



PARLIAMENTARY FORUM
ON SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS

Policy Statement on Bladed Weapons and Blunt Objects

Board of the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons,
meeting in New York, March 18, 2013

Armed Violence kills up to 740 000 people per year.¹ While both policy and research mainly focus on the impact firearms have on homicide rates, bladed weapons and blunt objects have largely been neglected in the discussion on armed violence. Although small arms and light weapons (hereafter SALW) cause a large share of the proportion of violent deaths, bladed weapons and blunt objects are increasingly responsible for non-lethal damage, and in some parts of the world lead to the majority of lethal outcomes of armed violence.

Bladed weapons are defined as ‘knives (e.g., kitchen knives, pocket knives, switchblades) and any object other than a knife whose action would cut or pierce flesh (e.g., hatchet, razor blade, bow and arrow, sword, crossbow)’. The category of blunt objects includes ‘any tool or article that is used to cause physical injury or death by hitting or bludgeoning’ (e.g., baseball bat, brick, stone, and sticks).²

Whilst clearly focusing on SALW, the Parliamentary Forum acknowledges the severe impact of bladed weapons and blunt objects on both injury and homicide rates and thus on public health and human development. Bladed weapons and blunt objects share a number of characteristics with firearms, both in terms of risk factors and the consequences of the use of these weapons. In particular, six main characteristics illustrate the close link to small arms and light weapons.

Bladed weapons are firstly extremely easy to access both in terms of financial costs and material accessibility. Unlike firearms, they are common in every household and often used in workplaces³ for example in agriculture and gastronomy. Their use in daily life is institutionalized in almost every culture, lowering the inhibition of using them. Blunt objects are even easier to access, as they can simply be found on the streets (such as sticks and stones) and are easily modified.

Secondly, bladed weapons and blunt objects are not sufficiently controlled, and compared to firearms extremely difficult to control. This is particularly relevant for blunt objects, as they are

¹ OECD-DAC, 2009: *Armed Violence Reduction: Enabling Development*

² Both definitions are taken from: Leesti, Tracey, 1997: *Weapons and Violent Crime*. Jurist at – Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Statistics Canada – Catalogue no. 85-002-XPE Vol. 17 no. 7.

³ World Health Organization (WHO), 2009, *Violence Prevention – The Evidence: Guns, Knives and Pesticides. Reducing Access to Lethal Means*

most often not even legally defined as weapons. In addition and as outlined above, some bladed weapons such as kitchen and agricultural tools are used in daily life at workplaces, which makes legislating against them almost impossible. Although there has been some effort to control bladed weapons and sharp objects (e.g. broken bottles etc.) in European countries in terms of raising the minimum purchasing age for knives and maximizing prison sentences for their possession (United Kingdom), or regulating and licensing business that uses bladed objects outside their property (Scotland), the long-term effects of these legislative control mechanisms are limited.⁴ More legislative action on the issue is warranted in order to guarantee effective control mechanisms that aim at preventing and reducing armed violence committed with these weapons. Space for legislative measures is especially given with regard to knives, since these are commonly defined as weapons and are thus an easier subject of legislation than blunt objects.

Although not as lethal as SALW, bladed weapons and blunt objects are thirdly able to cause significant injury and mutilation. In addition, as will be outlined further down, their use in infliction of damage on another person might also lead to death, making bladed weapons and blunt objects the weapons of choice in some parts of the world.

Similar to SALW, the use of bladed weapons fourthly bears a gender dimension. In this context, research from South Africa suggests that knives are commonly chosen when raping young girls and women.⁵ However, although most firearms are in the possession of men, they are also more frequently directed against male victims.⁶ Femicides, on the other hand, less frequently involve firearms, which illustrates the importance to address bladed weapons and blunt objects when used to injure or even kill.

Fifthly, the significant rate of violence inflicted with the help of knives, sticks, stones and other related objects represents a severe obstacle to human development and thus harms the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Consequences of bladed weapon and blunt object related violence include long-term hospitalization and extensive health care, with severe financial implications. This is particularly worrying in transitional and post-conflict societies already struggling with poverty, unemployment and general low levels of development. High public health care costs draw off resources from other public services, the provision of which might help prevent armed violence in the first place.

Finally, the risk factors which push people to use bladed weapons and blunt objects are very similar to the ones that push someone to use firearms. Hence, there is a need for a similar approach to preventive measures as with regard to firearms.

Despite similarities to firearms, very little research has so far been done on why people use bladed weapons and blunt objects in violence. This represents a severe obstacle for assessing the risk factors and causes of armed violence and makes it difficult to address the issue adequately. In particular, it averts effective legislation on the matter, since very little is known on how legislative

⁴ World Health Organization (WHO), 2009: *op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁵ The Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV), 2010: *Tackling Armed Violence. Key Findings and Recommendation on the Study on the Violent Nature of Crime in South Africa*, p. 29.

⁶ The Small Arms Survey estimates that between 2004 and 2009, firearms were used on average in one-third of all femicides world-wide, leaving two-thirds of the killings weapon-free or to be committed with the help of other weapons. However, it has to be noted that the share of femicides by firearms differs largely between regions (see Small Arms Survey, 2012: *Femicide. A Global Problem*, SAS Research Notes Armed Violence).

measures might prevent and reduce armed violence related to these weapons. The few studies conducted so far find evidence of a significant variation in the frequency and consequence of use of bladed weapons and blunt objects between regions and countries as well as within them. While SALW related violence overwhelmingly accounts for the largest share of homicides in Latin America and the Caribbean, in a number of African, Asian and European countries bladed weapons and blunt objects have outnumbered firearms. For example, evidence suggests that in Malaysia's capital, Kuala Lumpur, the majority of intentional violent deaths are with 41% inflicted with different kinds of sharp objects (knives, glass etc.). In Scotland (47%), Nigeria (40%), and Australia (34%), knives are responsible for causing the largest share of intentional homicides.⁷

In addition, some post-conflict societies are increasingly facing the challenge of bladed weapon and blunt object related violence that seems to replace violence committed with the help of firearms. While this can be seen as a positive development given the lethality of SALW, it should be remembered that bladed weapons can also cause a tremendous amount of damage, as outlined above. Although firearms are with 31% mainly responsible for lethal outcomes (in comparison to blunt objects with 20%, and bladed weapons with 19%), research suggests that in Liberia for example, most non-lethal violence is committed with the help of bladed weapons (42.3%), followed by blunt objects (34.4%) and firearms (16.2%).⁸ This clearly shows that merely focusing on SALW is not sufficient in order to assess, explain, reduce and prevent contemporary armed violence.

Additionally, evidence from South Africa suggests that there might be spatial variation within countries. Armed violence outside metropolitan areas seems to be more likely to be committed by knives than firearms, whereas intentional homicides within big towns usually involve firearms.⁹ Furthermore, bladed weapons seem to be the choice when committing 'acquaintance violence' (e.g. violence between family members, friends, and partners), while firearms are commonly used in fatal stranger violence.¹⁰

Finally, it has to be recalled that some of the most devastating armed conflicts were characterized by the predominant use of bladed weapons. The genocide in Rwanda for instance, which peaked in 1994, has been to a large extent committed with the help of machetes, causing not only approximately 800 000 deaths¹¹, but also tremendous physical and psychological damage. This particular case further illustrates the psychological dimension of bladed weapons and blunt objects, as they can be used as instruments for torture and non-lethal brutalities.

⁷ World Health Organization (WHO), *op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁸ Action on Armed Violence (AOAV), 2012: *Liberia Armed Violence Observatory (LAVO)*, pp.9, 11.

⁹ The Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR), 2010: *op. cit.*, p. 8.

¹⁰ The Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR), 2010, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

¹¹ Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), (Date of retrieval: 13/02/28) *UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia*: www.ucdp.uu.se/database, Uppsala University; lowest and highest fatality estimate

Objectives

The Board of the Parliamentary Forum of Small Arms and Light Weapons, meeting in New York, on March 28, 2013;

Recognizes the severe impact of bladed weapons and blunt objects on human development and public health as well as its similarities to SALW related violence;

Urges its members thus to raise awareness on the urgency of the matter within their respective parliaments, to oversee their governments work and to encourage improved monitoring of the issue of bladed weapons and blunt object related violence in their home-countries;

Asks its members further to raise public awareness on the issue and promote a stronger discourse within policy in order to prevent bladed weapons and blunt objects related violence;

Encourages its members in their function as parliamentarians to investigate possibilities for legislative action on the issue, particularly with regard to the difficulties of controlling bladed weapons and blunt objects, and push for more and coherent legislation, where needed;

Calls for more profound qualitative and quantitative research on bladed weapons and blunt objects related violence in order to provide reliable data that is necessary to assess risk factors and thus prevent related violence;

Inspires its members to make sure that sufficient resources are allocated in order to assess the impact of bladed weapon and blunt object related violence and effectively reduce and prevent it, if necessary;

Encourages members to ensure effective support programmes for rehabilitation of victims and work closely with their governments to provide resources for such programmes;

Supports efforts to work closely together with research institutions as well as NGO 's active on the field in order to build up a network for information and best-practice exchange on how to deal with the subject;

Mandates the Forum's secretariat to undertake all necessary activities in order to support progress on the issue, include these concerns in the Forum's activities and provide its members with sufficient information.