



PARLIAMENTARY FORUM
ON SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS

Policy Statement on Violence against Women

Board of the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons,
meeting in Buenos Aires, May 16, 2009

'Violence against women and girls continues unabated in every continent, country and culture. It takes a devastating toll on women's lives, on their families, and on society as a whole. Most societies prohibit such violence — yet the reality is that too often; it is covered up or tacitly condoned' — UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, 8 March 2007.

One in three women will experience violence in their lifetime. The problem has reached pandemic proportions and can be said to be the most widespread and socially accepted violation of human rights.

In May 2007, the Board of the Parliamentary Forum adopted a policy statement on Gender and SALW, focusing on 'gender mainstreaming' and the effort to take into consideration the situations of both men and women in any planned action as well as emphasising the importance of including women in the decision-making process. Building on this, the Board of the Parliamentary Forum find it necessary to take a strong stand against violence against women and the devastating effects it has on women around the world.

In this light, the Board of the Parliamentary Forum thought it necessary to take a stronger stand against violence against women due to the devastating effects it has on women around the world.

The United Nations General Assembly defines violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life". It thus refers to a wide range of violations of women's human rights, including trafficking, rape, wife abuse, sexual abuse and harmful cultural practices and traditions that irreparably damage girls' and women's reproductive and sexual health. The 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women noted that this violence could be perpetrated by assailants of either gender, family members and even the State itself.

Although the intensity varies, violence against women occurs in both developed and developing countries and in conflict and non-conflict contexts. According to Yakin Ertürk, Special Rapporteur for the UN on violence against women, the scale and brutality of the sexual violence currently committed against women in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) can be

described as war crimes and crimes against humanity. Over 500 000 women have been raped over the last ten years. Gender-based violence is used as a deliberate and strategic weapon in warfare between different parties, not only in Congo but in many conflict settings around the world. By causing as much humiliation and damage as possible, often directly in front of the husband and children, the perpetrators can spread fear and chaos.

Rape as a war strategy is used to show the men of the enemy side that they cannot protect their women. This can be achieved in particular in cultures, where women are the backbone of society. By strategically breaking down women the perpetrators can disrupt an entire society. Aside from severe physical injuries, women face psychological traumas and the risk of being infected by HIV/AIDS and other diseases, as well as the risk of unwanted pregnancies is high.

It is estimated that worldwide, one in five women will become a victim of rape or attempted rape in her lifetime. In many societies there is a stigma attached to rape victims and the women are often held responsible for the violence against them. She may therefore be shunned by her husband and community, which will in turn lead to economic difficulties. The legal system in many countries contains loopholes which allow the perpetrators to act with impunity, for instance by proposing to marry the victim.

Small arms facilitate crimes directed specifically at women and make sexual abuse and violence yet more lethal. The lion's share (60 percent) of all small arms and light weapons in the world are owned privately and this is one important explanation for why the mortality rate increases among women abused by their men. In post-conflict contexts, SALW and ammunition are still widely available which means that women run a great risk of being killed after the conflict is over. During the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) phase, women can be of great use since they have both information of where weapons are kept and it is in their interest that the arms be taken away and destroyed.

Violence against women is indeed a security threat, both against women as individuals but also in a wider perspective, but is rarely addressed in the international debate on security policy. A clear difference can be seen since men are often exposed to violence in public places whereas women most often suffer violence in their own home where it is more difficult to detect. Intimate partner violence is a very common form of violence and the most unsafe place for a woman might be her own home. Half of the women who die from homicide are killed by their current or former husbands or partners, often by the use of guns, beatings and burns (UNIFEM). Another key issue is that many women do not seek help or report their experiences of violence, often due to limited availability of services, stigma and fear.

The military and the police are supposed to protect individuals. However in many states gender-based violence is overlooked, often due to the lack of relevant legislation and/or implementation or by being seen as a private matter. Implementation and enforcement of legislation is vital but it is also necessary to put a stop to laws that emphasize family reunification over the rights of women and girls. In this sense the state has failed to protect its citizens but instead contributes to the oppression of women.

Instability and a potential outbreak of violent conflict can be identified by using 'early warning systems' which would give the international community time to act in order to prevent the conflict from escalating. There is a responsibility for the international community to intervene

when violence against an ethnic group is widespread, systematic and large scale and this should be the case for systematic gender-based violence as well. In early warning efforts or situation analyses for conflict prevention, gender issues are still not widely addressed. Yet gender indicators – those signs that reflect the changing circumstances of men and women in society – are often the earliest signs of impending conflict. Hence, by identifying violence against women as an international security threat, it increases the chances of preventing an armed conflict from breaking out already at an early stage.

The Parliamentary Forum Policy Statement on Gender and SALW highlights the importance of promoting gender-equal participation at all levels and contexts. Persistent political exclusion of women or a sharp reduction in the representation of women, fewer women in public places as well as other forms of economic or educational discrimination should all be seen as early warnings. The international community must also take note of any gradual changes which occur when a tolerant society starts becoming more intolerant, and particularly of any changes that involve more restrictive laws and rules for women.

Protection of women from violence does not equal security. Measures to ensure women's security should not in any way limit their freedom of movement, as is usually the case when the security threats are deemed too difficult to manage.

Security threats against women need to be recognized and addressed. In accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820 on women, peace and security, women's equal and full participation as active agents in peace and security must be taken seriously. Women's security, freedom of movement and equal participation can only be ensured when women are seen as actors with the right to attend meetings and work outside the home and with the right to make their own choices.

Objectives

The Board of the Parliamentary Forum of Small Arms and Light Weapons, meeting in Buenos Aires, May 16 2009;

Recognizes that violence against women is a global problem and an international security threat which might reach catastrophic proportions when used as a strategic weapon in warfare as a way to terrorize, humiliate and break down women and society as a whole;

Acknowledges that early warning and preventive activities can be made more effective by utilizing the untapped potential of women, women's networks and women's organizations as actors for peace;

Draws attention to the fact that violence against women and its link to SALW is an essential theme which needs to be addressed in global security and development discussions, since SALW facilitate violence against women making sexual abuse and violence more lethal, particularly in post-conflict contexts where SALW are still widely available constitute an immense risk for women while at the same time the active participation for women in the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) phase is vital;

Recommends 'gender-specific early warning indicators which can detect shifts in power structures and/or the start of widespread, systematic violence against a certain group which in turn may lead to armed conflict breaking out;

Urges, that the international community and other stakeholders, both on the regional and national levels, firmly display political will, and allocate adequate resources, for addressing violence against women;

Recommends violence prevention measures directed at women and girls as well as at men and boys such as education and opportunities for women and girls to improve their self-esteem and negotiating skills, and reducing gender inequities in communities, as well as further research to assess the effectiveness of these measures;

Urges the members of the Forum and their parliamentary colleagues to, if needed, create specific legislation on violence against women and promote revisions and updates of existing national legislations on gender-based violence, in order to avoid loopholes and better address the needs of women and reduce their exposure to violence and threats;

Expresses its conviction that gender-equal participation at all levels of society is key in order to assure women's security rather than protection, *reaffirming* its support to the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820 on Women, Peace and Security and calls for its full and immediate implementation;

Mandates the Secretariat to undertake various activities within the program work of the Forum, in order to considerably raise the profile of the Forum on violence against women, through, amongst other things, the development of practical policy tools, capacity-building, reforms to relevant legislation, and awareness-raising.