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Gendered Vulnerabilities to Small Arms in South Central Somalia

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FEATURE

GENDERED VULNERABILITIES TO SMALL ARMS IN SOUTH CENTRAL SOMALIA

by Abigail Jones [Danish Demining Group], Nicola Sandhu, and Lucas Musetti [Gender and Mine Action Programme]



Danish Refugee Council (DRC)/Danish Demining Group (DDG) small arms risk education training in 2015. All photos courtesy of Abigail Jones.

Somalia is a very young nation demographically; estimates place half the population under the age of 14 and less than five percent over the age of 60.¹ A large portion of the population grew up during incredible civil instability and violence, making exposure to armed violence an ever-present prospect. Further, the presence of more than one million displaced persons and refugees exacerbates the difficulties of protecting vulnerable groups from violence.

Key factors contributing to armed violence and prevalence of small arms in Somalia include clan and subclan rivalries over resources; the 20-year breakdown of the federal state that lead to the importance of clan or subclan identity for survival; marginalization of nonpastoral clans and non-Somali tribes; external funding for extremist Islamic ideology

and the presence of groups such as al-Shabab; as well as lack of a legitimate outlet for justice and grievances. In addition to these factors and despite government efforts toward civilian disarmament, ownership of officially registered firearms in Somalia is legal, which has contributed to the prevalence of weapons in the country.

Weapons ownership is attached to masculinity in Somali culture, and boys will sometimes receive a weapon as a symbol of manhood.² According to a 2015 Danish Demining Group (DDG) impact assessment, young men aged 13 to 30 are often seen as the main perpetrators of armed violence, especially as they are the most at risk for recruitment into armed groups including al-Shabab; Islamic State group; Galgaduud, Khatumo State, and other clan militias. Due to the lack of employment



DRC/DDG small arms risk education training in 2015.

opportunities, young men are increasingly resorting to criminal activity such as carjacking, extortion, kidnapping, and assassinations.³ Young men in Somalia are also known to use weapons to rape, or commit other acts of sexual violence against women.⁴

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO GENDERED VULNERABILITY TO SMALL ARMS

In humanitarian mine action, gendered daily routines and mobility patterns expose people to landmines differently, and evidence suggests this is also the case with small arms in South Central Somalia. Secondary research indicates that the more significant danger posed to men from small arms is related to the idea that weapons are linked to masculinity. In Somali culture, owning a weapon is related to status, and firearms are directly linked to the role of protector. For Somali men, this involves protecting family, clan, livestock, and livelihood, especially in pastoral communities. Given the lack of a formal justice system, protecting the clan can also include revenge violence on those who attack clan members. The justice-system vacuum has been filled with traditional Somali or Xeer law, which demands armed retribution if arbitration over a slain clan member, usually blood money, fails to materialize. However, only men (15–45) are allowed to be targeted, as women, children, and the elderly are considered off limits.³

Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests the activities that put men at risk of accidents involving firearms are distinctly gendered. Men are often injured as a result of improper weapons handling or storage—a result of insufficient training. Peer pressure is a key factor motivating younger men to handle and use firearms in unsafe ways. DDG staff highlighted the fact that unsafe storage—for example keeping the weapon and ammunition together—can lead to accidents.⁴

Alternatively, Somali women reportedly have a very different exposure to weapons as, in Somali culture, they do not typically own firearms. Most women who do are either widows or wives of men who left the family and their guns behind for their sons to use when they are older. Apart from these scenarios, women are primarily exposed to firearms through their role as keeper of the household, where they have the responsibility for any firearm within the home. This leads women to view firearms as higher risk within the home than their male counterparts do.² In the 2015 DDG impact assessment in South Central Somalia, 25.6 percent of female respondents in Banadir cited domestic violence involving firearms as one of their primary safety and security concerns. DDG staff in South Central Somalia highlighted examples of unsafe weapons storage in places accessible to children, as well as storing the weapon loaded and without

the safety catch on, which has led to accidental discharges.

THE GENDERED EFFECTS OF SMALL ARMS INCIDENTS

For the household head, whether male or female, an inability to work and support the family due to a disability caused by a small arms incident can lead to significant psychological suffering and isolation. In addition, it can lead to family breakup and divorce if a man can no longer provide for his wife and children. In the case of women, the significant difference is that a woman who gets disabled by a small arms incident can also become more vulnerable to rape or gender-based violence. Her injury can result in the husband taking an additional wife if she is not perceived as physically able to carry out her domestic tasks. With girls, securing a marriage partner will be extremely challenging due to negative perceptions of disabilities in the community. For boys, it is reported that disability can cause social isolation, which can lead to substance and drug abuse and, in some cases, suicide.⁴

AVAILABILITY OF DATA TO SUPPORT THE ARGUMENT

To provide evidence of the different effects of small arms on women, girls, boys, and men, an analysis of data disaggregated by sex and age is essential, which includes data on firearm ownership, firearm-incident reporting, and casualties. At present, significant gaps exist in the availability of quantitative data.

In 2007, the Small Arms Survey ranked Somali firearm ownership per capita at 66 of 178 countries.⁵ However, due to ongoing insecurity and access challenges, tracking the exact number of small arms in Somalia is extremely difficult since firearm ownership is legal, but no central or local records exist to show how many are circulating.³



DRC/DDG small arms risk education training in 2015.



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In a context where the federal government does not control the entire territory, and the local population has little confidence in state institutions, data compiled on reporting of firearm-related incidents to the police will not reflect the problem's true extent. Data compiled through the 2015 DDG impact assessment showed that in South Central Somalia a relatively low percentage of the population would report if they were a victim of crime or a violent encounter: Abudwaq (51.8 percent), Gedo (37.5 percent), and Banadir (63.2 percent). In addition, the reporting of firearm-related incidents to police varied across the different geographic areas: Abudwaq (20 percent), Gedo (63 percent), and Banadir (24 percent). Within these figures, female respondents were less likely to report the incident to the police.

DDG states that most victims of firearm-related violence are men between the ages of 17 and 38 years.² Yet accurate data on incidents involving small arms that lead to injury or death is not available. In 2015, DDG attempted to track this data in Puntland by visiting individual hospitals in Ayn, Bari, Karkar, Mudug, and Nugal as well as through liaison with the Ministry of Security. However, this data was not disaggregated by sex and age, and at the time of writing, no such effort had been made. Also notable is that, for many families in South Central Somalia, significant access constraints—such as a lack of financial resources to travel to the hospitals—can further distort the accuracy of the data.

CONCLUSIONS

The lack of accurate sex- and age-disaggregated data on firearm ownership, firearm-related incidents, and casualties means that the argument on gendered vulnerability to small arms is drawn from secondary research, perception data, and qualitative information. The Gender and Mine Action Programme (GMAP) and DDG believe that to encourage positive behavior change with regard to small arms, a better understanding of gender-related behaviors drawn from an analysis of quantitative and qualitative data is needed. This will allow organizations carrying out small arms risk education (SARE) to identify target groups, develop appropriate risk communication messages, and measure the results of SARE initiatives. At the same time, based on indications showing specific gender and diversity vulnerabilities to small arms, GMAP and DDG argue that future analyses and activities should be designed and implemented with sensitivity to gender, tribe, clan, age, and wider community relations in South Central Somalia. ©

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