

INTRODUCTION

Tracing the evolution of new political conversations can be a complex endeavour. This complexity becomes compounded when a norm is relatively new on the global agenda, does not yet have a universal definition, and has been historically marginalized. Such is the case with ‘gender mainstreaming’ in discussions of illicit small arms and light weapons (SALW) at the United Nations (UN).

The issue of gender mainstreaming at the UN has been a norm in development since the 1975 World Conference on the International Women’s Year in Mexico City. A useful definition of this term within the UN came from a UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) resolution issued in 1997:

“...[t]he process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality.”¹

By making reference to both men and women, this definition provides a crucial framework to keep in mind when discussing SALW, because of the difference in impact of SALW on men and women. This monograph aims to identify failures within the UN system to consider the dimensions defined above, and investigates their ramifications by examining the language used within UN meetings to see where such failures may lie.

As global norms promoting gender equality emerge, others aimed at thwarting the illicit trade in SALW are also being formulated. With gun violence causing over half a million casualties per year, and over 600 million guns in worldwide circulation, the problem has assumed huge proportions. In response, international organizations, UN member states and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have begun to develop a norm infrastructure that combats gun

violence. Progress was accelerated when the UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects was held in July 2001.²

Bearing in mind the definitions and good practices of gender mainstreaming, the authors of this monograph analyze the intersection of the UN's conversations on SALW with gender. The aim is to assess the extent to which strategies designed to reduce the effects of SALW are gender aware. To date, there has been no comprehensive study that examines the debates, resolutions, reports, and other documents of the UN on small arms through a gender lens. This study undertakes that challenge.

Gender discourse within the context of SALW has been noticeably neglected in discussions at the UN, even though "a disproportionate percentage of the aggressors (whether in conflict or in peace) are male, while a significant proportion of victims are women".³ Any sort of discussion that includes a gender component at the UN tends to focus mainly on the context of women and children as victims of war, without taking into account gender mainstreaming, which is an effort to include the situations of both men and women in such discourse. In addition, the discussions at the UN on gender and armed violence have traditionally been limited to the context of war, rather than including more holistic discussions of the impact of SALW on men and women in society in both peace and wartime situations.

This monograph surmises that despite some progress, gender perspectives have not become systematically incorporated into all UN fora on SALW, and examines reasons why this might be. The first section of the monograph provides an overview of the definitions and the emergence on the global agenda of both the issues of SALW and of gender mainstreaming at the UN. The second section scrutinizes the frequency and content of references to gender in the UN, and assesses how these have changed over time within debates and documents addressing SALW in the UN General Assembly and the Security Council between 2001–2003. The third section contains a similar analysis of the statements, reports and other UN documents issued by the 2001 UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects and the 2003 UN 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 Light Weapons in All its Aspects. The final section offers observations and conclusions on the current status of gender mainstreaming within the UN's management of the SALW issue. It offers recommendations on how to promote the incorporation of gender perspectives on SALW into UN decision-making processes more actively.