

CHAPTER THREE

GENDER LANGUAGE AT THE 2001 UN CONFERENCE AND 2003 MEETING ON SALW

In order to assess the full scope of the UN's gender mainstreaming efforts within SALW governance on a global level, it is necessary to look at the gender language used within the various fora of UN world conferences and meetings. Because SALW as an issue have only recently emerged on the international agenda, the UN has held only two meetings geared toward addressing the problem of SALW proliferation. These are the 2001 UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (2001 SALW Conference), and the 2003 First Biennial Meeting of States to Consider the Implementation of the UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Lights Weapons in All Its Aspects (BMS). An examination of the gender language used in the official statements and reports coming out of both of these international events offers valuable information that assists in determining the extent to which discourse at these events incorporates gender perspectives.

Gender language and the UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects

The framework for the 2001 UN SALW Conference developed as the international community began to realize that illicit trade in SALW and the violence resulting from it was a pervasive problem that affected the global community because it was not inhibited by national borders. Therefore the UN needed a global forum through which to establish a global governance regime that would address the SALW problem. In September 1999, the UN developed a set of guidelines for the conference, using a group of governmental experts on small arms, and then set up a Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) to plan the conference events and draft the preliminary objectives.⁵² While these aimed to combat the illicit trade in SALW on a technical level, another question soon became apparent: To what extent were they creating a conference culture that allowed the participants to address the human elements affected by, and active within, SALW issues? This included the consideration of gender perspectives.⁵³

To prepare for their analysis, the authors needed to research all uses of gender language in statements from national delegates, NGOs, international organizations, the conference report and press releases. Then they identified the frequency of gender language used throughout the formal proceedings of the 2001 Conference before attempting to understand the context in which gender references were used. Between the document categories overall, women as victims of violence made up the majority of contexts within which references to gender were used. Approximately 72% of the gender references employed in all of these documents referred to women as victims in some capacity. Such an overwhelming majority of references in one category over the other 12 gender reference indicators raises the question: Why did member states at this conference focus on women as victims rather than on some of the other ways women participate in SALW issues? And why did the fact that men, who as the main users of SALW are the greatest victims of SALW misuse, go unmentioned?

Some of the authors' findings are as follows. Member states delivered 132 national statements, 30% of which contained at least one reference to gender. NGO statements had slightly fewer instances of gender references at 26%, while international organization statements captured the lowest percentage at 22%. The conference statements as a whole invite investigation of the reason behind such low frequencies of gender reference. One potential explanation might be that many conference participants either made gender a low priority on their agendas or, as a whole, possessed poor levels of knowledge about gender issues. In either case, the low gender reference frequencies exposed a lacuna within gender awareness in the UN, which could suggest clues as to where gender advocacy should be directed in the future.

Perhaps the most significant finding was that the 23-page official conference report contained only one sentence referring to SALW's effects within a gender context which limited women to roles as victims of gun violence. All of the references to gender in the 2001 Conference statements and documents examined, addressed the plight of women as victims. They failed to disaggregate the different consequences for men and women of SALW proliferation, or to acknowledge the roles other than that of victim that many women adopt to deal with SALW. Although it is difficult to measure the direct effects that such a limited representation of gender perspectives might have, it is safe to speculate that by not taking into account the complexity that gender issues bring to SALW, participants in these UN meetings and conferences cannot understand the entirety of the SALW problem. As a result, they are unlikely to find convincing solutions.

Of the 177 NGOs requesting accreditation to the conference, approximately 23% gave statements, out of which only ten made references to gender. However, of all the documents and statements issued at the conference, those produced by the NGOs used the widest range of gender contexts and indicators. This is no surprise, considering that many NGOs make gender issues their main focus (although some still do not take gender components into consideration in their work). Naturally, some of the NGOs focusing on women will have some level of expertise on gun-related violence, while other NGOs specializing in SALW will have had practical experience of the differentiated effects of these weapons on men and women. Therefore, it is to be expected that their use of gender references would incorporate a wider selection of contexts for gender perspectives on SALW issues. Nonetheless, not one reference was made that focused on the unique experiences of men within SALW situations. Their refraining from discussing gender represented an enormous opportunity lost, considering that NGOs work on the ground and therefore have acquired relatively higher levels of gender expertise, in general, than member state delegates. Gender received less attention at the conference because of the failure to fully capitalize on this awareness-raising resource. Opportunities to advocate the improvement of the standing of gender perspectives on the UN agenda were also lost, for the same reason.

While the majority of the NGOs referred to women as victims in some capacity, five references were made that coincided with stereotypical gender roles for women in conflict, two to non-stereotypical gender roles of women in war situations, and one each to gender equality, gender mainstreaming, women as refugees or internally displaced persons (IDPs), illustrative examples, and women in peace-building.⁵⁴ As an example of a reference to non-stereotypical roles of women, the Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency of Papua New Guinea remarked that "there was an increased number of single mothers and female headed households", in espousal of the theory that SALW violence has forced women to adopt leadership roles.⁵⁵ Gender references such as this broke with the more common stereotypes of women's victimization by emphasizing the diversity of roles that women play within society, including leadership. These roles could help to bring about solutions to the SALW problem. The variety of contexts within which NGOs refer to women could be signifiers of civil society's readiness to evolve new ways of thinking about gender. Therefore, unlike the representatives of the UN member states, the civil society representatives had evidently made strides toward considering a diverse spread of gender perspectives as relevant to SALW.

Press releases from the UN that summarized the proceedings of each daily event had the highest percentage of gender references (43%). The relatively higher frequency in comparison with other conference documents, however, may have been because each release summarized the proceedings of an entire day, in which multiple gender references could have been made. Because these summaries covered statements from national, NGO and international organizations, it was logical that references to gender should be made at least once in each press release. Therefore the high percentage of gender references found in the press releases contributed little towards the authors' attempt to assess mainstreaming efforts at the UN.

During the 2001 Conference, NGOs scheduled a series of daily meetings for the week of 9–13 July for round table discussions, panel presentations, information sessions, caucuses and planning meetings. Out of 25 or so scheduled thematic meetings, only two specifically addressed gender. Both meetings occurred on the afternoon of the last day, which meant that the only conversations focusing on gender occurred at the end of the conference week. This gave little to no opportunity for gender themes to be brought to the forefront. The low visibility of gender-related themes throughout the week limited the influence that gender advocacy efforts could have on conference proceedings. When NGOs convened two years later at the 2003 Biennial Meeting of States, non-governmental representatives, particularly in the umbrella organization International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) Women's Network (formerly the IANSA Women's Caucus), reported that they had made a conscious effort to distribute the thematic meetings on gender more evenly throughout the week. This was done to create better opportunities to incorporate gender components in the advocacy strategies of the NGOs. They also hoped that giving more attention to gender issues earlier in the week would create more pressure on UN officials to incorporate gender perspectives in the final report.⁵⁶ This decision by the NGOs in 2003 demonstrated an improved awareness of the need to devote significant attention to gender in the entirety of the UN sessions, not just in isolated instances.

Gender language and the UN First Biennial Meeting of States

The 2003 BMS was a reporting forum in which member states were encouraged to disclose the status of their implementation of the Programme of Action (PoA) decided at the 2001 Conference. It aimed to identify the successes and failures of these national initiatives in order to design more effective strategies for the future. The forum, however, did not mandate the development of next-step strategies, the negotiation of new agreements or any decision-making, leaving such tasks to the review conference in 2006. The outcome of the meeting was a procedural report and a chairperson's summary.

In 2003, member states submitted detailed reports outlining their implementation of the PoA, delivered national statements and produced co-ordinated regional statements. Nine regional bodies made presentations. Near the end of the BMS, states also engaged in a series of thematic debates designed to address specific areas of focus, including themes such as human development, public awareness and promoting a culture of peace.⁵⁷ The sixth debate focused mainly on children, women and the elderly. Although having a thematic debate with women as part of the focus seemed to be a positive move, the lumping together of women, children and the elderly implies their continued marginalization within UN discourse. Nonetheless, in the thematic debates gender was referred to within five different contexts, including women as victims, peace educators, peace-builders and agents for change. However, despite this encouraging step towards acknowledging women's more aggressive roles in situations of SALW violence, the debates made no reference to the specific experiences of men in the context of SALW.⁵⁸ Unless the experiences of men and women are aligned side by side in UN discourse, the proceedings of the UN will continue to exclude the relevant experiences of both groups.

As did the 2001 Conference, the documents produced at the 2003 BMS included statements from national representatives, NGOs, international organizations, a meeting report and press releases. The 2003 BMS, however, also included national reports and regional statements. Again, the most frequent use of gender references (46%) in all of the document categories pointed to women as victims in some capacity. A statement from Nepal, for example, read, "Women and children have been the most vulnerable victims of the pervasive use of these weapons".⁵⁹ The national report from Canada mentioned the importance of the "protection of vulnerable groups, in particular women and children".⁶⁰ The 2003 BMS, however, showed more diversity in its use of gender reference indicators than the 2001 meeting. These included 11

references to gender mainstreaming, seven to women's roles in peace-building, and seven to non-stereotypical gender roles played by women in conflict. Among the national statements, all ten gender references used identified women as victims, whereas the national reports reflected a more diverse array of gender contexts. These included the roles of women as victims, civil society activists, proponents of gender justice and gender mainstreaming, refugees or internally displaced persons. They also gave illustrative examples.⁶¹

There were some discrepancies in participation between those states that submitted reports and those that delivered statements at the conference. Some countries submitted only reports,⁶² some delivered only statements,⁶³ while others presented both. One hundred and two member states submitted national reports; and 100 delivered national statements outlining their countries' implementation of the PoA. Canada, Chile, Guyana, Kazakhstan, Mali, Mexico, Nepal, the Philippines, Thailand and Turkey were the only countries out of 91 to use gender language in their national statements.⁶⁴ Burkina Faso, Canada, the Central African Republic, Gambia, Sri Lanka, Argentina, Equatorial Guinea and Niger were the only countries to use gender language in their national reports. That so few countries used gender references implies that either gender perspectives had again become low on the list of priorities, or that the majority of member state delegations were lacking in awareness of gender mainstreaming.

An interesting finding made when the authors compared the national statements of the 2001 Conference and the 2003 BMS was that in 2001, gender references occurred nearly three times more frequently than in 2003, with 29.5% in 2001 and 10% in 2003. A tentative explanation of this apparent regression in gender awareness may be that fewer countries delivered national statements in 2003, in this way reducing the overall chance that gender language would arise. Another partial explanation is that some of the 32 member states that did not submit statements at the 2003 BMS might have referenced gender if they had done so. Needless to say, whatever the reason, this reduction has a disturbing implications for gender mainstreaming efforts.

NGOs again presented statements at the BMS. However, instead of giving individual statements, as in 2001, civil society presented 15 co-ordinated statements addressing thematic issues. The frequency with which gender reference indicators were used in the NGO statements was virtually identical with the 2001 meeting. The statements from both also contained similarly diverse contextual ranges of gender reference. One provocative finding was that the 2003 NGO statements referenced stereotypical gender roles of women

in conflict only once, versus five references in 2001. Instead, the NGOs made references to gender that were atypical of the majority of references made in the other UN presentations during the 2003 BMS. For instance, the portion of the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) statement given by Chamila Hemmagathema in 2003, entitled “Community Impacts, Community Action”, reads: “Women cannot simply be seen as the victims of conflicts: they also participate as combatants, and in support roles providing information, food, clothing and shelter”.⁶⁵ Language such as this paints a picture of women’s roles in SALW matters as active participants rather than as passive victims.

The NGOs, however, did not ignore the common perception of the victimization of women: they made reference to sexual violence, trauma, intimidation, enslavement, robbery and rape as among the various effects of SALW violence on women.⁶⁶ By painting a holistic picture detailing the different ways in which gendered reactions could emerge in violent situations related to SALW, the NGOs brought to the discourse on gender ideas hitherto ignored at both the 2001 conference and the 2003 BMS.

The statements made by international organizations (IOs) in 2003 showed a 57.1% improvement in relative occurrences of gender language coming up at least once, over those of the 2001 conference. Needless to say, the four statements that referred to gender were from IOs whose mandates either focused on, or included, gender perspectives.⁶⁷ Each of the statements referenced gender more than once and within various contexts, demonstrating a more advanced level of gender awareness relative to that displayed in 2001, certainly by the member states.

The IOs also demonstrated a relatively well-diversified range of gender reference indicators, achieving the greatest number of references in all the document categories. Examples are: “Their [SALW] use and misuse leads to psychosocial trauma, obstructs humanitarian relief and development programmes, weakens traditional family and community structures, and exacerbates gender-based violence”, and “[f]urthermore, the carrying or handling over of a weapon must not be a precondition for participation in DDR programmes, as many children who are otherwise associated with armed forces and armed groups, particularly girls, are often left out as a consequence”.⁶⁸ These demonstrate the breadth of gender awareness among the IOs.

Another discrepancy between the 2001 Conference and the 2003 BMS was that there were nearly 50% fewer references to women as victims in 2003. Furthermore, there were 11 specific references to gender mainstreaming in

the entire 2003 BMS versus only one during the 2001 Conference. This, along with other uses of gender references at the 2003 BMS, indicated an overall widening of scope in the ways in which gender perspectives were considered in SALW issues. One reasonable explanation for this apparent evolution was the improved co-ordination between NGOs.⁶⁹

The final 2003 BMS report, also containing the chairperson's summary, encouragingly included more than the one reference made to gender in 2001. However, it continued to propagate the statistic that women and children made up 80% of war-related deaths resulting from the use of SALW.⁷⁰ Inaccuracies such as this in high-level UN documents could hinder effective policy-making and debilitate interventions, because they are not based on the actual situation. To say, for example, that the primary victims of gun-related deaths are women and children draws the focus away from male victims (who are far more numerous), men being both the greatest perpetrators and victims of gun-related deaths. It also puts women into a passive category, which takes their alternative roles as caretakers, leaders, perpetrators and peace builders out of the policy-making equation. It also denies them acknowledgement of their participation in both creating the problem posed by illicit trade in SALW and contributing to the solutions. The report's failure to refer to men further encourages the tendency to equate gender with women only, and to equate men with an equally stereotypical norm that does not warrant mention. This expression of unconscious prejudice is a hindrance to gender mainstreaming efforts because it neither promotes nor reinforces the equal consideration of men and women within UN discourse. Even more worrisome is the influence on policy decisions that such misconceptions could have at the 2006 Review Conference.

In summary, examination of the gender reference indicators used in documents from the 2001 Conference and the 2003 BMS exposes areas where gender mainstreaming efforts have made progress, regressed or stayed relatively the same over time. The analysis of the formal statements and reports by member states demonstrated that the use of gender references actually diminished between the 2001 Conference and the 2003 BMS, while those of NGOs and IOs publicly demonstrated increased gender awareness. By examining the language used throughout the various statements and reports in these meetings 2001 and 2003, the authors hoped to make more apparent the degree to which gender is a priority in SALW discourse at the UN.