

# Strength in Diversity: Amplifying the Voices of Women Campaigners Against Gun Violence



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## Introduction

This paper draws on personal insight and experience from a range of women<sup>1</sup> members of IANSA working to prevent and end gun violence in The Philippines, Democratic Republic of Congo, Pakistan, South Africa, and Argentina. Through quotes and stories derived from Zoom interviews by Jenny Morgan during 2021, this paper aims to capture and collate knowledge and learning to help strengthen understanding of some of the ways in which gender dimensions affect women's work and engagement in the areas of small arms and light weapons (SALW) control and gun violence prevention. In addition, some contributors note forms of violence against women that they have directly experienced because of their activism – including personal threats and online violence – that negatively impact them.

Through this paper and learning about their different experiences, we gain insight into the range of opinions and approaches that exist, and how these respond to the challenges of patriarchy and power. In this way, sharing multiple experiences helps people see their broad scope and complexity, while also understanding the approaches that different women from diverse backgrounds bring to their work.

## Gender-based Armed Violence

Gender-based armed violence is often presumed to be inflicted only or primarily on women and girls, but this understanding fails to take into account the full scope of the issue. For example, the gendered impact of small arms proliferation and misuse, which includes sexual violence and slavery, also affects LGBTQI+<sup>2</sup> people, who are frequently omitted from definitions of women and girls. In addition, men and boys account for the vast majority of violent deaths, including from gun homicides and in direct armed conflict, and these often result from enforced recruitment of boys and young men and from them being targeted by soldiers, police, armed groups, or criminal gangs on the basis of their gender. Likewise, security forces or criminal gangs commit extrajudicial executions of transgender and non-binary people, gay men, and sex workers because they do not conform to the predominant gender roles in society. Incidents and patterns of gender-based armed violence therefore include but are not limited to armed violence against women and girls. Gender-based armed violence includes violence that is directed at people based on discriminating norms

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the term 'women' encompasses women and girls in all their diversities, including LGBTQI+ women and girls.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, [Vulnerable Groups: LGBTQI+ Free and Equal NOT Criminalized](#).

and practices relating to their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, and/or gender roles in society.

## **Small Arms Control Standards**

In 2001 after years of deliberations in the UN and other international fora, all states committed in the General Assembly to implement the UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in All Its Aspects (UNPoA). The purpose of the UNPoA is, “To reduce the human suffering caused by the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons in all its aspects and to enhance the respect for life and the dignity of the human person through the promotion of a culture of peace.” The UNPoA sets out a raft of norms and measures that states must take at the national, regional, and international levels to prevent, combat, and eradicate the illicit trade in all its aspects. To achieve this, the UNPoA set up a process of reporting and biennial meetings, as well as regular review conferences. States also adopted regional instruments on small arms, mainly in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Americas, Europe, and the Pacific, although the Middle East, North Africa, and Asian countries lagged behind.

Despite a reference to, “The dignity of the human person,” the only specific reference to women in the UNPoA is to, “The negative impact on women and the elderly,” of the illicit trade in SALW. This formulation views women as passively affected by illicit SALW rather than as active participants and agents in the creation of more peaceful and secure lives. During the 2000s and alongside the UNPoA process, the IANSA Women’s Network adopted a feminist approach and linked women’s rights with small arms control through participation in the annual Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), and also began campaigning as part of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence.

A breakthrough in standard-setting was achieved through IANSA’s triple alliance with Amnesty International and Oxfam International in the Control Arms campaign for an Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) from 2003 to 2013. This involved huge numbers of civil society organisations and women in over 150 countries, resulting in the first treaty in history to explicitly address gender-based violence. The ATT text requires each state party, when considering an export of a wide range of arms, ammunition, parts, and components, to, “Take into account the risk,” of arms, “being used to commit or facilitate serious acts of gender-based violence or serious acts of violence against women and children.” Such acts of violence, based on discrimination, are violations of human rights and of international humanitarian law. The export risks must be considered in, “An objective and non-discriminatory manner, taking into account relevant factors,” as well as possible mitigation measures, and if the risk is overriding, then the export must not be authorised.<sup>3</sup>

The ATT process in the UN General Assembly and the advocacy of IANSA and its partners eventually led to incremental steps in the UNPoA process as well. At the Second Review Conference on the UNPoA in 2012, states agreed, “[T]o facilitate the participation and representation of women in small arms policymaking.” By the Third Review Conference in 2018, the UNPoA process had committed to, “Encourage the full participation and representation of women, including in leadership roles, and acting as agents of change, in policymaking, planning and implementation processes related to the Programme of Action, such as national small arms commissions and programmes relating to community safety, violence reduction, professional policing, collection and destruction of illicit and surplus small arms and light weapons and conflict prevention and resolution.”<sup>4</sup>

Most recently, the Resolution adopted by the General Assembly in December 2021 on the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons in all its aspects (Resolution 76/232)<sup>5</sup> underscores the importance of adopting a

<sup>3</sup> See C da Silva and B Wood, *The Arms Trade Treaty: Weapons and International Law*, Cambridge, Intersentia, 2021, chapter 7.

<sup>4</sup> IANSA, *Women’s Participation in Small Arms Control and Peace and Security Initiatives*, March 2021.

<sup>5</sup> [United Nations General Assembly Resolution 66/232](#).

gender-responsive approach to small arms control. The recognition of the gender dimensions of the use of small arms and light weapons has also progressed thanks to recommendations contained in the consensus outcome documents of the Third Review Conference, the Sixth and Seventh Biennial Meetings of States,<sup>6</sup> and the final report of the Fifth Conference of State Parties to the Arms Trade Treaty.<sup>7</sup> It is also complemented by the decisions of other bodies, including the United Nations Security Council, the United Nations General Assembly, and the Human Rights Council.

Supported by the Women, Peace and Security agenda and UN SCR 1325,<sup>8</sup> the promotion of gender-balanced participation has been an extremely important aspect of work of the IANSA Women's Network. A key element has been ensuring that more women from diverse social backgrounds are able to participate in decision-making on an issue that in many ways disproportionately affects them.<sup>9</sup> It was not the only focus in terms of efforts to strengthen gender mainstreaming, but is often considered to be the most visible and obvious way to monitor and measure more equal participation by women. However, this area still requires focus to ensure the meaningful engagement and inclusion of women at all levels; numerical parity is insufficient. To understand the gaps between current policies and the objective of full and effective participation, it is also important to understand and reflect on the actual experiences of women activists themselves and the barriers and challenges they continue to face. This report provides insights on these issues from several IANSA members.

## **Gender Mainstreaming, Intersectionality, and Universal Human Rights**

It is inaccurate to identify women solely as victims and men as perpetrators of violence. Such a view not only neglects the active role that women play globally in civil society-driven disarmament initiatives, but also the role that women and girls increasingly play as users of guns, as combatants, or traffickers. Even in times of 'peace,' gender must remain a cross-cutting consideration for strategies on combating illicit SALW at national, regional, and global levels.<sup>10</sup>

According to a large group of UN agencies whose work is profoundly affected by small arms proliferation and violence around the world, the term "gender mainstreaming" has two interconnected dimensions. It means ensuring that the impact – on women and men – of all SALW control initiatives is considered at every stage of assessment, planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Gender mainstreaming allows for a better understanding of the roles that men and women play in relation to small arms and light weapons, in times of conflict, post-conflict reconstruction, and non-conflict situations.

Gender mainstreaming also encompasses the promotion of gender-balanced participation in SALW control, protecting men and women's rights to participate in decision-making and cooperate constructively on an issue that affects everyone's security. As SALW control has traditionally been seen as a male domain, ensuring full and effective participation by women requires a strong focus on the inclusion of women – especially from affected communities and civil society – as well as a commitment to gender-sensitive monitoring and evaluation.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, [Small Arms and Light Weapons](#).

<sup>7</sup> [Fifth Conference of State Parties \(CSP5\) to the Arms Trade Treaty](#) documents.

<sup>8</sup> IANSA, [Strengthening the Connection Between Small Arms and Light Weapons Controls and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda](#), September 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Men also suffer disproportionately in armed conflict situations from enforced recruitment, violent deaths, and injuries, and also constitute the vast majority of homicides from firearms, according to [data from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime](#). On the other hand, women and girls suffer disproportionately from gun violence in the home including during peace time and also suffer massively from enforced displacement and the denial of food and medical, educational, and other public services during warfare and extreme gang violence.

<sup>10</sup> IANSA, [Mainstreaming gender in the UNPoA](#), 2012.

<sup>11</sup> United Nations, [MOSAIC](#) module 06.10 on 'Women, men and the gendered nature of small arms and light weapons', New York, October 2017.



While there has been some progress in developing gender-sensitive analyses of SALW proliferation and violence, there is still much research to do. All too often, analyses assume that gender is a synonym for women, and that all perpetrators of violence are men while all victims are women. Analyses need to recognise, “The interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination and disadvantage,” which is how the Oxford Dictionary defines “intersectionality,” a term first coined by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989.<sup>12</sup> Other expressions of social identities and patterns of discrimination are also affected differently by armed violence, and these also need to be analysed.

The analysis should always be centred on what the UNPoA called, “The dignity of the human person,” and thus framed in the context of universal human rights where respect for human dignity must be treated with equal concern and respect. This requires freedom from violence and equality of opportunities and outcomes. The human rights approach also guards against blanket condemnations of everyone in one or other social identity. Instead, it focuses on helping raise awareness of specific socially constructed expressions of identity that contribute to gun violence when combined with other social factors (such as the proliferation and lack of strict control of guns, prevalence of injustices, and the presence of cultures of violence).

Moreover, small arms control initiatives remain largely a male domain at all levels, from community consultations to international diplomacy to the technical aspects of ammunition and weapons management.<sup>13</sup> IANSA continues to prioritise the participation of women in small arms control and peace and security initiatives.<sup>14</sup>

The short case studies that follow give examples of the lived experiences of IANSA members working on these issues.

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<sup>12</sup> [Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later](#), Columbia Law School, June 2017.

<sup>13</sup> IANSA, [Women’s Participation in Small Arms Control and Peace and Security Initiatives](#), March 2021.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

## THE PHILIPPINES



"We take a lot of time building partnerships with the government at all levels, reassuring them that we are working for peace and are there to support and complement their existing work, instead of them seeing our advocacy as 'additional' work."

**BIANCA PABOTOY**

*Women's Peace and Security Project Officer, Center for Peace Education, Miriam College*

The Philippines has a Magna Carta of Women, based on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and passed into law in 2009. It has a Gender and Development budget policy, monitored by the Philippine Commission on Women, which obliges government ministries and institutions at all levels to allocate five per cent of their annual budgets to gender and development programmes. Its five-year National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security has been running since 2017, and is the second such Plan. All of these laws and policies tend to be overshadowed by news of the thousands of extrajudicial killings carried out by police and armed gangs, mostly with guns, since President Duterte took office in 2016 and launched what he calls a 'war on drugs.' In September 2021, the International Criminal Court announced it was opening an investigation into these killings as potential crimes against humanity.<sup>15</sup>

Bianca shared her insight into the challenges facing a young woman working on women, peace and security and the elimination of gun violence in the Philippines. "I think in the past six years of the Duterte administration, with the on-going war on drugs, there's been a lot of reversal in terms of the perception of small arms and weapons in the country. Culture-wise I think this administration reinforces the negative things to do with small arms here, as the spike in extra-judicial killings shows, the power dynamics also. Unfortunately, there's still a lot of machismo in the culture."

Due to The Philippines' commitments as noted earlier, Bianca explained, "When we do outreach,

we try to talk to the councillors in the small communities, or the mayors, and try to get them to become the advocates for gender because at least within their periphery we can mainstream gender issues. That includes talking to the local police, and the military bases that are there, and including them in our Women, Peace and Security training. They're very much open to it; there's a difference at national and local level, and we're aware of that, so that's where we try to target our gender mainstreaming efforts – reminding them that we actually have this law, that there's this Gender and Development budget, which is five percent from the total government budget, that can be used, not just to have an event, but to make an all-women peace-keeping team, for instance. So, trickling gender mainstreaming down through the communities that need it the most, that's where a lot of our efforts are focused. Covid-19 has blocked this local and regional work and they are hoping to restart in 2022."

The approach to gender mainstreaming has led to more women being involved but Bianca commented that this could be strengthened, "There are a lot of drivers for women's participation in peace and security and women are everywhere. We do have a lot of women lawmakers that we talk to; there are a lot of women in the police, women in the military, so visibility is not that much of a challenge. But I think there's still a gap in terms of being meaningfully involved."

Bianca's organisation takes a strategic approach to the issue and influencing the agenda of national and local officials, and she acknowledges the

<sup>15</sup> Amnesty International UK, Press release: [Philippines: International Criminal Court's investigation into drugs killings welcomed](#), September 2021.

importance of its reputation in the work that she does, “An important caveat is that our organisation is under a respected institution, Miriam College, so I think this legitimacy helps us get responses when we do outreach. We also take a lot of time building these partnerships with government, always reassuring them that we are working for peace and are there to support and complement their existing work, instead of them seeing this as ‘additional’ work.” Bianca related her experience that, “The high turnover in politics in the country is the biggest challenge [...] That’s why we’re really trying to push at local level, because even if there are new people in the top positions, at least the people around them, their staff, will have been trained on the issues. We’re a small office, so we’re working within our capacities and those of our existing partners – but I think focusing on the local level is really the best way to do it, because at national level you’re competing against a structure that’s corrupt, or a bureaucracy that moves around – and you can’t really talk to those people at high level. But at the local level you can get a head start with the mayors, and so on.”

This focus on collaboration and sustained relationship building is also evident in peacebuilding work with NGO allies and partners and particularly in conflict affected areas. Bianca went on to explain, “Along with NGO partners on the ground we formed four women[’s?] peace-keeping teams, two in Luzon and two in Mindanao.”<sup>16</sup> We’re encouraging women from different sectors: they could be health workers, or in the church, or indigenous leaders; we try and get police and military women as well. That’s where the small arms and light weapons context comes in, because it’s an obvious driver of the violence in their communities. We frame the discussion using the Philippine National Action on Women, Peace and Security, highlighting the interrelation between illicit arms and gender-based violence, for instance. Our goal in 2020 was actually to include a focus on small arms in the training, because we were more conscious of the issue after the first year of implementation. We also wanted to engage with

former women combatants in Mindanao, but because of COVID we couldn’t do this.”

Bianca and her team remain focused on advocacy in support of small arms control and the ability of the government to respond. She explained, “At the moment, they’re actually adjusting the law to be more relaxed about gun ownership and carrying guns in public. [...] We were surprised about this amendment. There are a lot of illicit guns – a lot of guns that are not registered. Guns are very cheap; they’re very accessible. Gun stores are strict, but the illicit gun-makers, the black market, are highly accessible. And we have very weak borders in the Philippines because we’re an archipelago, so diversion, entry, import, and export, can go unnoticed, if you put it in a fishing-boat, in a very far-flung beach area – that’s one challenge. It’s really a question of resources – not much is put into this.” She added, “In an outreach meeting we conducted in 2019, we learned that national offices under the Philippine National Police were still working on developing a unified database for all small arms and light weapons in the country – the aim is a national database, because that doesn’t exist yet. A database shared by the police and the military would be the precursor to an efficient gun control system, but that has yet to happen.”

Bianca connected this situation to the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) and reflected, “That’s why I’d say the Philippines is taking such a long time ratifying the ATT, because there are a lot of gaps all around the system that hinder the efficient implementation of the Treaty and control of arms flows in the country. We tried to have a campaign for ratification of the ATT and have had a meeting with officials since the Philippines signed in 2013 – but again these people have a high turnover. A lot of the people in the room in past years most likely won’t be in the room in 2022. [...] I don’t see it as an impossible thing, but I think it will take a long, long time before we’re really able to have an efficient system in place.”

The focus on good relationships is a recurring one, which creates stronger foundations for progress in

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<sup>16</sup> Arlyssa Bianca Pabotoy, “[“WePeace” and Women’s peacekeeping in the Philippines](#),” *The Journal of Social Encounters*, Volume 5, Issue 2: Women and Peacebuilding, Article 7, August 2021.





## DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO, SOUTH KIVU



"Here they have a low opinion of women. So, a woman going to them to denounce a perpetrator – who do you think you are?"

**ROSE FAIDA**

*Women's Rights Programme Director, Réseau des Femmes en Action pour le Développement Social (REFEADES)*

Rose explained that, 'In our situation, violence is a problem for people, especially for women. If a woman is raped, it's a real problem for her. She has to go back to her family, but she's made to feel shame, and she feels ashamed in the wider society. She's frightened; she can't tell anyone what's happened. She's scared that the family will abandon her, throw her out. And if she can't even tell her husband, it becomes a problem. Often armed men commit these rapes. When a man has a gun, it's very easy for him to manipulate people.'

Armed violence in the eastern DRC, including the provinces of South Kivu and Ituri, which is perpetrated mainly with small arms, light weapons, and traditional weapons, is mainly fuelled by war economies, where local armed groups, undisciplined security and public services, and foreign armed groups support their activities, in part or in a significant way, through extortion or racketeering activities. These war economies increase insecurity and are a source of human rights abuses against the general population and contribute to the influx of illicit small arms and armed violence in the region.<sup>17</sup> This has particular impacts on women and girls and the forms of violence they experience, including sexual violence at gunpoint. On any given night in eastern DRC, armed groups of men will overrun a village and divide into bands of three to five, forcing themselves into houses where they seize and serially rape women and young girls.<sup>18</sup>

Despite demobilisation, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) initiatives over the years,<sup>19</sup> Rose said, "There are a lot of ex-combatants who've kept their weapons and have them at home. The government has done nothing to take them away. When these men are living with guns in the house, it's very easy for them to intimidate anyone." She added that, "Sometimes an armed group will turn up suddenly, steal and rape, and then go. Actually, this happens quite often, because they're somewhere in the surrounding area. It's impossible to predict when it will happen. The problem is that we don't even have police keeping watch; there's no security at all; because if there were police here, for the population, it wouldn't be like this."

Rose expressed her frustration at the lack of political will and action, "The authorities are the only ones with the right to remove the guns; ordinary citizens can't do that. We do try to raise it; the problem is just that the authorities ignore us. They ignore the issue, sometimes for their own interests, because there are even local authorities who work with them [the armed men], or they have parental or family links with them. So, it gets complicated to complain about this to the authorities. [...] We'll do this, we'll do that, say the authorities; but years pass, and nothing happens."

Although REFEADES works with others in the community and local area, all are facing similar issues with lack of government accountability and

<sup>17</sup> International Peace Information Service (IPIS), [Conflict analysis and stakeholder mapping in South Kivu and Ituri](#), Antwerp, April 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Denis Mukengere Mukwege and Cathy Nangini, [Rape with Extreme Violence: The New Pathology in South Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo](#), *PLoS medicine* vol. 6.12, December 2009.

<sup>19</sup> United Nations MONUSCO, [DDR/RR: MONUSCO CVS, a Strategic Paradigm Shift: from traditional to 2<sup>nd</sup> generation DDR](#).

responsibility for the safety and security of the local populations and especially for women victims of sexual violence. Rose explained, "There are no women in the local authority – no, no, no. Here it's men who are in charge. That's why there are often problems – they say to us, 'You women, how is it you're coming to sit here with men, speaking about anything you want?' Here they have a low opinion of women – they think women can't do anything serious; they just go to the fields, cook food for their husbands, go and fetch water – this is all they're capable of. So, a woman going to them to denounce someone – who do you think you are? Sometimes they listen to us, but they don't give us a response; they tell us they'll deal with it, but they wait for us to calm down and go away, and then nothing is done. We have to deal with the authorities – we can't bypass them; we live here; we have to collaborate with them. It's difficult to work with them, but we have to do it, for our own security. We can't just take any action we want. If they refuse to do anything, we have to accept it."

Despite the challenges, Rose and her colleagues continue to advocate, represent, and support women survivors of violence perpetrated at gunpoint and the families of women killed or injured. Rose went on to explain, "When we encounter women who've been raped, we can't just abandon them. There are women who risk being chased out of their communities when they've been raped, so we, as a women's association, go and speak to her husband. With some husbands it's complicated, they don't understand, so we need to keep talking until they do, repeating over and over that his wife is not to be blamed for being raped, and that she needs his support to denounce the perpetrator and access justice."

The system leads to women being further traumatised as Rose described, "Women who are raped have to denounce their attacker, and not be frightened to do so – work up the courage to go and speak to the authorities – and then nothing comes of it." The lack of response and investigation by the local authorities means that, "Very often, the rapist flees the community, and then he escapes justice, because it gets complicated to find someone who isn't in our area anymore. So, you needed to find the courage to speak, and then there's no result." This is compounded by the

continued availability and possession of weapons including by known perpetrators of violence against women. Rose added, "Then we have to make people aware that the weapons need to be taken away from the ex-combatants, because as long as they have them, they can continue to use these weapons to intimidate people."

There is significant risk to Rose and others in their work to support women victims and survivors of sexual violence at gunpoint. She said, "We continue to denounce, and sometimes things change; but if you denounce only once or twice, they sabotage you and do nothing. They drag it out, and we wait. But if you insist, and keep on denouncing [perpetrators], they tell you they will take care of it themselves – because these women already spoke a lot." Despite these challenges and personal danger, Rose and her colleagues remain committed to their work in support of women and girls in the village and surrounding areas. They understand that their persistence, and collective voice and action are powerful factors to stand with each other and to show solidarity with affected women and girls. They continue to speak out against violence and seek justice no matter how impossible it may seem at times.



***REFEADES hosted a two-day workshop for 30 school leaders from 15 secondary schools in Fizi, DRC to discuss roles and responsibilities in ending gender-based violence and the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons for the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence.***

## PAKISTAN (*Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province, which borders Afghanistan*)



**"I think it's important that women should start talking about the issue of guns – it can have a very good effect if women are talking about it."**

**SANA AHMAD**

*Programme Officer, Blue Veins*

Sana works in a country awash with nearly 44 million guns in civilian hands according to the Small Arms Survey,<sup>20</sup> one of the highest numbers in the world (only the United States, China, and India have more). Sana acknowledged that in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province, "Guns are a symbol of power here especially in this area which is close to areas of conflict and where there are security issues. So, any person who has a gun, it's a symbol of power for them, a symbol of status. Men especially have a very close attachment to their guns; this is a patriarchal society, and men are most likely to be the holder of the gun. Guns are so easy to have here – very accessible, so everybody wants to be able to have one at home, to use whenever there's an issue. And when they are driving outside their district, or anywhere they don't feel comfortable, they keep guns with them."

However, the connection between guns and violence against women remains hidden to the public and ignored by the authorities. Sana revealed, "Incidents of domestic violence are not recorded, so there are no official figures available, and we have no data on the role of guns in gender-based violence – this is something very new. But we know guns are used in situations of violence, especially in places where there are murders of girls and women in the name of "honour." Guns are used by family members in these cases; and in other cases of domestic violence guns are misused at home." In a blog post from May 2021, Sana wrote about this issue noting, "According to Pakistan Health and Demographic Survey report 2017–2018, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, 52 percent of women faced intimate partner violence."<sup>21</sup> Sana commented, "The linkages

between gender and gun violence, between gender-based violence and gun violence, are something that you can say is hidden. How guns contribute to gender-based violence – in Pakistan this is something that is not recognised."

Sana and her team are now focused on making the connection between guns and violence visible to parliamentarians. The longstanding work of her organisation, Blue Veins, is key to this. In her view, "Blue Veins has good relations with the government and policymakers; our major work now is to engage them and bring their attention to this issue – how the presence of guns in the home is contributing to gender-based violence. We are trying to put this on the table for policymakers, formally and informally." As part of what she calls 'baby steps', Sana is researching and assembling relevant data. She indicated that this is the first research of its kind, "When I was doing interviews with targeted respondents, who included police, policy-makers, and media, I was surprised to see that this connection was new for them – like, 'Yes, we never thought about it.' So, they don't oppose the idea – there's no backlash, no negative comments. On the contrary, they were open, saying there should be discussion about it. I've found that people are curious and interested – and especially because it's a woman talking about it. People see women now in different roles. But people also want data, and we don't have data about the link between guns and gender-based violence. We have a limited number of organisations and a limited number of women's rights actors who are working on this issue." The novelty of the issue is a positive factor according to Sana who said, "We are at the very

<sup>20</sup> Small Arms Survey [Infographics: Global Firearms Holdings](#).

<sup>21</sup> IANSA, Member's Blog: [Disarming Domestic Violence: A forgotten connection](#), May 25, 2021.

early stage of tackling this issue... it's not explored yet – we have no research on it, we have no data. But talking about this as a woman is actually a very strong message that it's an important sector." She added, "I have found people supporting the idea of a data management system that monitors how many women are killed per year with guns; how much domestic violence involves the use of guns. Are there forms of gender-based violence that involve more use of guns? And who are the perpetrators? Because there's a general perception that most of them are men – but who are those men? Are they a family member, using the gun at home, using the gun outside?"

Sana feels that being a woman talking about these issues is a positive factor, "So being a woman – there've been regular interactions at this early stage, and I haven't found yet any big hurdle. [...] So, I think it's important that women should start talking about the issue of guns – it can give a very good impression if women are talking about it." That said, Sana does acknowledge the challenges including lack of general awareness and commented, "However, I don't think women would be able to talk about this at the community level, because apart from anything else, there's no awareness about it at those levels. Even I had no idea until I started working here – but if I see my mother at home, my sister, these women don't have any idea that having a gun at home can contribute to violence against girls and women; so, I don't think it's easy for women at the community level to raise their voices about this, because of the lack of awareness."

In such a patriarchal context, Sana reflected that, "This issue is very sensitive; it's connected with security and with the norms and the concept of power. Because women also believe that their men are keeping guns for *them*. There is a belief among women that their husband or their father is keeping guns for *their* safety. So, obviously I don't think they are likely to raise their voice and say that these guns are contributing to gender-based violence against them. I think that at the community level, it's difficult to mobilise women. But at the policy level, I think we can trigger a discussion around this topic. I believe it's more important to work on the policy side, because at the community level this is like a new-born baby, you can say." Indeed, in

some instances, women are encouraged by men to acquire a gun for personal protection, even though instead of making her safer, the gun is more often used against her. Sana is no stranger to this pressure. When she bought a car, her father said, "You are travelling, so you must have a gun, for your safety."

Despite progressive stances adopted by the provincial government on policy issues including an HIV and AIDS Bill, Sana acknowledged the ongoing challenges around gun ownership and possession. She added, "But obviously on gun violence it will take time – I'm not saying it will be easy. On the legislation side, because government has to make legislation mindful of the impact on people's families, when you talk about interventions on gun ownership...when I was having conversations with stakeholders about what kind of recommendations that we can make regarding gender responses to gun violence and gun controls, it's very difficult to bring in legislation to control the use of guns because obviously we are a state where there are security issues, safety issues." Sana knows that the issue is challenging given the sheer number of guns in civilian hands, but despite this, thinks that there are ways forward. She said, "When I was doing the interviews, people agreed that government should put some kind of limit on the use of guns." The distinction between the control and use of guns is interesting in a context of widespread civilian possession and she explained, "If you cannot control someone keeping a gun at home, at least you should have control on the use of the gun. So, there should be strict measures on the use of guns, at least."



**Sana Ahmad pictured here with Blue Veins, who organized an "Aim for Change" workshop for the 2020 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence.**



## SOUTH AFRICA (views from three members of Gun Free South Africa)



'When young colleagues were saying, "We didn't realise that people hated you so much", I was thinking, "Wow – I don't see it anymore."

**ADÈLE KIRSTEN**

*Director, Gun Free South Africa*

Adèle Kirsten is a founding member of Gun Free South Africa and was a key organiser of the Gun Control Alliance that took shape in 1999, with 450 civil society members, which helped achieve the Firearms Control Act under the new post-apartheid government. Despite its shortcomings, the new regulatory system for civilian firearms owners in South Africa is considered to have had a significant positive effect in reducing firearms-related deaths, injuries, theft, and illicit trade, as well as helping to improve police investigations and police safety.<sup>22</sup>

During a six-year period following the introduction of firearms controls, gun-related crimes fell by just over 20 per cent. Between 1999 and 2009, the proportion of firearms, "as a cause of non-natural death of women," was cut nearly in half. Data shows that between 2002 and 2008 the proportion of unnatural deaths due to the use of a firearm fell from 29 per cent to just over 10 per cent. According to the South African police, over 1.2 million guns were destroyed between 2000 and 2016, an average of over 70,000 guns a year.<sup>23</sup> However, in the five years after 2012, there was an increase in the murder rate<sup>24</sup> and illicit gun trafficking was linked to organised crime, sometimes involving police officers.<sup>25</sup>

Adèle joked that she was helped as a campaigner by the fact her hair turned grey when she was in her mid-thirties. "And now that I'm fully grey," she says, "it gives me rank with government officials. That's combined with, 'This woman has been around for 25 years – she has an institutional memory that no-one in government has.' Given that South Africa is such a patriarchal society, I think I've got the measure of it with policymakers, with government officials, and with peers in the civil society space. Maybe ANC [African National Congress], EFF [Economic Freedom Fighters], and MPs, [Members of Parliament], the men, will be like, 'Hey, she's quite smart, for a woman,' kind of slightly surprised, a little bit amused. But the organisation is taken seriously, and I'm taken seriously. I guess the issue is having women around the table, AND a feminist agenda. And we know that in these times, those two things can be seen as the same – but they're not!"

The difficulty right now, says Adèle, is that for some young black women living in townships, gun ownership for self-defence seems like a solution, in relation both to general crime and sexual violence. She explained, "They're saying women need a gun to protect themselves against a male intruder, but the reality is, it's the male intimate partner with his own gun who is the threat." She went on, "We're sometimes told that the problem with Gun Free

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Dube, "Did Gun Control Cause the Fall in Gun Crime? The Data Support the Claim" presentation on behalf of Gun Free South Africa to a side event at the United Nations in New York on 27 June 2018 during the Third Review Conference on the UN Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons.

<sup>23</sup> Figures cited by Gun Free South Africa, Media Statement "Scrap the Surplus! July 9 International Gun Destruction Day," Johannesburg 9 July 2017, and based upon the Annual Reports of the South African Police Service for the years 200/2001 to 2016.

<sup>24</sup> BBC Reality Check Team, "[South Africa crime: can the country be compared to a war zone?](#)" *BBC News*, 18 September 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Danssaert and Brian Wood, [Surplus and Illegal Small Arms, Light Weapons and their Ammunition: the consequences of failing to dispose and safely destroy them](#), IANSA and IPIS, June 2017, pp 12-13.

South Africa is that we're focusing on the weapon rather than addressing the underlying issue of gender inequality. As feminists, we have to engage with this. The majority of gun-owners across the

globe are men and often gun ownership is an extension of male identity and power – for us, challenging it is consistent with feminist analysis.”

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### **SOUTH AFRICA (views from three members of Gun Free South Africa)**



“We understand the law for what it should be, but not what it actually is in these communities. If the law is failing now, already, what would new gun laws do? They probably wouldn't be enforced. So, what difference would it make?”

**MARY-ANN NOBELE**

*Gauteng Regional Co-ordinator, Gun Free South Africa*

Mary-Ann Nobele, 22 years old, has experience of gun violence in both the black world and the white world of post-apartheid South Africa. Seeing the difference has galvanised her to become a campaigner. She explained, “I grew up in Alexandra Township [part of the city of Johannesburg], and my grandpa owned a little tuckshop in the township. One night he was coming home, and they held a gun to his head. They pulled the trigger, but the gun jammed, otherwise that could have been his life gone. My grandma has a park at the back of her house, and every night there are gunshots. Pull the covers over your head and hear nothing, see nothing. It felt normal. Then my parents moved us out of the township, and I went to a “good” school [i.e., a previously all white school], and they didn't relate to gun violence at all. They were like, ‘No, we go to bed; if anything happens, the security system goes off, and we're protected.’ So, I realised, Shucks, what I grew up with isn't normal living.”

Mary-Ann reflects on her positive experience in work with GFSA and support from older people, including campaigners, and said, “I think the reason I don't ever feel intimidated or scared is because there's a lot of older people around; when they see a young girl talking on such a serious issue, trying to bring about change in the community, it's almost admired. So, there's a lot of support from the older generation in terms of – well, you're young, and you're trying to work – it gives them hope for the future of our country. I think middle-aged and older women are our allies. I think they're a group of people we don't pay enough attention to; and the reason I think they're allies is because they understand that it's their kids who are in danger; it's their sons who are committing these crimes. I remember we had a workshop – and every time we host anything, it's majority females – and these ladies stood up saying, ‘I'm a teacher, this is what I deal with'; and they were all just so passionate.”

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## SOUTH AFRICA (views from three members of Gun Free South Africa)



"I don't think the issue is being a woman working on these issues. There are certain people who want to make a difference, and to make a difference we need to take the guns away, and that's just how it is."

**MONIQUE HANSEN**

*Regional youth co-ordinator, Gun Free South Africa*

Monique Hansen is based in Atlantis, 25 miles north of Cape Town. She explained, "When people hear the name "Atlantis", they think of gun violence and gang violence." Many of the illegal guns used in criminal enterprises in Atlantis come from police sources.<sup>26</sup> Monique has engaged with GFSA since 2017 and her connection with Adèle Kirsten developed from there, "Adèle knows the legal stuff, of legal gun ownership, but she doesn't really know the issues that we are faced with, illegal guns and gangsterism." So, when GFSA asked Monique to become regional youth coordinator, she didn't hesitate, "I saw the need for raising awareness and educating people on the dangers of firearms but it's complex, so it's necessary for us to be on the ground and link up with all the other issues that lead to gang violence, and why we have gun violence at the end."

As mentioned by Mary-Ann, Monique also thinks that gun violence has become so normalised, communities don't even include it among their priority issues, "The main goal is to have a gun-free nation at the end; but we have to be realistic as well – why are people carrying guns in the first place? It's because of the crime. And why do we have crime in the first place? It's because of poverty; it's because of the lack of resources we have available in our communities; unemployment [...] Community members feel like gun violence and gang violence are the normal thing; like we deserve this kind of behaviour. And it's not just now; it's coming from the apartheid era

already. So, my goal is really to start with the mindset." Community safety programming links to small arms and light weapons control by helping communities to feel more secure and, therefore, less likely to use weapons in a harmful manner.<sup>27</sup>

Monique's unique position as a younger woman campaigner with direct experience of the context is clear as she explained, "I know that there's always a reason why these young boys join gangs – because they don't have anything else to do, or they want those material things; they want attention, and they want to look cool. A lot of young girls are starting to fall for gang members, also because of material things – dads are not around, so this guy's giving me the attention and the love that I've been longing for, so they fall in that trap as well. So, they are the ones holding the guns for the gang members, because there's a lot of times where the police don't search the girlfriends or the women who were there [...] The young girls and the young boys that are in these gangs, you can see there's always a reason why they are joining, and we are not experiencing it in the way they are experiencing it – the violence at home, or the lifestyle, the background, the culture." Monique's experience mirrors some of the findings of a 2022 IANSA briefing paper that explored the complex relationship between masculinity and gun violence which has been shaped systemically, culturally, and politically, and is deeply rooted in patriarchy.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> In his book *Give Us More Guns* (2021), Mark Shaw says the large numbers of police guns sold by Christiaan Prinsloo were not the first to find their way into criminal hands. The assassination of police investigator Charl Kinnear in Cape Town in 2020 was yet one more in a spate of murders related to the so-called 'guns to gangs' saga that he documents.

<sup>27</sup> MOSAIC [Module 04.20](#), Designing and implementing community safety programming.

<sup>28</sup> IANSA, [Ways to Address Hegemonic Masculinity and Gun Violence](#), February 2022.

Monique actively engages men and boys in her work, but also covers basic needs as part of the approach, including offering food. She explained, "Whenever we have a programme or workshop with young people about gun violence and the dangers of guns, we always invite boys and young men to come, because they are the perpetrators, and they are mostly the victims as well. We try to give food; we mention food in our flyers, because of our lifestyle here, and the poverty and unemployment. People are keen to come and get food." She also realises the important role that girls can have as agents of change in the local community and said, "We try to influence girls to stand with us to see there's something better than just hanging out with a gang member. Also, we need them to help us to teach and educate and get these young boys to come. We ask the girls: Do you actually want a boyfriend who does this or this – something negative; and we build it in so boys will see that girls won't go with me if I'm a gang member." Monique reflected on the role of young women effecting and campaigning for change and shared her personal view, "You can see that worldwide, it's mostly women in the frontline of bringing change – young women – they are the ones always trying to bring the change. If we can get more young girls, young women, on our side,

we can try to come up with more ideas on how we can get boys and young men to get involved."

As is the experience of Rose in the DRC, Monique acknowledged the negative impacts upon her, as well as some of the ways that have been developed to respond to matters of safety and wellbeing that underscore the importance of collaboration, mutual support, and solidarity, Monique explained, "The work of activism in our community, it's mostly women and young people working with me; it can become a little bit dangerous. We are a lot of young women in my team; we have mental health sessions, and we have trauma sessions if we do get harassed on social media or in our outreach work. We got trained on how to deal with stuff like that, and if it gets too much, there is a platform for us to talk about it, and back off a little. And because we have so many partners in our community who are always working with us, we're never alone in our outreaches; there's always another partner that knows the community better, and knows how to approach these gang members, or how to approach young people. So, it's all about the building of partnerships; that's what's important for us when it comes to these dangers."



***The Gun Free Valentine campaign, an initiative launched by IANSA member Gun Free South Africa (GFSa) aims to raise awareness of the risks of having a gun in the home, intimate partner violence (IPV), and how effective laws can save lives. See above the 2022 campaign logo and a graphic created by GFSa. This campaign was widely shared on social media.***



## ARGENTINA



"I cannot do other than what I do – this work on guns."

**MARIA PÍA DEVOTO**

*Director, Association for Public Policies (Asociación para Políticas Públicas – APP)*

APP was formed in 2002 after the economic, social, institutional, political crisis in Argentina, and together with other NGOs, created the Network for Disarmament (*Red Argentina para el Desarme*). Maria Pía is currently the civil society representative on the Board of the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons.<sup>29</sup>

Maria Pía began with sharing her personal views, "I am an activist, I am a feminist of course but my 'cause' is guns. The environment, abortion – of course I agree with these campaigns -- but my cause is guns. Guns are associated with masculinity, with power, of course, but I have to confess that in general I have never experienced any kind of hostility when I raise these issues. That may be because I live in the city – Buenos Aires is a big city – and like many big cities, it's progressive. And in general, I would say, the media are with us – closer to disarmament, and against violence."

When the Network for Disarmament formed in 2004, there were 1.2 million legally owned guns, and roughly the same number of illegal weapons, circulating in Argentina.<sup>30</sup> During 2003, ten people a day died of gunshot wounds. Maria Pía explained that the Network for Disarmament developed legislative proposals for small arms control but had 'very small successes' for the first few years, "We went to parliament; we started to meet with ministers. They received us, they were polite, blah blah blah, but they didn't really see the problem."

Then, in July 2006, something happened that changed everything and underscored that gun violence is an issue that affects everyone regardless of status, class, or upbringing. Maria Pía recounted the story of a young man who was shot dead in a very busy street, a daily occurrence but usually with little media attention or police action. The deceased victim, Alfredo Marcenac, was a university student and from a middle-class family. The case shocked the country because it was a random shooting in a busy street where six other people were injured in the shooting after which the perpetrator just walked away. Alfredo's parents became an active part of the subsequent campaign to raise awareness, leading to media coverage which pushed the police into action.<sup>31</sup> After the perpetrator was found to be the legal owner of the gun used, political pressure increased to change the law. This led ultimately to President Néstor Kirchner declaring a National State of Emergency. In August 2006, Law 26.216, the National Programme for the Voluntary Surrender of Firearms, was introduced in Congress, paving the way for a firearms and ammunition buyback programme.<sup>32</sup> The Network for Disarmament worked closely with the government to draft the law, which included payment provisions to make the programme as accessible for as many people as possible.

The Network for Disarmament worked with the agency that implemented the programme and pursued an approach that focused on women. The approach was based on traditional gender roles

<sup>29</sup> [Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons](#).

<sup>30</sup> Marcela Valente, Inter Press Agency (IPS), [Argentina: Government to offer cash for guns](#), August 2006.

<sup>31</sup> Rodolfo Palacios, "[Salíó a la calle, disparó a quemarropa y mató como si fuera un videojuego](#)", InfoBae Crimen y Justicia, September 2020.

<sup>32</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "[Less guns, less violence. Argentina moves forward in firearms destruction](#)", May 2012.

and stereotypes. Maria Pía explained, “We appealed to mothers to convince their sons to surrender the guns – and it worked! The role of the mother in some areas is still very strong. You can be a criminal, but if your mother tells you to do something, you do it. So, our call was to women to take care of their families – if you want your family safe, try to convince your partner or your son to surrender the gun. We noticed from the survey we did that people went to surrender their guns because their mother asked them to do so! [...] So, I think women felt empowered by this message.”

The Network for Disarmament continued to engage in the programme which resulted in the collection and destruction of over 300,000 guns from 2007 to 2015.<sup>33</sup> Maria Pía remarked, “Every gun surrendered is one less gun in a home or on the streets,” and added that publicity, and the anonymity of the process, were key, “In small towns, for instance, when people understood that they would get the money, and there’d be no questions at all, more people started to approach.”

In 2009 the Ministry of Justice created a women’s bureau – the “*Oficina de la Mujer*” – with the aim of promoting a gender perspective in the institutional planning and internal processes of the judiciary in order to achieve gender equity. This office has published several reports on the study of femicides in Argentina where the weapon of use is described, including the use of firearms. According to recent reports by this office, there were 251 victims of ‘direct femicide’ in Argentina during 2020,<sup>34</sup> and between 2017 and 2020, 24% of femicides in the country were committed with firearms, while that percentage went up to 37% when it involves multiple femicides.<sup>35</sup>

In 2013, the World Future Council, in partnership with the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs and the Inter-Parliamentary Union, presented an award to the government of Argentina for its work on disarmament. Argentina’s Minister of Justice and Human Rights, Julio Alak, collected the award and Maria Pía was present at the ceremony to represent the civil society organizations<sup>36</sup> Maria Pía explained, “Our goal at the moment is to communicate the link between guns and femicide, between guns and machismo. We are in contact with the Ministry of Gender and Diversity that we have now with this new government. We’ve had many meetings with them, and we’re going to organise a Zoom webinar on debunking myths – the idea that the gun protects you, for instance – make the issue more visible, because it’s still invisible, the relation of armed violence and gender.” The intersections among gender, class, race, and economic status are no doubt factors in Maria Pía’s positive experiences of activism and advocacy in Argentina.



**APP has a highly active social media presence and it has created graphics, informative videos and other content for IANSA’s Global Week of Action and 16 Days campaigns, pictured here is their Instagram page: @app.argentina.**

<sup>33</sup> [Ministerio de Justicia y Derechos Humanos Argentina](#), Agencia Nacional de Materiales Controlados - ANMaC.

<sup>34</sup> Corte Suprema de Justicia de la Nación, [Registro Nacional de Femicidios de la Justicia Argentina](#), Resumen de la Edición 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Corte Suprema de Justicia de la Nación, Oficina de la Mujer, “[Femicidios con armas de fuego en uno de cada cuatro casos](#)”, 2022; Informe especial: [Adultas mayores víctimas de femicidio en Argentina](#), 2017-2019; [Informe especial: Niñas, adolescentes y jóvenes menores de 20 años víctimas de femicidios en Argentina](#), 2017-2019.

<sup>36</sup> [Argentina’s National Programme: Surrender of Firearms](#), futurepolicy.org; “[La Argentina ganó un premio de la ONU por el Plan de Desarme](#),” Infojus Noticias, 2013; “[Treaty of Tlatelolco Wins Future Policy Award](#) 2013,” World Future Council.

## Concluding Remarks

We thank the contributors to this paper. They highlight IANSA's diverse membership and the challenging work done by women campaigners in IANSA across continents, spanning a range of experience and approaches. It is important to acknowledge that each person's work and journey to end the misuse and proliferation of small arms is carried out in different contexts. Nonetheless, the ongoing and sustained commitment to achieve tangible change is at the core of their work and activism.

The solidarity and collaboration that is evident throughout the approaches described by those women interviewed is also at the heart of IANSA as an international network. The sharing and learning that is possible among members also enables us to progress in our work and collective approaches, particularly in our national and international advocacy. The importance of solidarity and support is also underscored by the reality of some campaigners who face threats to their work, wellbeing, and even to their lives, as noted by some of the interviewees in this paper.

IANSA prioritises fact-based advocacy and public awareness raising campaign actions. Wherever possible, IANSA encourages its members to use constructive engagement with officials, holding governments to account according to the international standards and laws that they adopt, including in the UNPoA, the ATT, and other instruments. Through its members, IANSA listens to, includes, and meaningfully collaborates with diverse groups of women and creates space for them to participate, innovate and speak out. Our work and actions draw on lived experience and we recognise and trust the expertise and insight campaigners gain when speaking truth to power.

While the emphasis of gender mainstreaming in small arms control and disarmament must aim to achieve women's full and effective participation, gender equality, gender parity, and gender mainstreaming must also include the analysis of gender relations, differences, and inequality.<sup>37</sup> The IANSA Women's Network remains an important space for coordination and collaboration, but not in isolation from the work of the wider network of all campaigners. We remain committed to gender mainstreaming because it enables us to have a better understanding of the roles that men and women play in relation to gun violence in various contexts – in conflict, post-conflict reconstruction, and non-conflict situations. As part of this, promoting equality through gender-balanced participation and the full and effective participation of women remain strong areas of focus for IANSA, as part of our intersectional and inclusive approach as a movement.

This diversity of members including their expertise, experience, and geographic scope, helps to make IANSA a unique movement that recognises the changes that we can contribute to at all levels – community, national, regional, and international.

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<sup>37</sup> More information can be found in the [MOSAIC module 06.10](#) on "Women, men and the gendered nature of small arms and light weapons."