, Executive Summary). However, a review of Canada's national statements and reports to the PoA shows that government policy has evolved from merely considering gender and SALW in the context of women (lumped in with children and the elderly) as victims, to articulating programming that recognizes that gender concerns involve both men and women.

### Canadian policy language on gender and SALW at relevant UN meetings

At international meetings of the UN Programme of Action (2001–2006), Canada has consistently included some gender language in statements and national reports. A review of the statements reveals the development over time of a more nuanced understanding of gender implications in SALW issues.

For example, in 2001, the only reference to women was in this statement: “The specific targeting of civilians, including women and children, is one of the tragic realities of armed conflict today” (Pagtakhan 2001).

In 2003, the national report stated that  
the results of small arms proliferation, availability and misuse are staggering. Small arms proliferation threatens the welfare and stability of communities, regions and states. It contributes to criminal and gender-based violence, to the collapse of health and education services and to the displacement of people. It also complicates the delivery of international humanitarian assistance to populations in dire need and threatens the very lives of aid workers in conflict situations. (Canada, Government of 2003, p. 3)

In 2005, the Canadian statement (Martin 2005) referred to UN Security Council Resolution 1325:

There is little doubt that we have made progress, but a lot of work remains to be done.... These weapons continue to undermine the safety, health, education, development and economic livelihoods of millions of innocent civilians, including women, children and the elderly.

...

We also encourage the inclusion of community development initiatives into Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programmes, taking into account the needs of all members of the community – men and women, girls and boys, old and young, and to include strategies for children affected by armed conflict. In line with our obligations under Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on

women, peace and security, we must ensure the full and equal participation of women in the design and implementation of all DDR programmes and activities, as actions and decisions on DDR have a direct and specific impact on the lives of women and on the building of sustainable peace.

In 2006, Canada (Laurin 2006) included men in the gender equation: “Since young men continue to be the main perpetrators and victims of gun violence, our analysis should include gender considerations. It is also critically important that we meet the physical and psychological needs of the survivors of armed violence, and ensure that they are reintegrated into their societies as full, productive members.”

## Canadian Contribution to International Efforts to Address Gender and SALW

In national reports submitted to the UN Programme of Action meetings, Canada has indicated its support for some projects related to gender and SALW:

- A study entitled “Putting Children First” (published December 2001), developed by the UK-based Biting the Bullet initiative, focusing on the impact of small arms children, highlighting the importance of child and gender sensitive disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs (National Report 2003).
- A Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and Human Security Network publication produced July 2003 on people-centred measures related to SALW, including attention to gender-based violence, titled “Putting People First” (National Reports 2003, 2005, 2006).
- The Canadian Peacebuilding Coordinating Committee (CPCC) Small Arms Working Group (SAWG), coordinated by Project Ploughshares, including the working groups on small arms, conflict prevention, gender peacebuilding, children and armed conflict, and peace operations activities (National Reports 2004, 2005, 2006).

Other examples of Canadian-supported work on gender and SALW include:

- A paper by Susan McKay and Dyan Mazurana, “Girls in Militaries, Paramilitaries, and Armed Opposition Groups,” presented at the International Conference on War-Affected Children in Winnipeg in 2000.
- Support by the Human Security Program of Foreign Affairs Canada for research and consultation initially conducted by International Alert in collaboration with the UN Department for Disarmament Affairs, which resulted in an International Alert publication on gender implications for the PoA (2005) and the UN Coordinating Action on Small Arms (CASA) guidelines for gender mainstreaming and the PoA (2006).

### CPCC: Focus on gender and SALW issues

The Government is supporting CPCC work on gender and small arms. On November 5, 2007, the Gender and Peacebuilding and Small Arms Working Groups of CPCC co-hosted a roundtable discussion to explore the specifically gender dimensions in integrating sustainable development with reductions in armed violence and small arms misuse. The participants discussed implications of the 2006 Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development, which pledges signatories to integrate armed violence reduction and conflict

prevention programs into humanitarian and development frameworks and initiatives. Information sharing and dialogue took place on the experience of Canadian organizations in research, policy development, and development and humanitarian activities.

As a follow-up to this workshop, research was commissioned on “Canadian Contributions to Gender Dimensions to Addressing Armed Violence as a Development Priority.” This work is to be completed in 2008.

### Global civil society efforts to raise awareness on gender and SALW

The work in Canada connects to related activities around the world, which are coordinated by the International Action Network on Small Arms Women’s Network.

The IANSA Women’s Network supports organisations working on women and violence prevention to combat gun violence in their communities and support the global campaign to reduce the proliferation and misuse of small arms. Its [sic] aims to connect organisations, provide information and resources, raise public awareness, and build a united and dynamic movement of women resisting gun violence around the world. To date, the Women’s Network has over 250 members from every region in the world. (IANSA 2008)

### The Way Forward to the 2008 PoA Biennial Meeting of States

The Canadian contribution to gender and SALW issues, particularly in international research, has been consistent over the years. However, sustained support for civil society initiatives in this area must continue.

In the lead up to the 2008 Biennial Meeting of States, SAWG makes the following policy recommendations:

#### Recommendations to Canada in the domestic sphere

1. The federal government should not repeal the registration of rifles and shotguns.
2. Establish procedures for police to ensure that confiscated legal weapons are not returned to offenders in cases of domestic violence. Licenses and registrations should also be cancelled.
3. Establish mechanisms for communication within police stations; for example, police officers responsible for social crime or family violence need to communicate with the officers responsible for firearms.
4. Conduct interagency training for all relevant bodies, including police, justice officials, women’s shelters, clinics, and NGOs to develop a “broadsheet” on who is responsible for particular tasks.
5. Make legal gun owners aware of their responsibilities (and penalties for noncompliance) for safe storage and legal use.

## Recommendations to Canada on the international scene

1. Implement Security Council Resolution 1325 to involve women fully in peacemaking processes: provide support for local women's groups involved in peacebuilding and the reduction of armed violence work.
2. Encourage gender balance in governmental UN delegations to such meetings as the Biennial Meeting of States.
3. Ensure that DDR programs take into account the different needs of female and male ex-combatants.
4. Continue to support research and policy development on armed violence reduction, including its connections with gender equality.

## Notes

1. See, for example, IANSA 2006 and UN CASA 2006.
2. Wendy Cukier in Schroeder, Farr & Schnabel 2005, p. 19.

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