

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

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Making the invisible visible: The impact of small arms on women and girls in Colombia, in armed conflict and in homes

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Somewhere in Colombia, a girl is hiding. Somewhere in Colombia, a woman is silently enduring her husband's beatings. Somewhere in Colombia, an adolescent girl is being raped in front of her community. Somewhere in Colombia, a woman's tears are being silenced. What do all these stories have in common? One word.

Guns.

Ladies and Gentlemen, distinguished guests, Madam Chair, Members of the Panel,

On behalf of Adriana, Kelly, Martha, and Maria Gladys – the women in the film you have just seen - thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

Colombia's armed conflict, fueled by the drug trade and the availability of small arms, is the longest running conflict in the Western Hemisphere. The presence of guns in Colombia is linked to a strong patriarchal and "machista" culture promoted by the armed conflict. This culture supports the idea that men need guns to defend themselves and protect their families. Yet, instead of providing security, these guns aid and exacerbate violence against women and girls.

The words of the women in the film you have just seen echo the experience of many women in Colombia. They reveal the invisible impact of gun violence: its impact on women's minds, bodies and freedom. We all see the death and injury rates of men. But what we don't see are when guns do not kill but are used to exert power. What we don't see, is when guns are used behind closed doors to subjugate and intimidate family members; when guns are used to threaten adolescent girls with sexual violence, forcing entire families to flee. What we don't see are the rapes of tens of thousands of women at gunpoint.

Between 60 and 70 percent of Colombian women have suffered some form of sexual, physical, emotional or political violence in their lives. The numbers are astonishing.

In 2008 only there were 21,000 victims of sexual violence, many at gunpoint. 16,000 were children. Many women identify sexual violence at gunpoint as the direct cause of displacement. Consider this - Colombia has the second highest number of internally displaced people after Sudan and 80% of these are women and children. The threat of armed groups seizing children and forcing them to fight is another leading cause of displacement and girls account for 25 per cent of child combatants in Colombia.

So, here we are, 15 years after the Beijing conference where the fundamental rights of women and girls were reaffirmed. Surely we must stop and ask – how can this be?

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Guns have devastating effects on civilians both during and after conflicts, as they are cheap, widely available, portable and are deadly but not always in ways you might think.

On New Year's Day this year, while at home in Barranquilla, Clarena Piedad Acosta was shot twice in the head by her ex-husband. He turned himself in, was shortly detained but he was quickly set free. Before her death she had reported his abuse and gun possession to the police but no one took action.

This is not an isolated case. Perpetrators of gender-based violence go unpunished in an astounding 97 percent of cases in Colombia and although a new Colombian law requires that a gun must be removed from an aggressor in incidents of domestic violence, it is not being implemented. Women report that the police do not react, and they and their children have to go home to violent husbands, including those with guns.

So children who grow up in such a climate of intimidation and fear and witness daily violence, sometimes the death of a parent are more likely to perpetuate violence, join armed groups, and see gun possession and armed violence as a way to resolve conflicts.

Maria Gladys in the film and others have had the courage to speak out and share their experiences. Sometimes this means reliving the horror of the event, feeling humiliated and not receiving protection afterwards. Brave, resilient, strong, these girls are telling us. "Our bodies are not a battlefield. Guns are not protecting us, they are being used to threaten us and take away our rights." But who is listening?

We all seek a future of peace and dignity. So do they. Can we really deny them this simple request and basic right? It is time to start taking gun violence against women seriously.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Violence in the home and the armed conflict feed each other in an unending cycle. These are not simple issues. The drug trade, the persistence of the conflict and availability of guns make it difficult to find sustainable solutions. But these cannot justify apathy, silence, and inaction. In fact, there are things we can start doing right now:

The first step is collecting data. Without accurate data on gun possession and its links to violence against women it is impossible to formulate and implement successful public policies on these issues.

We must also demand:

- Action to end impunity for armed violence against women and girls, and;
- Gun violence prevention through a strong and effective Arms Trade Treaty.

Gender equality and empowerment of women - the third Millennium Development Goal – cannot be achieved without eliminating gun violence against women.

Today, for Adriana, Kelly, Maria Gladys, and Martha, and for all of us, we must not let the Beijing Platform for Action remain empty discourse, but we must turn it into concrete actions.

Thank you for your attention.