

The Implications of the Reverberating Effects of Explosive Weapons Use in Populated Areas for Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals

SDG Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

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This factsheet is an extract from a longer UNIDIR report on Reverberating Effects of Explosive Weapons Use.

Target:

5.2: Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in public and private spheres (...)

5.5: Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.

Violence using explosive weapons kills and injures women and girls. Although there have been few contemporary studies on how explosive weapons affect women and their roles in economic and political life, the available evidence suggests that their use in populated areas may pose a greater risk to women than any other weapon category. The destruction of infrastructure and services by explosive weapons makes the practical tasks expected of women and girls in their daily lives more burdensome. In societies where domestic duties are primarily a woman's responsibility and social expectations mark females as caregivers, women and girls also have to ensure continuation of daily life when water and electricity are interrupted and food prices rise. They have to care for family members injured and permanently disabled by explosive weapons, often in the absence of health infrastructure. These longitudinal impacts hinder women's ability to participate in public life. Overall, much more research is needed to understand how explosive weapons affect women's empowerment.

The Women, Peace and Security agenda, based on Security Council Resolution 1325,¹ **recognizes the precarious situation of women in conflict, but also calls upon all States to allow for increased participation of women in decision-making on matters of peace and security.**² Addressing women's needs in conflict requires protection from violence and its consequences, and space for women to participate in economic and political decision-making in the reconstruction of societies in the aftermath of war.

In 2014, the Reaching Critical Will Disarmament Programme of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) produced the first overview of the impact of explosive weapons on women, which highlighted key aspects of how women are made vulnerable by explosive weapons.³ The overview implies that much remains to be done in examining and drawing attention to reverberating impacts. No work related to contemporary conflicts could be identified that discussed the effects of explosive weapons use in populated areas on women's empowerment and gender equality. Some documented psychological impacts on caregivers of small arms victims are likely to also apply to women caring for family members injured by explosive weapons.

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The effects of explosive violence on women and girls

Qualitative accounts of the death toll from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas suggest that **women make up a sizeable proportion of the civilian casualties**. Many of the high-casualty incidents occur in places where women are often present, such as markets, homes and schools.⁴ However, quantitative data on the casualties of explosive weapons are usually not disaggregated by gender. In 2014, AOAV recorded over 40,000 casualties from the use of explosive violence, of which 78 per cent were civilians, but the number of women among them was not reported.⁵ Yet a study on casualties in Iraq indicated that women made up 34 per cent of civilian casualties from explosive weapons use. This is the highest proportion of female casualties of all weapon categories.⁶ **These data suggest that women are highly vulnerable to death and injury from explosive weapons because they are likely to be in places such as residential buildings and markets that are often affected by explosive weapons use in populated areas.**

Effects on women's and girl's empowerment and participation in decision-making

There are no focused studies of the extensive use of explosive weapons in populated areas affects women's empowerment and participation in decision-making.

In many societies, women are expected to carry out most, if not all, of the domestic labour, which reduces women's ability to participate in political and social life and decision-making. The evidence discussed for other SDGs in previous chapters strongly suggests that the destruction caused by explosive weapons in populated areas will increase the time spent on domestic work because the performance of daily chores becomes more burdensome. The limited availability of food requires many hours spent queuing to access basics foods, as was reported from Donetsk, Ukraine,⁷ and Yarmouk refugee camp in Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic, in February 2014.⁸ Damage to piped water supply has an enormous cost in terms of the additional time spent obtaining water. Interruptions to electricity and water supplies force people to abandon labour saving technology and switch to basic techniques such as washing by hand.⁹

Women and girls are also usually the main caregivers for family members. Caring for children becomes more difficult when schools are closed because of damage or because they are used as shelters. In the Syrian Arab Republic for example, it was found that school attendance was down to approximately two days a week.¹⁰ Caring for elderly family members is made more burdensome when access to food and water is reduced. Explosive violence leads to added caring responsibilities when family members are injured by explosive weapons and suffer the long-term effects of violently acquired disability. Caregiving has clear economic, health, and human rights implications for women. Many caregivers, particularly in low-income settings, suffer economically because they are not able to work outside the home or participate in education or training.¹¹ Caregiving can lead to vicarious trauma, the indirect or secondary traumatization experienced by caregivers.¹²

Destruction of infrastructure by explosive weapons and the consequential decline in services requires changes to daily routines. This reduces women's capacity to participate in political and social life, and thereby reinforces their disempowerment in the longer term.

In summary, the upheaval caused by the destruction from explosive weapons will affect gender relations in many nuanced ways. More research is needed to understand how explosive weapons make women and girls vulnerable, overburden them, and therefore affect their ability to participate fully in economic and political life.

Endnotes

¹ Security Council, UN document S/RES/1325, 31 October 2000.

² Security Council, UN document S/RES/1325, 31 October 2000.

³ Gabriella Irsten, *Women and Explosive Weapons, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom*, 2014, p. 17.

⁴ John Borrie and Maya Brehm, "Enhancing Civilian Protection from Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas: Building a Policy and Research Agenda", *International Review of the Red Cross*, 93:883, September 2011.

⁵ Action on Armed Violence, *Explosives States. Monitoring Explosive Weapons in 2014*, 2014.

⁶ Action on Armed Violence. *Impact of Explosive Weapons by Gender and Age – Iraq 2003–2011*, Research Paper, 2012, p. 6.

⁷ Katie Stallard, "Ukraine: Long queues for aid in besieged city of Donetsk", *Sky News*, 30 January 2015; Damien Gayle, "In the bleak midwinter: Hundreds of Ukrainians forced to queue up in the snow in Donetsk as they wait for their monthly aid packages", *Daily Mail Online*, 4 December 2014.

⁸ Harriet Sherwood, "Queue for food in Syria's Yarmouk camp shows desperation of refugees", *The Guardian*, 26 February 2014.

⁹ Prior to displacement, most Syrians were used to a life with adequate water reserves of between 70–145 litres per person per day. For those in the refugee camp in Zaatari, they have had to adjust living with just 35 litres per person per day. Alaa Milbes, "Getting Water to Zaatari During Drought Season", *Oxfam Blog*, 19 August 2014.

¹⁰ Save the Children, *Explosive Weapons and Grave Violations against Children*, position paper, 2013, p. 12.

¹¹ See the WHO Long-Term Care Policy Initiative and its various outputs including: J. Brodsky, J. Habib and M. Hirschfeld (Eds), *Long-term Care in Developing Countries: Ten Case Studies*, World Health Organization (Geneva), 2003; J. Brodsky, J. Habib and M. Hirschfeld (Eds), *Key Policy Issues in Long-term Care*, World Health Organization (Geneva), 2003. Also see E. Esplen, *Gender and Care: Overview Report*, BRIDGE, Institute of Development Studies, 2009.

¹² Cate Buchanan, "Surviving Gun Violence Project", unpublished note for the UK Department for International Development on "Gender and Caregiving", 2013.