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Reinvigorating Gender-Responsive Small Arms Control in the Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Asia and the Pacific



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**WOMEN'S
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Two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, health and socio-economic impacts have become a global reality. As COVID-19 mitigation plans have taken precedent, armed violence and human rights violations continued to rise. Particularly, the impact of the health crisis coupled with structural gender norms and inequalities led to a surge of gender-based violence (GBV). In this context, the presence of small arms and light weapons (SALW) remains a huge threat. This paper provides an overview of the linkages between GBV and the proliferation and misuse of SALW in Asia-Pacific, and discusses how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these issues. It concludes by setting out ways to reinvigorate efforts to enhance gender-responsive small arms control in the region, in turn promoting more effective and equitable policy initiatives that can withstand evolving security and health challenges.

Armed Violence and SALW Proliferation

The uncontrolled proliferation and misuse of SALW continues to pose a systemic and pervasive threat to the security and socio-economic development of many countries in the Asia-Pacific region. The factors driving SALW proliferation are often intertwined with geographic and security challenges such as porous borders, extensive crossroads for illicit trafficking¹, and sustained subnational conflict and transnational terrorism. Sources of illicit SALW are diverse and include insufficient identification and disposal of surplus weapons, leakages from inadequate state-held weapon stockpiles, insufficient export and import controls, and in some cases, illicit local weapons manufacturing.² SALW are among the primary weapons used in conflict-settings, in cases of interpersonal violence and to perpetrate criminal activities. Armed violence is also a highly gendered phenomenon in both its causes and consequences in differing contexts. Of the more than half-a-million people who die violently every year around the world – in conflict zones and elsewhere – more than four fifths (84 percent) are male and less than one fifth (16 percent) are female. Most perpetrators are men acting as individuals or affiliated with a State or non-State armed group or criminal gangs. A small arm is used in almost half of all violent deaths globally and in approximately one-third of all killings of women and girls. Nevertheless, a growing body of research alludes to the idea that women and girls in particular are disproportionately affected in a number of ways by the proliferation and misuse of SALW, including by intimate male partners and family members or friends, and by severe indirect effects of armed conflicts, for example by sexual and other violence perpetrated by combatants during mass displacement, and the denial or destruction of food, water, health, education and other essential services causing physical and psychological harm³.

Regarding the Pacific region, non-government groups in Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, have treated inadequately safeguarded state armories as “gun supermarkets” through looting.⁴ Protracted armed conflicts and violence in parts of South and Southeast Asia, including the escalation of

¹ <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/firearms-protocol/firearms-study.html>

² Centre for Armed Violence Reduction (CAVR), 2021: Paper presented at UNRCPD webinar on 8 March, 2021.

³ See for reference: *Small arms and light weapons: Report of the Secretary-General S/2021/839* – 30 September 2021; Impact of arms transfers on human rights Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights A/HRC/44/29 – 19 June 2020; Conflict-related sexual violence - Report of the Secretary-General (S/2021/312) – 30 March 2021; United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs *Women, men and the gendered nature of SALW*, MOSAIC Module 06.10; Small Arms Survey: *Women and Guns*, Geneva 2014; Small Arms Survey: *Global Burden of Armed Violence- Every Body Counts*, Geneva, 5 May 2015.

⁴ Alpers, P. and Conor Twyford. 2003. Small Arms in the Pacific. Small Arms Survey Occasional Paper No. 8, p.xvi.

violence following the recent seizure of power by the Taliban in Afghanistan and the military coup in Myanmar, have fueled the demand for SALW, often obtained through illicit sources.⁵ In Myanmar, since the military takeover (1 February 2021), fighting between and among the Myanmar army, ethnic armed organizations, and local people's defense forces continues unabated. More than 1,300 armed and unarmed people, including dozens of children, have been killed across the country.⁶ A study published by the University of Melbourne highlights how armed conflict-related activities increased in five countries during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. Four of these five countries – India, Iraq, Pakistan and the Philippines – are in the Asia-Pacific region.⁷

Despite the region holding strict legislative controls on civilian firearm possession, in many Asia-Pacific countries, civilian firearm possession vastly outnumbers state-held weapons.⁸ In Indonesia, civilians owned an estimated 82,000 firearms (2017)⁹, in Myanmar civilians owned an estimated 877,000 firearms (2017)¹⁰, and in the Philippines, there were between 2.6 and 3.9 million estimated civilian-held firearms (2019).¹¹ Lawful civilian-held weapons in the Pacific reached 3.1 million firearms (2003), or one privately held gun for every ten people, surpassing the global ratio by more than 50 percent,¹² with most firearms being owned by Australians and New Zealanders. In Australia, there were 3,573,000 civilian-held firearms or an estimated 14.5 per 100 persons (2017), while in New Zealand, the ratio of firearms per 100 persons is 26.3 (or 1,212,000 firearms) (2017)¹³. While these arms have been obtained through legal channels and in line with international instruments and treaties, they can be misused in the context of weak SALW control frameworks to perpetrate acts of domestic and intimate partner violence. As governments struggled with strategies to manage the pandemic and its impacts, violence against women has intensified since the outbreak of the pandemic,¹⁴ exposing what United Nations' Secretary-General António Guterres called "the shadow pandemic".¹⁵ Emerging data and reports suggest that violence against women and girls, particularly domestic violence, increased during the pandemic.

Facts and Figures on Gender Based Violence in the Asia-Pacific Region

Armed violence is most frequently directed against, or disproportionately affecting, an actual or perceived member of a persecuted political, ethnic or religious minority, or targeted on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. Gender-based violence (GBV) is violence that is directed at a person based on discriminating norms and practices relating to his or her specific sex, gender or role in society.¹⁶ Violence against women (VAW) by men is the largest form of GBV, but homophobic and transphobic violence are also a form of gender-based violence that is driven by a desire to punish those seen as defying gender norms. When VAW is enabled or perpetrated with small arms, such violence can lead to major health, human rights and developmental crises¹⁷. In the context of already prominent gender inequalities, the illicit proliferation, threat and actual use of small arms in the Asia-Pacific region has exacerbated lethal GBV in situations of armed conflict as well as in femicides perpetrated in the home and in other criminal violence. It has also restricted access, especially of women and girls to essential social services, and been aggravated by extensive lockdowns during the recent pandemic.

⁵ Centre for Armed Violence Reduction (CAVR), 2021.

⁶ Statement by the Deputy Spokesperson for the Secretary General, 21 December 2021.

⁷ Coronavirus escalated armed conflicts in several war-torn countries (unimelb.edu.au)

⁸ Centre for Armed Violence Reduction (CAVR), 2021

⁹ Karp, Aaron. 2018 'Civilian Firearms Holdings, 2017.' *Estimating Global Civilian-Held Firearms Numbers*. Geneva: Small Arms Survey, the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Concepcion, Bruce. 2019 'Firearm Numbers and Management in the Philippines.' *Personal Interview with GunPolicy.org Director of Research Mike Picard*. Manila: GunPolicy.org.

¹² Alpers, Philip and Conor Twyford. 2003. Small arms in the Pacific. Small Arms Survey Occasional Paper No.8, p.xvi

¹³ <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-BP-Civilian-held-firearms-annexe.pdf>

¹⁴ See for example, <https://www.unfpa.org/news/digital-cry-help-big-data-study-asia-pacific-provides-key-signposts-violence-against-women>

¹⁵ <https://data.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/documents/Publications/Measuring-shadow-pandemic.pdf>

¹⁶ Discriminatory laws and practices and acts of violence against individuals based on their sexual orientation and gender identity - Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2011, A/HRC/19/41, para. 20) as well as 'Integrating a gender perspective into Human Rights Investigations', 2018.

¹⁷ UNFPA Pacific. 2008. An Assessment of the state of violence against women in Fiji, p.4

In the Pacific region, during periods of conflicts, men and women have been impacted differently by SALW. Men were more likely to be the perpetrators and victims of violence than women. During the Solomon Islands conflict (1998–2003), for example, women were more likely to experience sexual violence and rape than men. Some of this violence was perpetrated through the use of SALW. Out of the 63 statements collected by the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Committee after the conflict, 50 were made by women.¹⁸ Outside of conflict settings, men are more likely to be involved in gang violence or to be the victims of armed homicide, while women are more likely to be the victims of domestic violence.¹⁹

The Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar (The Mission) found that the gendered impact of Myanmar's conflict has been multi-faceted and taking a heavy toll on women and girls²⁰. In northern Myanmar, women are the victims of sexual and gender-based violence. In Rakhine, Rohingya women have been subjected to grave sexual and gender-based violence, including gang rape, rape and mutilation. The Mission also obtained information about people from the transgender community, and in particular transgender Rohingya. It found that transgender women have suffered sexual and gender-based violence, including rape by the Tatmadaw and Border Guard Police.²¹ In a joint statement on 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence in Myanmar, the United Nations underlined how during times of humanitarian crisis, conflicts, climate disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic, gender-based violence is exacerbated. It also notes how "the compounded crisis in Myanmar has disproportionately affected women and aggravated the vulnerabilities of women and girls from marginalized groups..."²², while in Afghanistan, UN Women is working with the humanitarian systems in place to ensure a gender-sensitive response to the country's triple crises of armed conflict, Covid-19 pandemic, and climate change.²³

The Pacific region has some of the highest rates of physical and sexual violence by an intimate partner in the world. VAW in the Asia-Pacific region is demonstrated by high rates of harmful practices, such as honor killings, dowry-related violence, menstruation stigmatization and lack of access to hygiene products, and forced marriage.

From July 2019 to July 2020, it has been estimated that 46 percent of women in Afghanistan (2015) and Timor-Leste (2015) have experienced intimate partner violence, while 38 percent of women in China (2012) experienced psychological violence by their own partners.²⁴ Some countries like India and Nepal, have experienced extremely long lockdowns, thereby increasing the likelihood for GBV as women have been confined in their homes with their abusers. Health and security measures to address the pandemic, such as social distancing, has in turn increased the risks of GBV and insecurity for women.²⁵

Reductions to mobility has hindered women's ability to remove themselves from potentially volatile situations. In the Asia-Pacific region, the number of women seeking domestic violence support services, online or by telephone, has risen significantly during the pandemic. Calls to domestic violence helplines have increased by 30 percent in Singapore, 40 percent in Malaysia and 50 percent in China by April 2020 compared to pre-pandemic rates.²⁶ Additionally, during the first month of the pandemic (March 2020) 40 percent of frontline workers in Australia reported an increase in requests for help.²⁷ Due to the limitations of in-person services, social media and internet search engines have become the only tools for women seeking help in cases of GBV. In Malaysia, the volume of "help-seeking" keywords (i.e., "domestic violence hotline", "sexual assault lawyer", "sexual abuse counseling") on

¹⁸ Publication gender arms and security in the Pacific.pdf (kobe-u.ac.jp)

¹⁹ Arms and Ammunition in Oceania - A Guide for Pacific Governments

²⁰ Human Rights Council - Forty second session - 9-27 September 2019,

https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/FFM-Myanmar/sexualviolence/A_HRC_CRP_4.pdf

²¹ A/HRC/42/CRP.4 (un.org)

²² <https://myanmar.un.org/en/160055-joint-statement-16-days-activism-against-gender-based-violence-myanmar>

²³ Expert's take: Gender equality is critical for the Afghanistan's future, long-term development, and sustained peace | UN Women

²⁴ ibid

²⁵ See UN Women, Violence Against Women and Girls Data Collection during COVID-19, in <https://www.unwomen.org/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/vawg-data-collection-during-covid-19-compressed.pdf?la=en&vs=2339>

²⁶ <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2021/Progress-on-the-Sustainable-Development-Goals-The-gender-snapshot-2021-en.pdf>

²⁷ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/5/press-release-the-shadow-pandemic-of-violence-against-women-during-covid-19> and <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-27/coronavirus-domestic-family-violence-covid-19-surge/12096988>

internet search engines increased by 70 percent compared to pre-pandemic rates.²⁸ Increases were also observed in Nepal, Thailand, Singapore, Bangladesh, and the Philippines.

Based on this evidence, men and women across the region should be given full and effective opportunities to participate in the development, training, implementation and promotion of policies and regulations to effectively control SALW and prevent their misuse. However, in practice, women are often excluded from these processes.

Status of the International Arms Control Treaties and Frameworks in the Asia-Pacific Region

Measures to prevent armed violence and develop strict controls on SALW must therefore include consideration of the gendered aspects of ownership, use and misuse of arms; the differentiated impacts of weapons on women and men; and the ways in which gender roles can shape arms control and disarmament policies and practices. Since 2001, urged on by civil society, Member States of the United Nations have negotiated and agreed new international instruments to regulate SALW with increasingly progressive language on gender, including on women's participation, youth engagement and survivors. Multilateral frameworks and treaties on SALW now include, in particular, the [United Nations Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects \(PoA\)](#) and its International Instrument to Enable States to Identify and Trace, in a Timely and Reliable Manner, Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons ([International Tracing Instrument, or ITI](#)), the [Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, their Parts and Components and Ammunition \(Firearms Protocol\)](#) supplementing the [United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime](#), and the [Arms Trade Treaty \(ATT\)](#). Together, these contain a resounding call to curb the proliferation of SALW and to regulate the legal trade of such weapons to prevent human right violations, including GBV. The ATT is the first ever legally-binding instrument that expressly recognizes the link between GBV and the international arms trade. Article 7.4 reads that "the exporting State Party, in making this assessment, shall take into account the risk of the conventional arms being used to commit or facilitate serious acts of gender-based violence or serious acts of violence against women and children".²⁹ However, efforts to get States to implement these frameworks or accede to treaties have been challenging. Across the Asia-Pacific region there are sixteen States which are now parties to the ATT and fourteen who are signatories to the treaty³⁰. While these numbers are relatively low compared to other regions, China ratified the ATT in 2020 leaving much hope that other States in the region will follow suit. Notably also, the Philippines will shortly deposit their instrument of ratification with the United Nations, and have taken up the chairpersonship of the upcoming [Eighth Biennial Meeting of States on the PoA](#).

However, reporting by States on the implementation of the PoA and ITI has been faltering in the region. Of the 93 national reports received globally in 2020/2021, covering the implementation periods 2018 and 2019, only eighteen came from the Asia-Pacific region³¹. Nevertheless, while the rate of engagement has been low, there have been considerable increases in requests by States in the Asia-Pacific region for international assistance on the implementation of the PoA and its ITI, for which different international cooperation and assistance mechanisms within the international community exist. In addition, during 2019, Fiji, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Palau, Tuvalu and Vanuatu received capacity-building support from the ATT Voluntary Trust Fund.³²

While the global pandemic has shifted attention away from other pressing matters, it has proven to be more important than ever to remain persistent with the implementation of global instruments and treaties on all critical aspects of SALW control. Those frameworks help Member States developing sound

²⁸ https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/covid-19_and_vaw_insights_from_big_data_analysis_final.pdf

²⁹ [Gender Based Violence and the Arms Trade Treaty](#), Control Arms, 2018

³⁰ See [Status of ATT Participation](#)

³¹ They are: China, Cyprus, India, Iraq, Japan, Kazakhstan, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Maldives, Mongolia, Nauru, Philippines, Qatar, RoK, Thailand, and UAE, See <https://smallarms.un-arm.org/national-reports>.

³² Voluntary Trust Fund (thearmstradetreaty.org)

SALW control infrastructures that effectively link arms control to the prevention of human rights violations and socio-economic challenges, such as the ones that arose during the global pandemic.

How to Strengthen Gender Equality and Small Arms Control During the Covid-19 Pandemic?

Over the past two years States responded nationally and globally to the pandemic in manifold ways, but the relevance of small arms control in their response mechanisms was frequently overlooked. However, States must reinvigorate efforts to enhance the integration of efforts towards gender equality with small arms control measures to close the current gap.

➤ 1. Collect relevant data and evidence of the linkages between GBV, the impact of the global pandemic and small arms proliferation

Relevant evidence can take the form of detailed case studies and also statistical data on trends. The growing body of literature and available sex-disaggregated data in small arms context have significantly contributed to the increased recognition of linkages between gender and SALW.³³ Sex, age and disability-disaggregated data, when collected and made available, not only make those linkages even more visible, and help raise awareness, but they are also vital to understanding and mitigating the negative effects of the illicit proliferation and misuse of SALW on women, as well as contributing to the development of an adapted gender-sensitive solution to the issue of small arms and its specific impact on men and women. Gender-relevant data can help officials and civil society advocates explore different aspects of SALW control, such as the gender patterns of homicides committed with firearms, connections between domestic violence and loopholes in, or lack of, legislation to regulate civilian firearm possession, the gendered drivers of the demand for weapons and the overall attitude toward guns within the society. It is also very important to collect data on women's meaningful participation in this field. Without comprehensive data and gender analysis, Member States will not be able to mainstream gender into SALW control.

During the pandemic, the accurate and comprehensive collection of gender- and age-disaggregated data has been especially difficult given the lack of face-to-face interactions, though new ways to collect relevant information have been established (using a GBV phone hotline for instance). The contribution of civil society organisations is particularly relevant in this respect and must also be taken into consideration when developing research and public messaging to help find solutions. Effective mechanisms should be put in place to ensure that data collected by civil society reach government entities and are, in the best of circumstances, compatible with national data collection and reporting methods.

➤ 2. Make gender equality an essential objective of SALW control and national security strategy.

Men are predominant owners and users of SALW in the home, in conflict settings, as well as in professional settings (i.e., law enforcement, military, private security personnel, and leading roles within the ministries of Defense and Public Security, among others). Often, a socially-constructed notion of security is embedded with associations between hegemonic masculinity and weapons possession as a panacea for security regardless of social disaffection. At the government level, policy priorities dedicated to militarization sometimes ignore or prevail over social programmes needed to address health, education, housing and other social needs. While poverty, marginalization and vast inequalities persist, total global military expenditure rose to \$1,981 billion last year, an increase of 2.6 per cent in real terms from 2019³⁴. Militaristic attitudes and a harmful ideological socialization, which accept violence as a norm, often permeate the sub-cultures of military or police officers leaving them susceptible to ignoring, downplaying or participating in the misuse of

³³ Gender Aspects of SALW and How to Address Them in Practice, UNDP-SEESAC, 2018

³⁴ <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2021/world-military-spending-rises-almost-2-trillion-2020>

SALW. In order to break these harmful links and allow values of gender equality to transfer from the institutional level to the interpersonal level, changes to the cultures of the security sector need to be established in line with United Nations human rights norms and instruments.

Embracing wider and more holistic definitions of peace and security that reduce reliance on military armaments account for our common humanity and recognize women's empowerment as a critical driver of sustainable peace and development, which will enhance safety for everyone. Through the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become even clearer that the lack of holistic policy objectives within the security sector frequently leaves women out of consideration and can even enable direct violence against them (i.e., lack of consideration for how quarantine mandates could unduly affect women). In order to adequately handle security threats, including global pandemics, security sector agendas and the development of strict controls on SALW, must promote the equal, full and effective participation of women. This must include the meaningful role of women in leadership and as agents of change, in all policy, planning and implementation peace and disarmament processes.

➤ **3. Make use of available instruments and networks and leverage their areas of convergence.**

A number of treaties, programmes and tools deriving from the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration and Covenants on Human Rights and the International Humanitarian Laws are available to help Member States overcome security and socio-economic challenges. Arms control and gender equality instruments and treaties share many of the same objectives and provide for additional measures. Thus, States should respect and utilize these instruments and enact measures in international cooperation to achieve their objectives. The implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda (WPS) has recently gained traction in Asia-Pacific with an increasing number of National and Regional Action Plans (NAP) on the implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 (2000) and subsequent resolutions. There are now 14 States in the Asia-Pacific region that have adopted NAPs or similar policies to implement the WPS agenda. However only a few have included arms control or disarmament in their NAP, therefore falling short in addressing one of the persistent challenges to national and regional, as well as human, security as part of their efforts. In the face of the global pandemic, it became clear that cross-implementation of both SALW and gender equality-related treaties and frameworks would strengthen States' capacity to deal with two daunting issues in a streamlined manner, with efforts towards one of these priorities meaning effort towards both.

In 2021, States agreed at the Seventh Biennial Meeting of States to Consider the Implementation of the Programme of Action (BMS7) to the harmonization of national policies and action plans on SALW and WPS.³⁵ In practice this means that WPS and disarmament or arms control actors should consider the relevance of SALW control in WPS and GBV discussions and vice versa. Regular information exchanges with parliamentarians and civil society, and among national focal points working on SALW and WPS, must be formalized. WPS experts and gender advisors should be seriously considered for inclusion in arms control delegations, discussions, and all decision-making, implementation, and evaluation processes. Likewise, SALW control experts should be fully involved in WPS delegations and NAP decision-making.

Conclusion

While COVID-19 remains a pervasive threat, new global challenges are constantly on the horizon that could yet again expose the fragile and volatile relationship between the lack of strict small arms controls and gender inequality and violence. Approaches to addressing these relationships need to be sustainable and robust in order to transcend the persistence of GBV. To help overcome competing policy priorities and achieve the inclusion of GBV considerations in SALW control and vice versa, more

³⁵ <https://undocs.org/A/CONF.192/BMS/2021/1>

comprehensive collection and aggregation of data is required as is the full and effective participation of women at all levels. International instruments provide a valuable framework to develop effective measures at the national level and enhance international cooperation to achieve a safer and more secure world for all.

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