UNIDIR

# No man's land? Focusing on men to reduce global armed violence

**ADAM BAIRD**

# Acknowledgements

## About UNIDIR

UNIDIR is a voluntarily funded, autonomous institute within the United Nations. One of the few policy institutes worldwide focusing on disarmament, UNIDIR generates knowledge and promotes dialogue and action on disarmament and security. Based in Geneva, UNIDIR assists the international community to develop the practical, innovative ideas needed to find solutions to critical security problems.

## Note

The designations employed and the presentation of the material in this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. The views expressed in the publication are the sole responsibility of the individual author. They do not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of the United Nations, UNIDIR, its staff members or sponsors.

## Citation

Adam Baird, "No man's land? Focusing on men to reduce global armed violence". Geneva: UNIDIR, 2024.

# Author

### Dr. Adam Baird

Researcher with UNIDIR's Conventional Arms and Ammunition Programme (CAAP)

He specializes in masculinities, armed violence prevention, gangs and organized crime, with a focus on Latin America and the Caribbean. His latest book is *From South Central to Southside: Gang Transnationalism, Masculinity, and Disorganized Violence in Belize City* (Temple University Press, 2024).

# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| **CAAP** | Conventional Arms and Ammunition Programme (UNIDIR) |
| **DDR** | Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration |
| **IDDRS** | Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards |
| **LGBTQI+** | Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, and persons of other diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics |
| **MEAC** | Managing Exits from Armed Conflicts (project, UNIDIR) |
| **NGO** | Non-governmental organization |
| **POA** | United Nations Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons |
| **SALW** | Small arms and light weapons |
| **SDG** | Sustainable Development Goal |
| **SYSP** | Southside Youth Success Project |
| **UN Women** | United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women |
| **UNDP** | United Nations Development Programme |
| **UNFPA** | United Nations Population Fund |
| **UNODA** | United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs |
| **WPS** | Women and Peace and Security |

# Contents

# Executive summary

This report is about reducing men's illegal armed violence. Globally, some 90 percent of firearms homicides are committed by men, and men also make up the vast majority of the victims. The highest rates of homicide are found in the Americas, including the Caribbean, and southern Africa, mainly in cities. "Men killing men" disproportionately affects young people in the Global South who live in precarious economic circumstances. This has been the consistent demographic of lethal armed violence for decades.

If men are at the centre of the global armed violence epidemic, it clearly has something to do with their gender. This prompts the question: What work is being undertaken with men using a masculinities focus to reduce armed violence? The answer, in short, is none. This is despite recent calls by the United Nations Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons encouraging "the engagement and participation of men and boys in mainstreaming a gender perspective into policies and programmes on small arms and light weapons". Efforts to reduce armed violence that do not consider masculinities will only have a limited effect.

In terms of building knowledge, implementation and accountability, this is an area the United Nations can lead on. It can do this by developing initiatives and collaborations through existing agencies and institutes such as UNIDIR, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and UN Women, in collaboration with Member States, academia, civil society partners and other stakeholders. To achieve this goal, greater advocacy, political support and funding are vital. One proposal is to begin with a United Nations inter-agency working group, with the long-term goal of creating a dedicated institutional home. This report seeks to generate debate about how progress can be made.

## Key findings

- When frustrated young men in contexts of persistent socio-economic marginalization gain easy access to small arms and ammunition, this creates a significant risk of an epidemic of lethal violence. This can be simplified as an equation:

> *Frustrated young men living in contexts of chronic vulnerability*

> *+*
> *fluid access to small arms and ammunition*

> *=*
> *heightened risk of armed violence epidemics*

- There is no silver-bullet solution. However, if no way is found to positively channel the agency of frustrated young men in contexts of socio-economic precarity, they will continue to drive demand for illicit small

arms, be recruited to armed groups and become the protagonists of homicide, as both perpetrators and victims. This has devastating consequences for local communities. A gender-specific (i.e., male-specific) approach to reducing masculine vulnerability – the drivers, motivations and other factors that push men into armed groups – will weaken the prospect of future armed violence. Given culturally relevant and gender-sensitive opportunities, men's agency can be directed away from armed groups. The ongoing global impact of small arms and light weapons (SALW) and the continual challenges presented by arms control mean that a turn towards masculinities is an innovation that can generate progress.

- Perceptions of men must evolve. The dominant understanding of men views them as perpetrators of violence in conflict and security spaces. Male victims are assumed to be genderless. Even though male-on-male homicide dominates statistics, this is rarely perceived as a gendered form of violence or fratricide. Child soldiers may be perceived as victims, whereas young gang members rarely are. This means that poor young men who are the most likely group to be murdered, are seldom targeted as beneficiaries of violence-prevention initiatives specifically tailored to their gender.

- A theory of change for masculinities-based armed violence prevention means the following: building recognition that armed violence requires a masculinities-oriented solution; and developing solutions that tackle masculine vulnerability in locations where armed violence epidemics occur or are at risk of occurring. This centres attention on dealing with the exclusions that drive armed group membership and the demand for small arms.

- There is little experience of relevant programming to draw upon, so it cannot be said with confidence what works. There is thus an urgent need to build the evidence base from the ground up. Innovation, piloting and evaluation are required to deal with the challenge of disarming male identities that are aligned with demand for, possession of, and use of small arms.

- Loss of status when leaving an armed group has long been acknowledged as important; for example, exiting an armed group often requires a man to accept reduction in his masculine status. This is a key challenge that remains underexplored.

- There are concerns from some in the wider gender community that empowering men or making them the targeted beneficiaries of programmes to reduce armed violence and demand for weapons may divert support away from traditional gender initiatives or may deepen patriarchy. It is vital to engage with these concerns. Programmes that critique armed violent masculinities will also reduce the victimization of women, children and gender-diverse persons, not just men. Challenging violent masculinities is indivisible from a critique of hegemonic masculinities and patriarchy, and therefore promotes the gender equality that is at the heart of the feminist agenda.
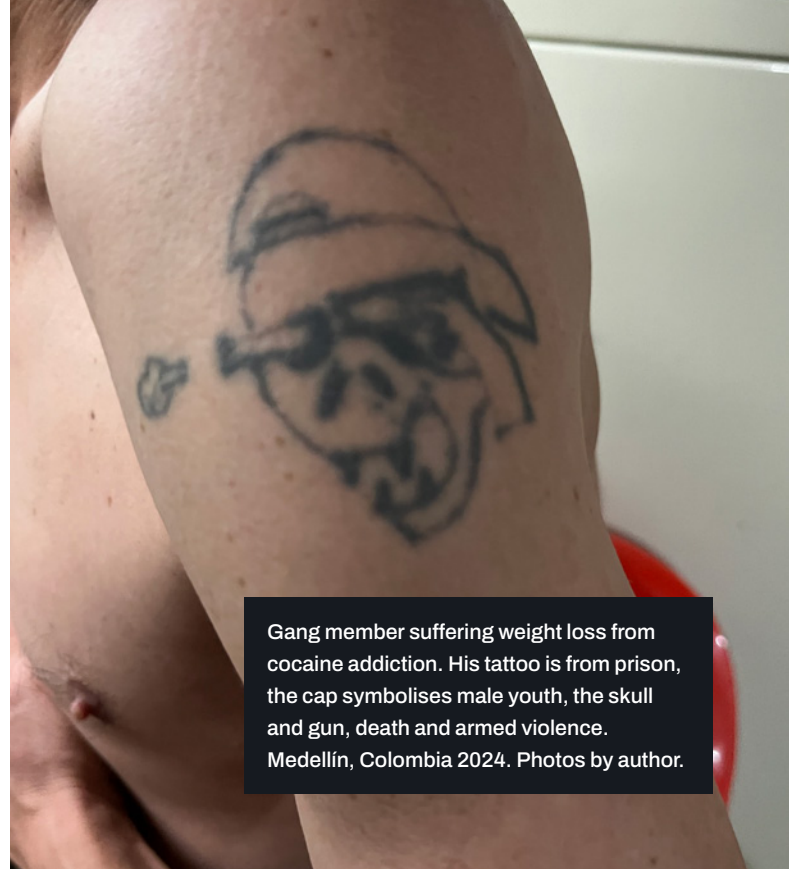
Gang member suffering weight loss from cocaine addiction. His tattoo is from prison, the cap symbolises male youth, the skull and gun, death and armed violence. Medellín, Colombia 2024. Photos by author.

# 1. Introduction

This report presents new ideas about tackling men's illegal armed violence. The statistics could not be clearer. Worldwide, 80 per cent of intentional violent deaths occur outside warfare.[1] Men make up 90 per cent of homicide suspects, while 84 per cent of homicide victims (488,000) are men and 16 per cent (92,000) are women. Men are responsible for 91 per cent of deaths caused by firearm. The highest proportion of small arms-related deaths and overall homicide rates are found in the Americas, including the Caribbean, and also Southern Africa, mainly in cities, where the majority of gun homicides coalesce around young men from poorer urban neighbourhoods.[2]

In other words, "men killing men" excessively affects young people in the Global South who live in challenging economic circumstances. Clearly, arms and armed violence are connected to men – meaning their gender identity or "masculinities" (as explained in Box 1). This has been the defining demographic characteristic of lethal armed violence for several decades. Statistically, if men are at the centre of the global armed violence epidemic, it clearly has something to do with their gender. In June 2024, a meeting on the United Nations Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons (POA) referred to the differential

---

1    A  Small Arms Survey, "Global Violent Deaths" database, 2022, https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/database/global-violent-deaths-gvd.
2    Small Arms Survey, "Global Violent Deaths".

impacts of the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons (SALW) on women, men, girls and boys, "To encourage the engagement and participation of men and boys in mainstreaming a gender perspective into policies and programmes on small arms and light weapons".[3] This prompts the question:

How are we working with men and masculinities to reduce armed violence? The answer, in short, is that we are not. This report addresses why working with men and masculinities continues to be overlooked and, vitally, what can be done about it so that armed violence can be tackled more effectively.

**Box 1. The trouble with men and small arms**

**Masculinities** refer to the social expectations of being a man or "manly" – the behaviour, roles and attributes that are expected of boys and men in their given culture. This forms their gender identity as a recognizable man. It is commonly, but not exclusively, associated with traits such as physical prowess; with being a provider or family breadwinner; with stoicism, emotional control and not showing weakness; with heterosexuality, dominance and risk-taking; and, relationally, with not being female or gender diverse.

These traits are not necessarily negative, but they create a gender hierarchy in society whereby men who display more of them are near the top. Criticized as "hegemonic masculinities"[4] – in popular terms reflecting the macho or alpha male – this subordinates women, femininities and other ways of being a man (e.g., homosexuality). This type of male identity is most commonly linked with domestic, social, organized and other forms violence.

The majority of civilian small arms are owned by men. Militaries, police, security guards, guerrillas, militias, extremists, terrorists, organized criminals, gangs and other groups that use small arms are overwhelmingly made up of men. Traditionally, men are expected or permitted to join armed groups – indeed, are rewarded for doing so – in ways that women are normally not. Furthermore, linking manliness to small arms as symbols of male success is continually reproduced in popular culture, in advertising for gun sales, and in recruitment into both legal and illegal armed structures.[5]

Male victims are assumed to be genderless. Even though male-on-male homicide dominates statistics, this is rarely perceived as a form of gendered violence or fratricide. In part, this is because attention is drawn to men only as the perpetrators of the majority of

these murders. This means that men living in violent contexts – who are the most likely demographic to be murdered – are rarely targeted as beneficiaries of gender-based interventions. Similarly, males as victims of wartime sexual violence are largely neglected.[6]

3    Fourth United Nations Conference to Review Progress Made in the Implementation of the Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat, and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects and the International Tracing Instrument, A/CONF.192/2024/RC/3, 5 July 2024, https://undocs.org/A/CONF.192/2024/RC/3, paragraph 133.
4    R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).
5    M. Schöb and H. Myrttinen, *Men and Masculinities in Gender Responsive Small Arms Control* (New York: Gender Equality Network for Small Arms Control (GENSAC), Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies and Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 2022), https://gensac.network/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Men-and-Masculinities_final.pdf.
6    P. Schulz, *Male Survivors of Wartime Sexual Violence: Perspectives from Northern Uganda* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.95s.

Although there may be concerns from the wider gender community (see Box 2), potential gender-based programmes that focus on men to reduce both their violence and their victimization could learn much from the progress made in recent years by feminist organizations that have advocated for vulnerable women to be supported in specific ways. Numerous organizations that seek to reduce armed violence intervene with male-dominated groups such as street gangs, organized crime, or combatants enrolled in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes. But they rarely implement masculinities approaches with rigour. Until this happens, global armed violence and demand for (illicit) small arms cannot be tackled effectively. This report aims to stimulate debate and makes recommendations for progress on this topic.

## Box 2. Addressing the concerns of the wider gender community

To reiterate, this report seeks to generate a debate about how men's illegal armed violence can be most effectively prevented. There are concerns from some women's advocates, feminists, and the LGBTQI+ and wider gender community that empowering men in programmes to reduce armed violence and demand for weapons can deepen patriarchy, could set back gender equality or could even entrench harmful masculinities. It is vital to to engage with and allay these concerns, and above all make allies in challenging men's armed violence.

Armed violence-prevention programmes with a specific critique of men's violence and masculinities will reduce the victimization of women, children and gender-diverse persons, not just men. This is indivisible from a critique of hegemonic masculinities and patriarchy. This report therefore promotes gender equality, which is at the heart of the feminist agenda. This responds to a recent POA call for gender responsiveness "by addressing gender roles, norms and expectations for women and men" in small arms control;  and to further calls for men and masculinities to be included more rigorously to deliver the Woman, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.[8]

To develop this work it is important to understand that (marginalized young) men can be:
(a) Vulnerable, considering that they are vastly disproportionate victims of small arms-related lethal violence,[9] injury, disfigurement and disability
(b) A gender category that requires specific attention
(c) Worthy beneficiaries of interventions that create positive, non-violent pathways to manhood that lead them away from entanglement in armed groups that damage communities

This report argues that men and masculinities must be addressed specifically in order to reduce the global burden of armed violence and illicit arms proliferation (for a methodological note, see Box 3). Section 2 tackles the challenges ahead. It first refers to masculinities in United Nations recommendations that have emerged in recent years. For conceptual clarity, it develops a straightforward equation explaining the centrality of men and masculini-

---

7       United Nations, A/CONF.192/2024/RC/3, paragraph 125.

8       D. Duriesmith, *How to Meaningfully Address Men in the Women, Peace and Security Agenda* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2023), https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/06/how-meaningful-ly-address-men-women-peace-and-security-agenda.

9       United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on DDR, "5.10 Women, Gender and DDR", Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS), 13 November 2023, https://www.unddr.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/IDDRS-5.10-Women-Gender-and-DDR_revised.pdf, p. 10.

ties to armed violence epidemics. It then asks: If men are central to armed violence, why are interventions using a masculinities approach so rare? Section 3 provides solutions, with a caveat. In terms of masculinities interventions that have been piloted and evaluated to reduce armed violence, there is simply no robust evidence base. This report advocates for this to change with programming to build, from the bottom up, such an evidence base about which masculinities approaches work. While there are few concrete lessons learned, some progress has been made and there is a growing body of academic research to draw upon to plot a path forwards. With this in mind,

Section 3 begins by asking how to better disarm men by taking masculinities into account: first, in terms of violence prevention before boys and young men actually join armed groups; and second, after they have joined, how they can be better helped to exit such groups. This is followed by a theory of change, outlining practical steps and principles for the inclusion of masculinities in armed violence-prevention initiatives, before concluding, in Section 4, that institutional and political support is key to promoting this agenda – without it, armed violence cannot be reduced effectively.

**Box 3. : Methodological note**

There is a substantial academic literature on masculinities and violence, including armed violence, some of which is cited one these pages. The onus here, however, has been to consider the recent increase in publications by the United Nations, Member States and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that make recommendations on engaging men and masculinities in policy and programming, referred to throughout the report.

To gain a better understanding of masculinities in policy and programming, the author used written feedback on early drafts of the report with select feminist scholars and masculinities experts in addition to individuals working within the United Nations system. This feedback has been anonymized as certain issues were considered sensitive. For example, one expert from a feminist NGO said that, while they supported "empowering men" from disadvantaged backgrounds as a mechanism to reduce armed violence, they felt that this was not something they could raise among their colleagues. Similarly, a masculinities expert said that they felt that he could not yet make public some private discussions about supporting men. One feminist scholar agreed that it would be a good idea to suggest creating "UN-Men" (to mirror the existing UN Women), but on balance the reviewers concluded that taking this step would be polemical and would detract from the report's key messaging. Another masculinities expert felt that they had spent years repeating recommendations on men and masculinities that were largely ignored.

Chelatenango, El Salvador. May 2007. A member of the Mara Salvatrucha gang displays his tattoos inside the Chelatenango prison in El Salvador. Credit: © Moisen Saman.

# 2. Challenges for developing masculinities approaches to armed violence reduction

## 2.1. Addressing the issue of masculinities, arms and armed violence at the United Nations

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16, on "Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions", aims to "significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere" and "significantly reduce illicit financial and arms flows, strengthen the recovery and return of stolen assets and combat all forms of organized crime". Further, the 2023 United Nations report on the SDGs highlights male overrepresentation in homicide.[10] The United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) has highlighted the gendered impact of arms in relation to SDG 5.2, which refers to the elimination all forms of violence against women and girls:

> The ownership and use of arms is closely linked to specific expressions of masculinity related to control, power, domination and strength. Correspondingly, men constitute a massive majority of the owners of small arms and young men constitute the vast majority of perpetrators of armed violence.

---

10    United Nations, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special Edition— Towards a Rescue Plan for People and Planet* (New York: United Nations, 2023), https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2023.pdf.

Weapons also have differentiated impacts on women and men, girls and boys. In 2016, men and boys accounted for 84 percent of violent deaths, including homicides and armed conflict. Women, however, are more frequently the victims of gender-based violence facilitated by small arms, including domestic violence and sexual violence …

All States should also incorporate gender perspectives in the development of national legislation and policies on disarmament and arms control, including consideration of the gendered aspects of ownership, use and misuse of arms; the differentiated impacts of weapons on women and men; and the ways in which gender roles can shape arms control and disarmament policies and practices.[11]

As mentioned above, the POA has referred to the different impacts of the illicit trade in SALW on women, men, girls and boys.[12] Further, the recently revised module on gender of the Integrated DDR Standards (IDDRS) raises the importance of working with men and masculinities.[13] The aim of SDG 5 is to "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls", with specific targets to "Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation".[14] UN Women recognizes that SDG 5 cannot be met without challenging violent masculinities. While the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda has largely been developed without specifically considering the role of men, there is evidence that this may be changing, albeit slowly.[15]

UN Women actively seek to engage men and boys in humanitarian policy and programming, in line with its approach to challenging patriarchy. In 2020 it commissioned a report to develop insights and recommendations on how to best "Work with Men and Boys for Gender Equality", and in 2023 it released a guidance note and further report on engaging men and boys in humanitarian action for achieving both better programming with women and girls and gender equality for all as well as women's empowerment.[16] These support UN Women's strategic plan for 2022–2025, which calls for the support of positive social norms, including through engaging men and boys; seeking to transform patriarchal masculinities to support gender equality; women's empowerment; and women's access to rights and services. In 2024, UN Women Executive Director, Sima Sami Bahous, restated that "when men and women, when boys and girls stand together

---

11  United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, *Securing Our Common Future: An Agenda for Disarmament* (New York: United Nations, 2018), https://front.un-arm.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/sg-disarmament-agenda-pubs-page.pdf, p. 39.

12  United Nations, A/CONF.192/2024/RC/3, paragraph 133.

13  United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on DDR, "5.10 Women, Gender and DDR". See also Duriesmith, *How to Meaningfully Address Men*.

14  UN Women, "SDG 5: Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls", n.d., https://www.unwomen.org/en/node/36060.

15  D. Duriesmith, "Engaging or Changing Men? Understandings of Masculinity and Change in the New 'Men, Peace and Security' Agenda", *Peacebuilding*, vol 8, no. 4 (2019): 418–31, https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2019.1687076; Duriesmith, *How to Meaningfully Address Men*.

16  A. Greig and M. Flood, *Work with Men and Boys for Gender Equality: A Review of Field Formation, the Evidence Base and Future Directions* (New York: UN Women, 2020); H. Myrttinen, *Men, Masculinities and Humanitarian Settings: A Mapping of the State of Research and Practice-based Evidence* (New York: UN Women, 2023); H. Myrttinen, "Engaging Men and Boys for Gender Equality In Humanitarian Settings", UN Women Internal Guidance Note, 2023.

for gender equality, progress is unstoppable, equality achievable".[17]

Although gender initiatives have recently included boys and men, they focus on gender equality and the empowerment of women. Their scope has yet to shift to working with men to reduce their victimization, that is, to understanding men killing men with small arms as a form of violence that disproportionately affects the male gender. Although men have recently been recognized as victims and survivors of wartime sexual violence, they are generally not perceived as beneficiaries of gender-based (i.e., male-based) interventions tailored to their needs. Even though widely available gender-disaggregated homicide data confirms the "maleness" of armed violence, ways of working specifically with masculinities are yet to resonate significantly in programming solutions.

UN Women is a leading light in gender advocacy and has successfully generated pathways to empower women and to promote women's rights and gender equality. It is important to continue this work and to find ways of working more substantially with men as a "gender category". In addition to reducing the victimization of predominantly poor young men in the Global South, a focus on men, masculinities and armed violence will not only promote gender equality, but is arguably essential for it (see Box 2).

Almost 30 years have passed since the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and the Beijing Platform for Action, which "recognized men and boys as important constituents in the prevention of violence, empowerment of women and girls, and achievement of gender equality".[18] It could therefore be assumed that men and masculinities would have progressed in intervention efforts across diverse institutions – a form of masculinities mainstreaming. In the decades since those early policy recommendations, up to the recent flurry of masculinities-focused reports, only nominal implementation has occurred. Recently, the draft phrase "encourage efforts that explore masculinities in the context of the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons in collaboration with relevant national authorities and civil society organizations" was removed from the final version of a POA report.[19]

"

One gender expert commented that they often see similar high-level United Nations recommendations to explore working with masculinities and to bring in men and boys, but they do not come with concrete programming ideas about what this should look like.[20]

17    Sima Sami Bahous, "When Men and Women, Boys and Girls, Stand Together for Gender Equality, Progress is Unstoppable, Equality Achievable", HeForShe Summit 2024, 24 September 2024, https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/speech/2024/09/speech-when-men-and-women-boys-and-girls-stand-together-for-gender-equality-progress-is-unstoppable-equality-achievable.

18    Dean Peacock et al., "Seeing the Forest for the Trees: The Case for a More Structural Approach to Countering Militarized Masculinities and Mobilising Men for Feminist Peace", In H. Myrttinen et al., (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Masculinities, Conflict and Peacebuilding* (London: Routledge, 2024), p. 7.

19    E. Bjertén, "Editorial: Improving Intersectionality and Addressing Ammunition and New Technologies at RevCon4", *Small Arms Monitor*, vol. 12, no. 1 (17 June 2024), https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/disarmament-fora/salw/2024/sam/17187-small-arms-monitor-vol-12-no-1, p. 4.

20    Expert reviewer comment on an early report draft, March 2024.

Further, recent reports that promote work with men, masculinities and violence recommend ways of reducing the victimization of women and children as the principal beneficiaries, while specific recommendations for dealing with the male victims of homicide or working with men as victims and survivors of wartime sexual violence are generally absent.

There is a pressing need to tackle this issue more effectively in order to deliver on United Nations priorities, particularly SDGs 5 and 16 and the *New Agenda for Peace*.[21] Viewing men as perpetrators of violence remains the dominant lens through which men and masculinities in conflict and security spaces are understood. Yet, despite this,

"

there is no clear call across United Nations policy documents for a "masculinities approach" and how "men's" disarmament might be promoted and how armed violence might be prevented and otherwise reduced. This report endeavours to push us further down this path.

## 2.2. Why do we get violence epidemics? An equation

When murder or homicide rates reach "epidemic" levels of over 30 per 100,000 population, the share of deaths caused by small arms – in particular, handheld small arms – increases substantially.[22] This has occurred in a number of cities around the globe where rates regularly surpass epidemic levels. This phenomenon can be presented in simple terms: when frustrated young men in contexts of persistent socio-economic, political, cultural and other exclusions gain easy access to arms and ammunition, this creates a significant risk of an epidemic of lethal violence (see Box 4).

Peacock et al. recently asked a fundamental question: How does exclusion push men to use small arms or to join armed groups?[23] To respond, such contexts frustrate young men as they come of age because there are fewer dignified pathways to manhood, most obviously a lack of decent job opportunities. This blocks routes to becoming income earners and family providers, which are two central pillars of masculinity (see Box 1). Recent reports by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) indicate that men in sub-Saharan Africa are motivated to take part in extremist violence due to grievances associated with poverty, inequality and un- or underemployment. These factors were cited as the lead cause of frustration by the men who joined extremist groups.[24]

21    The *New Agenda for Peace* explicitly seeks to "prevent conflict and violence and sustaining peace", "Transform gendered power dynamics in peace and security" (Action 5), "Reduce the human cost of weapons" (Action 7) and "Strengthen peace operations and partnerships" (Action 8), all of which relate to this report.

22    United Nations Development Programme, "Citizen Security with a Human Face: Evidence and Proposals for Latin America", 2014, p. 1; Adam Baird, "From Vulnerability to Violence: Gangs and 'Homicide Booms' in Trinidad and Belize", *Urban Crime*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2020): 76–97.

23    Peacock et al., "Seeing the Forest for the Trees", p.14.

24    United Nations Development Programme, "Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement", 2024, p. 5; Peacock et al., "Seeing the Forest for the Trees", p. 11.

Armed violence epidemics are dependent upon contexts of chronic socio-economic vulnerability that generate a pool of frustrated young men who use their agency in search of opportunity, respect and status.[25] This leads enough of them into armed groups to sustain high homicide rates (see proportion of male victims in Small Arms Survey infographic on p16). There simply is no homicide epidemic in urban communities without the acute, continual, socio-economic hardship that is caused by failures of development. This includes rapid economic decline, inflation, inequality, elitism and regional divides, high un- and underemployment, and pressures created by rapid urbanization, climate change, macro-economic instability, corruption, organized crime and parallel economies, low tax revenues, among other issues. This has been referred to in academic literature as "chronic vulnerability" creating "chronic violence".[26]

Silver bullet propositions should be treated with scepticism. However, if violent masculinities are interrupted, that would spell the end for armed violence epidemics. Conversely,

"

if no way is found to positively channel the agency of frustrated young men in contexts of socio-economic precarity, they will become the protagonists of homicide. We ignore them at our peril.

**Box 4. An equation explaining armed violence epidemics**

**Masculine Vulnerability**
(frustrated young men
in contexts of chronic
vulnerability)
+
**Fluid Access to Small Arms
and Ammunition**
=
**Heightened Risk of
Armed Violence Epidemics**

The equation in Box 4 represents a simplified supply-and-demand analysis of armed violence epidemics. These are anchored at the intersection of socio-economic exclusion, masculinity (mainly young men), and access to small arms and ammunition. The equation implies that removing weapons or reducing "masculine vulnerability" (defined as the gendered impact of chronic social and economic exclusion on boys and men)[27] – and ideally removing both – would significantly reduce the risk of the occurrence of armed violence epidemics.

---

25    Phillipe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

26    Jenny Pearce, "Violence, Power and Participation: Building Citizenship in Contexts of Chronic Violence", IDS Working Paper 274, 2007; Adam Baird, *From South Central to Southside: Gang Transnationalism, Masculinity, and Disorganized Violence in Belize City* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2024); Baird, "From Vulnerability to Violence"; Adam Baird, "Masculine Vulnerability, Gangs, and Perpetual Violence", In Myrttinen et al. (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Masculinities, Conflict and Peacebuilding*.

27    Baird, *From South Central to Southside*; Adam Baird, "'Man a Kill a Man for Nutin': Gang Transnationalism, Masculinities, and Violence in Belize City". *Men & Masculinities*, vol. 24, no. 3 (2021): 411–31, https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X19872787.
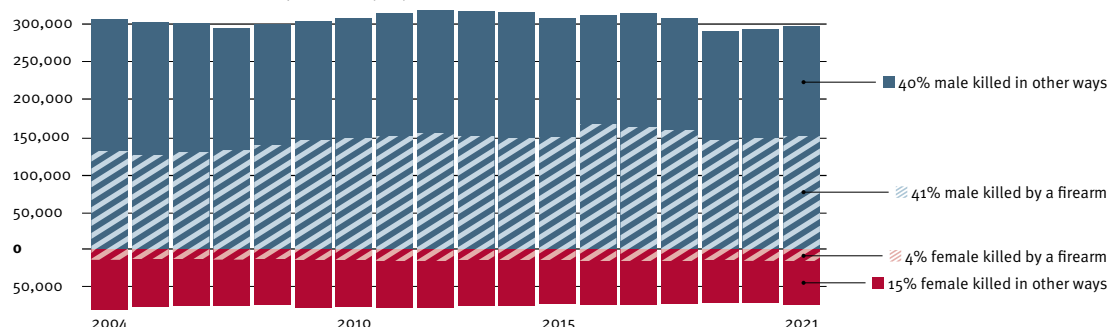
# How are sex, firearms, and homicidal violence linked?

**small arms survey**

Data for 2021, as of December 2023

There are more male victims of intentional homicide than female victims. Of the 370,000 victims in 2021, 296,000 (81%) were males and 74,000 (19%) were females, and 45% of the total were killed using a firearm.
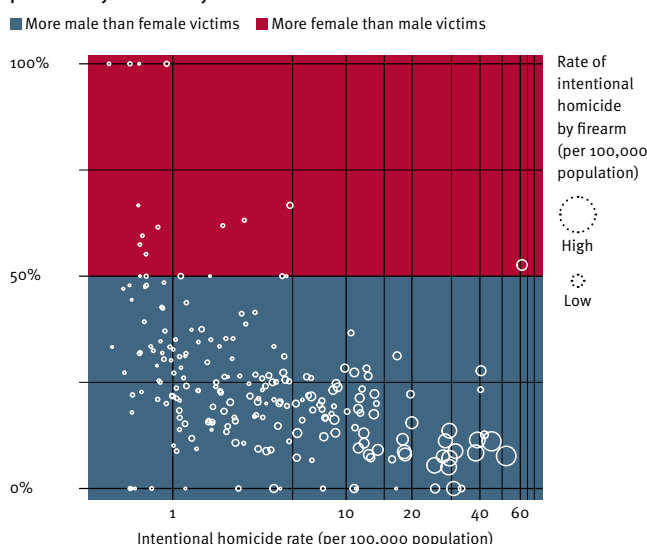
**Intentional homicide victims, by sex and perpetration mechanism**



- 40% male killed in other ways
- 41% male killed by a firearm
- 4% female killed by a firearm
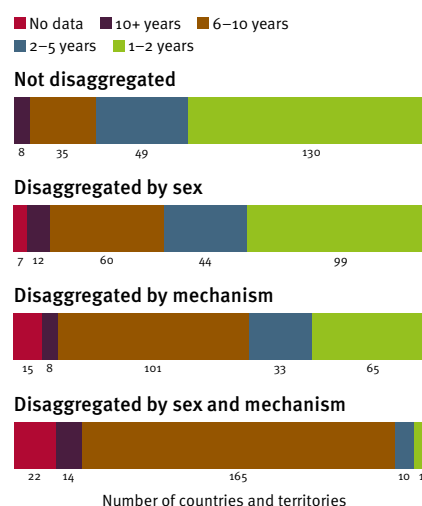- 15% female killed in other ways

2004 · 2010 · 2015 · 2021

**55%** of all female homicides are committed by family members or intimate partners; **12%** of male homicides are perpetrated in the home. While data on **non-lethal gender-based violence** is scarce, evidence shows that low overall rates of lethal violence should not be taken as an indicator that rates of non-lethal gender-based violence are low.*

Where rates of intentional homicide are low, the proportion of female victims of intentional homicide is usually high.

**Intentional homicide rate and proportion of female victims, per country or territory**

- More male than female victims
- More female than male victims



Rate of intentional homicide by firearm (per 100,000 population)

High
Low

Intentional homicide rate (per 100,000 population)

On average, intentional homicide data is less than two years old. But the majority of data disaggregated by sex and killing mechanism (i.e. the use of a firearm) is more than six years old.

- No data
- 10+ years
- 6–10 years
- 2–5 years
- 1–2 years

**Not disaggregated**



8  35  49  130

**Disaggregated by sex**

7  12  60  44  99

**Disaggregated by mechanism**

15  8  101  33  65

**Disaggregated by sex and mechanism**

22  14  165  10  11

Number of countries and territories

source: www.smallarmssurvey.org

Much work is underway by the United Nations and Member States to control the availability of illicit arms and ammunition. Yet, unfortunately, these flows – popularly termed the "iron river" in Latin America – continue apace.[28] Recovering small arms and ammunition that have ended up in the illicit sphere in post-conflict settings is extremely challenging. Furthermore, preventing the diversion of legally held arms and ammunition to criminals and illegal armed groups (e.g. organized crime and gangs) is already a national security priority in many countries. What, then, can be done to tackle the other half of the equation: masculine vulnerability?

Empirical research on violence epidemics in the Caribbean confirms that "homicide booms" are sparked by a well-armed demographic of poor young men.[29] It is important to be clear that, even in the most violent communities, only a minority of men drive homicide; the large majority do not. There should be no stigmatization of entire communities or stoking of moral panics that can block opportunities and compound underdevelopment. For example, many poor young men in Belize have had social services withheld by civil servants who stigmatize them wholesale as gang members simply because they live on the Southside of Belize City.[30]

Furthermore, while violence epidemics coalesce around poor young men, the main financial benefactors of illicit street economies are usually a minority of older gang leaders or men in higher echelons of organized crime.

Brun states that

> If vulnerability is defined by both the external threats of a specific environment and by the coping capacity of those experiencing that environment, adolescent boys and men can clearly be described as a vulnerable group. The consequences of neglecting their needs are not just potentially disastrous to them but also, indirectly, to the security, resilience and cohesion of the broader society.[31]

"

A gender-specific approach to reducing masculine vulnerability – the drivers, motivations and other push factors driving recruitment into armed groups – will weaken the prospect of future armed violence. This should be understood as a masculinities strategy in armed violence prevention

(proposed as a theory of change in Section 3).

There are generalizable expectations upon young men the world over to secure income and to be seen by peers, women and wider society as financially established and hence "grown men". In poor neighbourhoods in Colombia, for young men who are coming of age this can be as simple as having enough money to take a woman on a date.[32] Masculine

28    Ioan Grillo, *Blood Gun Money: How America Arms Gangs and Cartels* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2023).

29    Adam Baird, Matthew Bishop and Dylan Kerrigan, "Breaking Bad? Gangs, Masculinities and Murder in Trinidad". *International Journal of Feminist Politics*, vol. 24, no. 4 (2022): 632–57; Baird, "From Vulnerability to Violence".

30    Baird, *From South Central to Southside*, pp. 113–14.

31    Delphine Brun, *A More Generous Embrace: Why Addressing the Needs of Adolescent Boys and Men Is Essential to an Effective Humanitarian Response in Cameroon's North West and South West* (Oslo: Norcap, July 2022), https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Report-A-more-generous-embrace.pdf, p. 30. See also Alan Greig, *Men, Masculinities & Armed Conflict: Findings frosm a Four-Country Study* (Geneva: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 2020).

32    Adam Baird, "Duros & Gangland Girlfriends: Male Identity and Gang Socialisation in Medellín", In J. Auyero, P. Bourgois and N. Scheper-Hughes (eds.), *Violence at the Urban Margins in the Americas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

vulnerability in these contexts means that armed groups are frequently seen as the most attractive – even only – route to male esteem, dignity and income; the best locally available method to increase status and offset the pressures of masculine expectation. They can also provide a sense of belonging to those who come from homes that have been fractured by domestic and community violence and who feel the pressures of socio-economic marginalization. The illegal economies of rebels, militias and organized crime groups and gangs depend upon armed men to function. There are, of course, examples of girls and women being recruited into armed roles within rebel groups such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka (known as the Female Tigers)[33] or the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército Popular (FARC-EP).[34] However, female recruits are normally a minority and their pathways into such groups different because of traditional gender norms. Notably, girls and young women more commonly link to street gangs as girlfriends or take non-violent administrative and logistic tasks (e.g. carrying drugs or collecting extortion money), as opposed to being on the front

lines.[35] Considering the case of recruitment by the Islamic State group and gangs in Trinidad and Tobago in recent years, it is no surprise that both groups have drawn from the same population: marginalized male youth.[36]

In Rio's poor *favelas* or Medellín's *comunas populares*, homicides involving young men occur where the drug trade has emerged as a response to scant employment, limited presence of the state, and easy access to small arms and ammunition.[37] Young men grapple for esteem and status to "make them feel that they are socially recognized adult men. This violence is also related to competition for reputation, recognition, honour, and prestige from female partners".[38] The gang provides a bounty of "masculine capital" that is simply not available in impoverished contexts given the dearth of legal opportunities.[39] Many crime bosses and gang leaders, from *Scarface* to Pablo Escobar, are romanticized versions of a brutal hegemonic masculinity, perceived as "successful" men. Similarly, "heroic" notions of masculine martyrdom can be seen in the evoking of Che Guevara by militias and revolutionary guerrillas. Armed male groups can offer purpose, identity and

33    G. Frerks, "The Female Tigers of Sri Lanka", In Alette Smeulers, Maartje Weerdesteijn and Barbora Holá (eds.), *Perpetrators of International Crimes: Theories, Methods, and Evidence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1093/OSO/9780198829997.003.0012.

34    I. Lopera-Arbeláez, "Feminization of Female FARC-EP Combatants: From War Battle to Social-Economical Struggle", *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2023): 3–19. https://doi.org/10.1177/15423166221120638.

35    Baird et al., "Breaking Bad?"; V. Panfil, "Performance Narratives of Gang Identity and Membership", In D.C. Brotherton and R.J. Gude (eds.), *Routledge International Handbook of Critical Gang Studies* (London: Routledge, 2021).

36    Emma Graham-Harrison and Joshua Surtees, "Trinidad's Jihadis: How Tiny Nation Became Isis Recruiting Ground", *The Guardian*, 2 February 2018; A. Baird, "Negotiating Pathways to Manhood: Rejecting Gangs and Violence in Medellín's Periphery", *Journal of Conflictology*, UOC, vol 3, no. 1 (2012): 28–39. 37   G. Barker, *Dying To Be Men: Youth, Masculinity and Social Exclusion* (London: Routledge, 2005); Adam Baird, "The Violent Gang and the Construction of Masculinity Amongst Socially Excluded Young Men", Safer Communities, vol. 11, no. 4 (2012): 179–90.

37    G. Barker, *Dying To Be Men: Youth, Masculinity and Social Exclusion* (London: Routledge, 2005); Adam Baird, "The Violent Gang and the Construction of Masculinity Amongst Socially Excluded Young Men", Safer Communities, vol. 11, no. 4 (2012): 179–90.

38    R. Acheson, *Abolishing Militarised Masculinities, Strategies for Change* (Geneva: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 2022), https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/RL_10-Abolishing-militarised-masculinities-AW.pdf.

39    A. Baird, "The Violent Gang and the Construction of Masculinity Amongst Socially Excluded Young Men", *Safer Communities*, vol. 11, no. 4 (2012): 179–90.

belonging – a soft power that attracts boys and young men who face exclusion, trauma and neglect. The gang provides an opportunity for them to obtain power in their community that they would otherwise be unlikely to attain.

The continual recruitment of young men into armed groups creates demand that pulls "residual" small arms into poor urban communities from criminal drug trans-shipment organizations in regions like the Caribbean. These are small arms that otherwise may not have arrived, and the communities then become "weapons sinks" where they stubbornly remain.[40] Gangs demand the supply of weapons, which has a devastating impact upon communities. The recent armed violence epidemic in Haiti (see cover image and photo of Haitian gang on p25) was stoked by rapid flows of weapons and ammunitions from Florida in the United States and from adjacent Caribbean islands.[41]
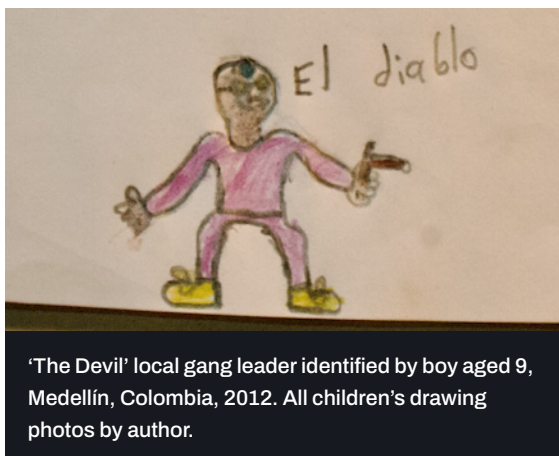


'The Devil' local gang leader identified by boy aged 9, Medellín, Colombia, 2012. All children's drawing photos by author.

> "
> Demand for small arms is driven by a combination of desperation and ambition among young men. These include "high agency" and intelligent individuals, who see armed groups as their best option. Given socially positive opportunities to "become a man", where could this youthful ambition take them?

It is logical, therefore, to divert marginalized young men's agency away from armed groups to prevent community violence – violence which can escalate and spill over to pose national security and development concerns. Recognition is growing that taking masculinities into account is critical for programming in arms control and armed violence prevention.[42] Given the ongoing global impact of SALW and the continual challenges presented by arms control, a "masculinities-turn" has the potential to reduce inertia and generate progress. As Bias and Janah state, "There is large agreement across the interlocutors that working on masculinities yields a significant potential to redirect gender-sensitivity to a more transformative approach to violence prevention, fragility, and peacebuilding".[43] This potential has not yet been realized.

40    Adam Baird, Matthew Louis Bishop and Dylan Kerrigan, "Differentiating the Local Impact of Global Drugs and Weapons Trafficking: How Do Gangs Mediate 'Residual Violence' to Sustain Trinidad's Homicide Boom?", *Political Geography*, vol. 106 (2023): 102–966, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2023.102966.

41    A.-S. Fabre et al., *Weapons Compass: The Caribbean Firearms Study* (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2023), https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/CARICOM-IMPACS-SAS-Caribbean-Firearms-Study.pdf; Oliver Laughland, "Guns and Weapons Trafficked from US Fuelling Haiti Gang Violence", *The Guardian*, 14 March 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/mar/14/haiti-gang-violence-us-guns-smuggling.

42    Schöb and Myrttinen, *Men and Masculinities in Gender Responsive Small Arms Control*; H. Myrttinen, "Disarming Masculinities", *Disarmament Forum: Women, Men, Peace and Security*, no. 4 (2003); E. LeBrun, *Gender-Responsive Small Arms Control: A Practical Guide* (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2019), https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-GLASS-Gender-HB.pdf.

43    Leandra Bias and Yasmine Janah, "Scoping Study: Masculinities, Violence, and Peace", SwissPeace, 2022 https://www.swisspeace.ch/assets/publications/Reports/Final_Scoping-Study_EN.pdf, p. 23.

## 2.3. No man's land:
## Where are the interventions with men and masculinities?

Women from affected communities as well as feminist organizations have often been at the forefront in demanding programming and policy that take men into account and work with masculinities to promote gender equality and reduce violence against women. Nevertheless, "gender" is often presented or implicitly understood as being synonymous with "women". Although not new,[44] research on masculinities and violence has never been mainstream. There is a small yet active contemporary research community across academia, multilateral institutions and civil society organizations that studies such issues. Nonetheless, it is largely made up of individuals within non-specialist institutions who do not necessarily focus on armed violence. Masculinities remain in the margins of gender work, with programming limited to "personal initiatives [rather than an] institutional roadmap".[45] Lack of programming means that best practices to shape future policies have not been developed. Gender mainstreaming is widely – and rightly – promoted, yet "masculinities mainstreaming" has yet to become part of the conversation.

Although men's centrality in armed violence is increasingly recognized across the United Nations, including in the 2023 SDGs report[46] and follow-up resolutions on WPS, this has not yet led to substantive policymaking. One expert said in a personal communication that a decade of writing and rewriting recommendations on masculinities and armed violence that are never implemented felt like being in the film *Groundhog Day*, in which the protagonist wakes up to repeat the same day over and over again. The few programmes run by NGOs that do work with men "all focus on fostering gender equality, transforming men's gender expectations, reducing violent [domestic] behaviour, and promoting men's increased participation in household and care work"[47] and "promoting changes in individual men's attitudes and practices in the domestic sphere".[48] There is yet to be a concerted policy or programming focus on the question of masculinities and armed violence prevention within United Nations institutions.

It is essential that the reasons for this lack of progress are discussed. For organizations and institutions that engage violent armed men directly – for example, through gang interventions, recidivism programmes, DDR processes or combating violent extremism – masculinities have hitherto been missing.[49]

---

44    A. Adler, *Understanding Human Nature* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1928).

45    Bias and Janah, "Scoping Study", p. 19.

46    United Nations, The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023.

47    Myrttinen, *Men, Masculinities and Humanitarian Settings*, p. 19. Organizations working in this area include SASA!, Stepping Stones, the International Rescue Committee's Engaging Men through Accountable Practice (EMAP), CARE's Role Model Men approach, Equimundo's (formerly Promundo) fatherhood-focused Programme P and health-focused Programme H, Sonke Gender Justice's One Man Can, Tearfund's faith-based approaches to transforming masculinities, UN Women's work in Palestine under the Men and Women for Gender Equality (MWGE) programme, and the Roots Foundation's Abyssinia – A journey of change in Trinidad and Tobago. These programmes have also been adapted to local needs in Rwanda, Nepal, Myanmar, the Balkans and Tajikistan. The International Rescue Committee's EMAP programme is the only one that has been specifically designed for a humanitarian setting. See Myrttinen, *Men, Masculinities and Humanitarian Settings*, p. 21. Further, the International Men and Gender Equality Surveys (IMAGES) carried out by Equimundo measures, among other issues, male attitudes to the acceptability of violence.

48    Peacock et al., "Seeing the Forest for the Trees", p. 11.

49    Bias and Janah, "Scoping Study".

One expert said that,

> For me, one of the challenges has been that the knowledge about masculinities is there, not least among the men themselves and in the communities they live in, but it is not tapped into by external actors, be it the state, NGOs or United Nations agencies, which do not engage with that knowledge".[50]

**Six factors** explain this lack of engagement:

1. *This is new.* Pathways forwards for masculinities in armed violence prevention are uncharted and require innovation and testing. Data collection, monitoring and evaluation are weaknesses. There have been a number of recommendations, but they lack empirical rigour and a strong grasp of best practices remains distant.

2. *Masculinities experts are rare.* This limits advocacy, research, training, programming and policymaking.

3. *Men are less likely to be considered victims or are considered genderless.* The maleness of victimization has not been sufficiently problematized and consequently lacks adequate responses. A recent survey by Kreft and Agerberg found that "respondents consistently underestimate the victimization of men, perceive civilian male victims as less innocent, and hold anti-male biases when it comes to accepting refugees and providing aid".[51] In countries with high homicide rates, the narrative that killings occur solely between criminals, organized crime and gangs has been promoted. The inference that "bad guys killing each other is a good thing" blames victims for their own deaths and fosters the perception that male victims of homicide are fair game. That killing men is somehow a useful type of social cleansing is misandrist and is linked to classism and often racism.[52] This discourse draws attention away from underlying socio-economic drivers – the masculine vulnerability that push boys and young men into illegal armed groups in the first place. A youth worker in Central America said the crushing poverty leading boys as young as 11 years old to join gangs is "basically child soldiering".[53]
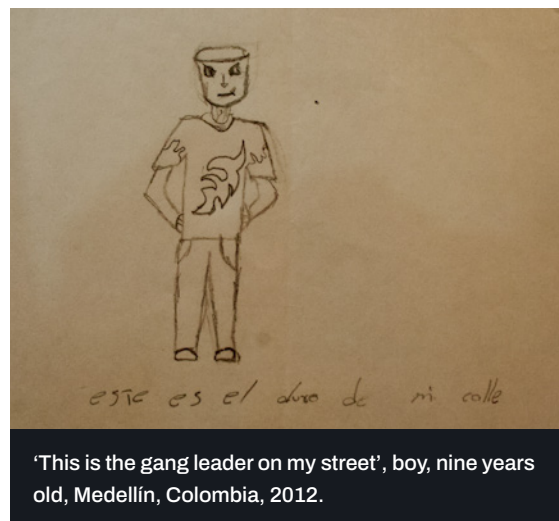


'This is the gang leader on my street', boy, nine years old, Medellín, Colombia, 2012.

---

50    Written feedback on report draft by masculinities expert, Anonymized, July 2024.

51    A.-K. Kreft and M. Agerberg, "Imperfect Victims? Civilian Men, Vulnerability, and Policy Preferences", *American Political Science Review*, vol. 118, no. 1 (2024): 274–90, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423000345.

52    Schedler (2016) cited in Abigail Weitzman, Mónica Caudillo and Eldad J Levy, "Hybrid Interpersonal Violence in Latin America: Patterns and Causes", *Annual Review of Criminology*, vol. 7 (2024): 163–86. See also Anthony W. Fontes, *Mortal Doubt: Transnational Gangs and Social Order in Guatemala City* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2018).

53    Baird, *From South Central to Southside*, p. 106.

> "Perceiving boys who join gangs in a similar light to child soldiers – that is, not simply as criminal deviants to be punished, rather as citizens for whom the state should be responsible – is an important discursive leap to promoting masculinities-based armed violence prevention. It centres attention on dealing with the exclusions and vulnerabilities that drive armed group membership.

4. *A reluctance to make men a beneficiary focus in the gender space*. This is based on men being the leading perpetrators of violence, the persistence of patriarchy and gender inequality, and considering that feminist organizations have fought long and hard for resources, recognition and political space. According to one expert, a "zero-sum approach is becoming increasingly prevalent as resources for this kind of work become ever scarcer, especially when it comes to ensuring that funds flow to actual on-the-ground implementers of this kind of programming".[54]

Presenting male-on-male violence as a type of gender-based violence and framing men as victims, as vulnerable or as target beneficiaries further stokes concerns of "a reduction of political space as well as funding"[55] for women's empowerment and their unmet needs. The funding arena should not be a zero-sum domain divided between men, women, the gender diverse or other groups, but this remains a concern. Another expert said that, during donor-level discussions a senior figure from a funding agency stated frankly, "if we want to support male victims and survivors, then we need to cut funds to women".[56]

There is also a concern that "re-centring of the focus on men's agency [can] entrench patriarchy",[57] and a fear of an "'engaging men and boys' frame that fails to challenge structural inequality or reshape masculine norms".[58] Moreover, "In an international context where fundamental women's rights are already put into question … masculinities might be appropriated by actors who push for a masculinist, not a femisnist agenda".[59]

5. *Masculinities are perceived in arms control policy circles as a subset of women-focused "gender projects"*. While men are sometimes involved in gender-based projects, the involvement tends to be superficial and oriented towards delivering gender equality and increasing female participation. A focus on men and masculinities is not widely understood as a potentially key approach in future arms control.

---

54    Written feedback on report draft, masculinities expert, May 2024.
55    Email communication with masculinities expert, August 2024.
56    Email communication with masculinities expert, August 2024.
57    H. Myrttinen, Engaging with Men and Masculinities in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States (OECD Development Policy Papers no. 17 (OECD: Paris, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1787/36e1bb11-en, p. 2
58    Hannah Wright, "'Masculinities Perspectives': Advancing a Radical Women, Peace and Security Agenda?", International Feminist Journal of Politics, vol. 22, no. 5 (19 October 2020): 665, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2019.1667849.
59    Bias and Janah, "Scoping Study", p. 20..

6.  *Men simply do not want to talk about masculinities*. Men are reluctant to participate in programmes that they perceive will criticize them, question their "manliness" or diminish male privilege. The rare programmes that focus on masculinities usually work with men who are already open to self-reflection and to discussing gender equality. Violent armed men rarely fall into this "open" category; even if open to participation, they may feel burdened with masculine expectation or be pressured by peers not to take part. Therefore, entry-points are perennially challenging. Men often resist visualizing male privilege and supporting gender equality.[60] This applies in particular to men wielding guns, whose identities are more likely to be wedded to hegemonic masculinities. Further work is required to identify which messages and which messengers resonate best with a given male audience, in a given cultural context.

At the time of writing, there are just two cases – in Albania and neighbouring Montenegro – where work with men and masculinities is included in SALW control. These cases aim to increase awareness among young men of the dangers of small arms misuse and to address harmful gender norms.[61] One expert commented that "policymakers and programming staff see 'masculinities' as something that is a bit of a black box to them, something they find difficult and/or are unwilling to seriously engage with".

## 2.4. Taking the concerns of the gender community into account and making progress

Concerns from the feminist and gender communities are warranted. These concerns are raised in all of the policy papers and reports on men and masculinities that have been written in recent years, including this one. However, there is a risk that placing reservations front-and-centre creates blockages that mean masculinities programming continues to stall. Men-and-masculinities interventions to reduce armed violence will require support for men's agency, empowering them to take on non-violent, productive futures.

> "
> Empowering men" may raise eyebrows, but a change of tack is required to understand men as vulnerable and worthy beneficiaries of masculinities-based interventions.

One individual from a feminist organization agreed in private that empowering marginalized men was a good way to prevent armed violence, but they would never raise this within their institution because they would face serious opposition and potential exclusion.[62] Another masculinities expert noted that there were a number of taboo issues discussed in private that could "not yet" be raised in public.[63]

---

60    Myrttinen, *Engaging with Men and Masculinities in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States*, p. 32.
61    H. Myrttinen, *Connecting the Dots: Arms Control, Disarmament and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda*, (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2022), p. 38.
62    Expert Interview, July 2024.
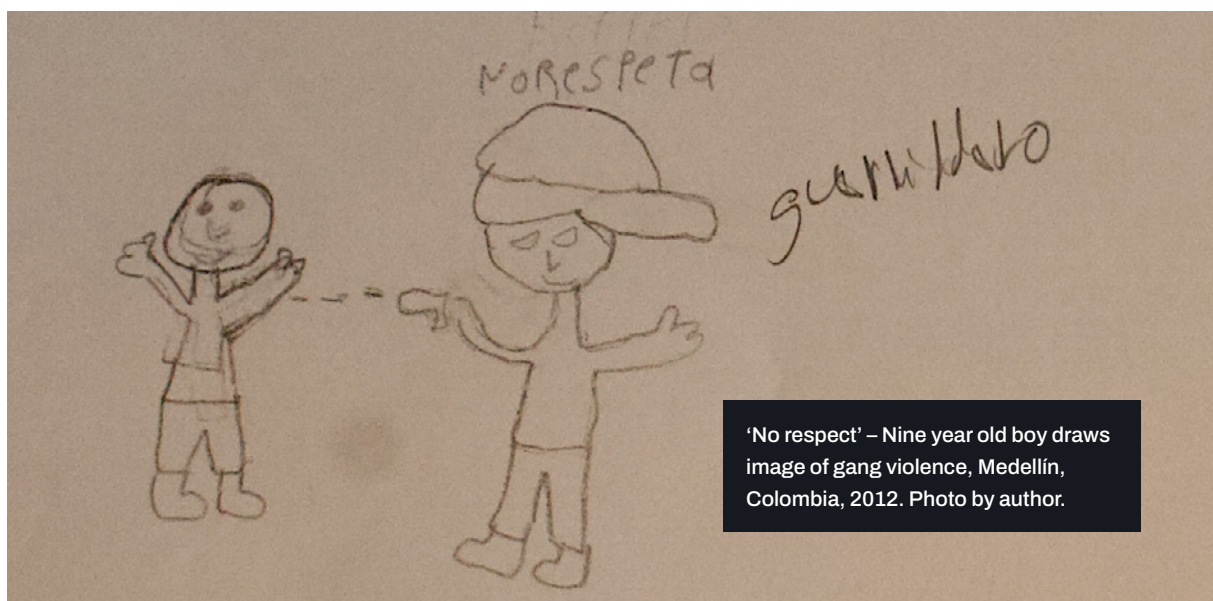63    Expert Interview, July 2024.

Despite this, many feminist organizations have been at the forefront of critical engagement with men, and the well-established MenEngage network takes accountability to women and gender equality seriously. In terms of preventing violence epidemics, empowering men means reducing their "masculine vulnerability" to joining armed groups, which (as reiterated in this report) benefits the whole community. Historically, calls for gender-sensitive programming have pushed for a rethinking and improvement of eligibility and support for women and girls. This report calls for the same, pushing for a rethinking of eligibility and support from a gendered perspective for vulnerable boys and men – who predictably tend to come from the most socio-economically disadvantaged (urban) contexts – in order to reduce armed violence.

Greater efforts are required to engage with and allay the concerns of feminist voices and women's advocates. Armed violence-prevention programmes with a specific focus on masculinities will, by design, critique men's violence. Not only will this reduce the violence suffered by women and children, not just men, it is indivisible from a critique of hegemonic masculinities – it will therefore de facto promote gender equality, which is at the heart of the feminist agenda.

Men-and-masculinities programming has made some progress, but it is slow. "Masculinities" are gender, but clearly programming should not take funding away from programmes for women, girls or gender-diverse groups, including programming relating to these groups being victims of armed violence. Yet, as it stands, there are rarely clear and obvious donors for men-and-masculinities initiatives – a funding no man's land. As it stands, they are scarcely funded at all. Taking the United Nations as an example, there is no agency, no institute and not even a programme dedicated to implementing masculinities approaches to reduce armed violence.

There remain serious conundrums about how to best locate masculinities in the arms control and armed violence-reduction policy world and how to support implementation of initiatives that take a masculinities approach. This report calls for a bottom-up approach, building the evidence base through programming and innovation to show impact, and then showing that a masculinities framing can work. Section 3 suggests how this might be done.



'No respect' – Nine year old boy draws image of gang violence, Medellín, Colombia, 2012. Photo by author.

Gang leader Jimmy 'Barbecue' Cherizier with gang members, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, 2024. Credit: © Giles Clark.

# 3. Solutions for developing masculinities approaches to armed violence reduction

## 3.1. Disarming men: Violence prevention and exiting armed groups

This subsection is divided into two parts, "prevention" and "exiting armed groups". It is not an exhaustive manual of interventions. As mentioned in Section 1, there are few experiences to draw upon, hence the urgent need to build the evidence base. The aim here is to highlight key opportunities where specific thinking about men and masculinities has the potential to reduce armed violence. This is a cross-cutting topic. For example, at UNIDIR it corresponds to three units: the Conventional Arms and Ammunition Programme (CAAP), the Gender and Disarmament Programme, and the Managing Exits from Armed Conflicts (MEAC) project (see Box 5).[64]

First, in terms of armed violence "prevention", this subsection asks: How can interventions be tailored toward boys and men? And, within culture and context, how can interventions

---

64    UNIDIR, "Conventional Arms and Ammunition: Countering the Proliferation and Misuse of Conventional Arms and Ammunition", https://unidir.org/programme/conventional-arms-and-ammunition; UNIDIR, "Gender and Disarmament: Advancing Gender Equality and Gender Analysis in Arms Control and Disarmament", https://unidir.org/programme/gender-and-disarmament; UNIDIR, "Managing Exits from Armed Conflict: What Drives People into and out of Armed Groups?", https://unidir.org/programme/managing-exits-from-armed-conflict.

meet the specific needs of boys and men? Answering this requires consideration of key learning from a rare masculinities-focused gang-intervention project in Belize City. The subsection then asks: How can this thinking be applied to "exiting" armed groups and wider DDR processes, from traditional combatants to hybrid conflict/criminal groups, organized crime and gangs? How might these processes, for example, begin "disarming male identities"? For all of these processes, community participation plays an important role.

**Box 5. Conventional Arms and Ammunition, Gender and Disarmament, and Managing Exits from Armed Conflict at UNIDIR**

**CAAP seeks to bring about real-world change** with a research focus on preventing armed conflict and armed violence. Specifically, CAAP aims to examine options to enhance peace and development derived from SDG 16; provide practical solutions, particularly those that apply to urgent security issues; and monitor and evaluate practices and policies. Providing innovative solutions to conflict and armed violence from a masculinities perspective aligns with these priorities. Policy influence is a long-term goal that must be supported through programming that pilots and evaluates masculinities-based initiatives.

The **Gender and Disarmament Programme** has identified that more than 264 million wom en live in fragile and conflict-affected countries, yet less than 20 per cent of peace negotiators are women. Growing complexity requires diversity, but women's voices are often lacking in decision-making on arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament. The programme analyses the gendered impacts of armed violence and examines how gender norms shape the role of weapons in society. By translating gender awareness into policy action, it helps to ensure that arms control and disarmament deliver for everyone.

**MEAC** generates a unique evidence base on journeys into and out of armed groups. This helps practitioners to prevent armed group recruitment and to design more tailored and effective DDR and reintegration support. Despite decades of programming to help groups and individuals lay aside their weapons and return to civilian life, there is a significant knowledge gap as to which approaches to micro-disarmament, demobilization and reintegration work effectively, under which conditions, and for whom. These knowledge gaps undermine effective programming, present challenges for efficiently allocating resources, and increase the likelihood of recidivism and conflict resurgence. As practitioners are asked to apply reintegration approaches in complex or ongoing conflict contexts, MEAC works to strengthen the international community's capacity to better understand individual, group and community conflict-transition trajectories in order to build sustainable peace.

## Prevention

As this report establishes, the majority of gender-based interventions with men seek changes in the behaviour of participants in order to reduce negative impacts upon women, such as domestic violence, while promoting gender equality. This is important work that is steeped in feminist epistemology and struggle. However, little work is done with male identities, behaviours and practices that focuses on boys and men at risk of entering, or already part of groups such as the abovementioned child soldiers or child gang members. The overarching question for programming should be: How can a masculinities approach be developed to prevent armed violence?

Prevention is understood in this report as tackling the multiple social, economic and other drivers of armed violence. The principal

driver referred to in this report is masculine vulnerability, where socio-economic constraints mean that boys and young men often use their agency to join armed groups. This is a profoundly male process, which is why homicides are overrepresented among poor male youth. This does not mean that girls and women do not engage with such groups, but that, crucially, their vulnerabilities are different.[65] They are subject to far higher levels of sexual, psychological, domestic and other violences, yet far lower levels of homicidal violence, gunshot-caused disability, permanent injury or disfigurement, and incarceration. This reinforces the need for gender-disaggregated understandings of vulnerability, across male, female and gender diverse identities.[66]

"
Specific measures are required that target masculine vulnerability in the "social terrains"[67] where homicide epidemics occur.

From an arms control perspective, reducing enrolment into such armed groups will weaken the demand side for small arms that flow along the "iron river" into urban hotspots.

One example is used next to draw key learning from a masculinities-based gang intervention. The UNDP Southside Youth Success Project (SYSP) in Belize City, designed and monitored by the author of this report, sought to tackle masculine vulnerability by creating opportunities to channel boys' agency and frustrations in productive ways, away from the temptations of gang life. Although many may not be familiar with Belize City, it is used here because it has high levels of male-led homicidal violence, and the SYSP is a rare – maybe unique – violence-prevention project that used a masculinities focus to target gang members and at-risk youths from poor neighbourhoods. The project ran from 2012 to 2014 with four cohorts totalling 106 boys and young men. It successfully used gender-based workshops, including "men-talk" with local role models covering topics such as "Not choosing the path of a gangster", "Losing a loved one as a result of gang rivalry", "Sexual exploitation" and "Changing the course of your life". This promoted non-violent, pro-social and pro-equality identities, and discussions about the sexual exploitation of boys and girls, and sought to undermine the widespread local admiration of gang leaders and to develop critical awareness around the realities of gun violence, prison, injury, disability, sexual violence and death.[68]

65    E. van Damme, "Jennifer: The First Female Honduran Gang Leader", In D. Rodgers (ed.), *Gang Lives: Global Portraits from the Streets and Beyond* (London, Bloomsbury Press, forthcoming 2026); Baird, "Duros & Gangland Girlfriends"; Panfil, "Performance Narratives of Gang Identity and Membership".

66    I. Aguilar Umaña and J. Rikkers, "Violent Women and Violence Against Women: Gender Relations in the Maras and Other Street Gangs of Central America's Northern Triangle Region", Interpeace, 2012, http://www.interpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/2012_09_18_IfP_EW_Women_In_Gangs.pdf; Baird, *From South Central to Southside*; J. Miller and R.K. Brunson, "Gender Dynamics in Youth Gangs: A Comparison of Males' and Females' Accounts", *Justice Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 3 (2000): 419–448, https://doi.org/10.1080/07418820000094621.

67    Baird et al., "Breaking Bad?"; Baird et al., "Differentiating the Local Impact of Global Drugs and Weapons Trafficking".

68    United Nations Development Programme Belize, *Southside Youth Success Project: Pathways to Employment for At-Risk Young Men Training and Apprenticeship Programme Report* (Belmopan: UNDP Belize, 2014); Baird, From South Central to Southside, pp. 151–64.

**Five key lessons** were learned:

- *Addressing urgent needs first*.
  The boys and young men in the programme were not initially interested in nor motivated by the offer of men's workshops. These could only be delivered when their most pressing needs were addressed. Many suffered from malnutrition-related illnesses, arrived hungry and needed to be fed before planned activities could start. This was a necessary incentive to guarantee the first step towards participation; many did not have national identification cards or birth certificates, and acquiring these through the project was key to building trust and belief that the project could deliver.

- *Creating genuine alternatives*.
  Participants lived in absolute poverty and were pragmatic. They would only take part if there were clear and tangible economic or other benefits. Essential to the project's success were real job opportunities, paid apprenticeships, back-to-school programmes with after-school help to do homework, and financial support so they would not have to hustle on the streets.

- *Local male mentors*.
  Working with members of the community is vital. To build a masculinities critique of gang violence, locally based pro-social or positive male mentors were crucial influences in "disarming masculinities", questioning violent gangland masculinities and promoting gender equality. Positive feedback on male mentors has been seen in other gang-intervention projects such as the "navigators" used at the Los Angeles-founded Homeboy Industries,[69] although such projects do not have an explicit masculinities methodology.

- *Man-to-man spaces*.
  "Men-talk" (men only) spaces were highly valued by participants, many of whom had no positive male figures at home and looked to gang leaders on the streets. The young men stated that there were issues they felt they could not discuss at home with their mothers, and that talking to male peers with the support of the male mentors about the social pressures they felt as young men was psychologically alleviating.

- *Include women peers*.
  The project did not work with vulnerable girls and young women. This was a shortcoming. Girls and young women would also benefit from a masculinities-based critique of gang violence given the elevated risk of sexual and other gender-based violences directed at women who socialize with gangs. There is also widespread admiration of gang members by young women, meaning that it is critical to deconstruct both male and female admiration of violent armed gangs at a community level. This would reinforce the deconstruction of all types of male violence, including homicidal violence between men and domestic, sexual, psychological and other violences targeted at girls and women, while promoting gender equality.[70]

---

69    Homeboy Industries, https://homeboyindustries.org.
70    Baird, *From South Central to Southside*, pp. 151–64.

Author with former sicario, now gang member, at home with his mother. He said he would only demobilize if given a job as a 'bank manager' (see p31), Medellín, Colombia, 2024.

## Exiting armed groups

A masculinities approach to exiting armed groups is applicable to both political and criminal entities and to groups that have complex hybrid motivations, given the individuals consistently involved are men. Women are often overlooked in discussions about disarming or exiting armed groups due to traditional gender norms and stereotypes that portray men as the primary aggressors in conflict. These norms can lead to the underestimation of women's roles in armed groups, limiting their visibility in both conflict analysis and peacebuilding efforts. While women certainly are commonly involved with armed groups located in communities, they rarely engage in armed violence, which remains a male role.[71] In Colombia, Sierra Leone and South Sudan, "violent masculinities" are a staple job requirement for gangs and illegal armed groups and resist transformation, presenting a major challenge in post-conflict transitions for former combatants.[72] In many regions, joining violent armed groups is

---

71    C. Farfán-Méndez, "Organized Crime and Gender: Issues Relating to the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime", UNODC, 2022; Baird, "Duros & Gangland Girlfriends".

72    David Duriesmith (ed.), *Masculinity and New War: The Gendered Dynamics of Contemporary Armed Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2016), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315561493; Kimberly Theidon, "Reconstructing Masculinities: The Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration of Former Combatants in Colombia", *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2009): 1–34; Myrttinen, *Engaging with Men and Masculinities in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States*.

often sanctioned or even promoted by the surrounding community as a pathway to manhood. Participation in conflict can be seen as a rite of passage into adulthood. In Mali, this dynamic is observed in efforts to prevent violent extremism, where young boys are encouraged to join armed groups under the belief that it solidifies their status as men within the community. Societal endorsement reinforces the masculine logic of joining armed groups, which makes disengagement challenging and thus reinforces cycles of violence.[73]

Globally, as noted above, over 80 per cent of lethal armed violence occurs outside conflicts. In many parts of the world, social violence is driven by organized crime, street gangs and delinquency, where violence is indivisible from the identities of men in these groups and small arms are potent symbols of male power. A principal challenge is disarming male identities that closely align with weapon possession.

Upon exiting an armed group, a man may feel that he has missed out or fallen too far behind to catch up on civilian economic opportunities. A major stumbling-block is self-perception of status.

> " Although the norms around status loss when leaving an armed group have long been acknowledged as important, they remain under-programmed. Exiting armed groups will require men to accept a reduction in masculine status, particularly for those holding leadership positions.

Myrttinen argues that work must take place with men to ensure that they relinquish some of the power, privilege and space they occupy[74] – some customs and traditions require change so that progressive ideas and norms can emerge. However, these ideas are yet to be put into practice meaningfully, and there are few tangible examples on which to draw.

The United Nations Integrated DDR Standards have made initial recommendations on masculinities in a recently updated module on gender (see below).[75] However, DDR programmes have yet to explicitly address the implications of male status reduction. While the One Man Can programme implemented by Sonke Gender Justice in Sudan in 2012 did focus on male gender,[76] it is an exception that occurred over a decade ago.[77] It is vital to

---

73    A. Baird, "Becoming the 'Baddest': Masculine Trajectories of Gang Violence in Medellín", *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2018): 183–210, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X17000761.

74    Myrttinen, *Engaging with Men and Masculinities in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States*, p.13.

75    United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on DDR, Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS), https://www.unddr.org/the-iddrs.

76    Sonke Gender Justice, "Sonke's One Man Can Campaign Supports Peacebuilding and Gender Equality in Sudan", 17 October 2014, https://genderjustice.org.za/publication/sonkes-one-man-can-campaign-supports-peacebuilding-and-gender-equality-in-sudan; Farfán-Méndez, "Organized Crime and Gender"; Baird, "Duros & Gangland Girlfriends".

77    H. Wright, *Masculinities, Conflict and Peacebuilding: Perspectives on Men through a Gender Lens* (London: Saferworld, 2014), p. 35.

address men's status reduction because lowering of income, perceived authority and social position generates feelings of emasculation, which, if left unaddressed, can scupper participation in demobilization initiatives.[78]

It is exceedingly difficult to persuade armed men to give up status and power, particularly in contexts of unresolved insecurity where they are likely to be exposed to retaliatory violence. This can be alleviated, in part, by DDR and social-inclusion initiatives that are community-wide because individuals will not participate in an initiative unless they know that others who may be a threat will also do so. There are difficult questions to answer:

"

How can armed men, from combatants to gang leaders, be convinced to accept that when they demobilize they will no longer be the most feared and powerful man in the area, that they may attract fewer female partners, and that they will very likely have less money?

Anecdotally, a gang member in Medellín engaged in an urban DDR process stated said that he would never demobilize to suffer the ignominy of working as a street cleaner on a minimum salary, but that was the only job offered to them at the time. Another mid-ranking gang member involved in the same DDR process said that he would only be prepared to demobilize if given a job as a bank manager because he perceived that to be his equivalent status in the legal world.[79] It is unrealistic to offer a gang member with serious psychological trauma, multiple addictions and limited education a bank manager position, yet there was nothing in the DDR programme at the time to help him navigate or accept perceived male status reduction. This prevented his successful demobilization, and he is still an active gang member years later (see photo p29). Furthermore, a failure to deal with status reduction and feelings of insecurity by men in DDR processes can lead them to return to their armed group, or if they do reintegrate into their communities, an uptick in domestic (man-on-woman/child) and community (man-on-man) violence, as seen in Colombia in 2009.[80] To date, gender-based approaches focus on female ex-combatants in response to women being left out of such processes almost in their entirety. This should be applauded and supported, but masculinities are still only mentioned superficially as "working with men with guns", with no deeper consideration of their gender identity.

78    G.S. Friðriksdóttir, "Soldiering as an Obstacle to Manhood? Masculinities and Ex-combatants in Burundi", Critical Military Studies, vol. 7, no. 1 (2021): 61–78, https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2018.1494884.

79    Baird, A. (2018). Becoming the 'Baddest': Masculine Trajectories of Gang Violence in Medellín. Journal of Latin American Studies, 5(1), 183–210. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X17000761.

80    Theidon, "Reconstructing Masculinities".

## 3.2. Practical steps and guiding principles to include masculinities in armed violence prevention

Recent reports push for increased advocacy for masculinities in promoting gender equality and a reduction in men's violence, while recommending holistic and integrated approaches from the short to the long term and building knowledge.[81] These shine a light on the deficit of work in this area. To stimulate progress, this report suggests

> a theory of change to reduce global armed violence based on two guidelines: build recognition that armed violence requires a masculinities-oriented solution; and develop solutions that tackle masculine vulnerability.

Poor young men are killing each other disproportionately with small arms and victimizing others. This means that the intersection of "poor" and "young" and "men" is precisely where interventions need to focus in order to successfully reduce armed violence and illicit arms flows. These are guidelines for dealing with the demand side of the equation (in Box 4 above), and they should be the focus for driving advocacy.

With this theory of change in mind, there are **two practical steps** to take into account when developing a masculinities approach:

1. **Identify violent social terrains for interventions.** Most obviously, interventions should target the social terrains or hotspots where armed violence epidemics are regularly found, such as gang-affected neighbourhoods.

2. **Use masculinities questions to orient programme design** and tailor them using a well-grounded understanding of the local context and culture. This understanding can only be developed with the participation of the local community. Preventing boys and young men from joining armed groups – that is, targeting the motivations to join – or assisting them in exiting such groups can be reduced to one sentence: give them the opportunity of a different future. Interventions must counter the masculine logic of joining gangs in contexts with few alternative legal opportunities. When programmes are designed, the lead question that must be asked is: How can programme generate opportunities to channel boys and young men away from armed groups, such as gang recruitment and child soldiering, and towards something socially positive?

To do this we should ask:

a) **How can programming respond to frustrated masculinities, male ambition, intelligence and agency** in contexts of socio-economic precarity and the presence of attractive illegal armed groups? How do communities understand the pull factors of these groups, including belonging, identity, camaraderie and even a sense of fraternal care?

---

81 Schöb and Myrttinen, *Men and Masculinities in Gender Responsive Small Arms Control; Wright, Masculinities, Conflict and Peacebuilding; Myrttinen, Men, Masculinities and Humanitarian Settings*; Myrttinen, "Engaging Men and Boys for Gender Equality in Humanitarian Settings".

b) **How can programming generate opportunities for positive, non-violent pathways to manhood that provide dignity and esteem, without compounding male privilege, domination or patriarchy?** How can programmes and activities reshape traditional gender roles that link masculinity with violence?

The following **principles** should then be applied:

1. **Involve local women, men and the wider community in these processes.** Gender identities are relationally constructed, and they therefore involve relationships with the wider community – broadly, a critical masculinities lens is necessary across peace and security work. For example, this could involve community-based education that promotes alternative, non-violent pathways to manhood, encouraging empathy, cooperation, gender equality and emotional expression.

2. **Explicitly plan and tailor interventions to appeal to boys and men.** This requires diagnostics conducted with local stakeholders who understand context and culture.

3. **Explicitly seek to generate an alternative, non-armed, non-violent sense of male dignity.** This can be done through interventions to offset the masculine status reduction that, as mentioned above, often occurs in DDR processes.

4. **Offsetting masculine status reduction should be applied to create a masculinities-sensitive approach to disarmament.** This will encourage men to hand over their guns, which they see as symbols of masculine power being taken away from them. Disarmament "should focus on dissociating arms ownership from notions of power, protection, status and masculinity [for this] type of gender- and age-transformative transitional [weapons and ammunition management] to be effective".[82]

5. **Resolve the urgent basic needs of beneficiaries** that may stop them from being receptive to planned masculinities-based work.

6. **"Masculine pathways" out of armed groups must respond clearly to beneficiaries of real-world economic and other needs.** They must be designed as productive pathways.

7. **Find male-sensitive ways to tackle trauma, addiction, injury and disability**, given that "many men are reluctant to seek care due to social and cultural taboos".[83] This is a largely unapplied area that requires innovation and specialist support. Again, such interventions must be connected to resolving structural exclusion and poverty (points 4 and 5 above). To illustrate this, an intervention implemented by the South African NGO Sonke focused exclusively on gender and masculinities as levers for change but did not address the chronic lack of mental health services for trauma or high alcohol sales, and nor did it help participants address joblessness and food scarcity.[84] Focusing on social

---

82    IDDRS gender module, United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on DDR, "5.10 Women, Gender and DDR", (forthcoming).

83    IDDRS gender module, United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on DDR, "5.10 Women, Gender and DDR", (forthcoming).

84    Peacock et al., "Seeing the Forest for the Trees", p. 10.

norms change alone, without addressing such issues (points 4 and 6 above), will be insufficient to reduce men's violence.

8. **Explicitly create ways to promote non-violent masculinities so violence is not transferred into host communities during reintegration:**

   ◦ "Include measures to challenge harmful notions of masculinity and engage with men and boys to promote behaviours and attitudes that value gender equality and non-violence [and] healthy expressions of masculinities and femininities".[85]

   ◦ Develop local and culturally relevant critiques of violent masculinities and violent male role models, such as the leaders of armed groups. This could involve working with local individuals, organizations, media and cultural institutions to counter sources of violent male discourse often found in, for example, misogynistic music lyrics.

   ◦ Problematize and make visible the disproportionate "maleness" in the use of small arms that victimizes women, children, non-binary people and other men.

   ◦ Problematize the disproportionate "maleness" of small arms victims in homicide, disability, injury and related trauma.

   ◦ Problematize the disproportionate victimization of girls and women with sexual, psychological and other violences that are more common when groups or individuals are armed.

By piloting experiences and methods, toolkits and best practices on masculinities-focused interventions can be developed. For example, a feminist advocate at a seminar in Colombia in 2023 suggested that female survivors of sexual violence could be brought into the DDR process to face gang members, potentially as a form of transitional justice.[86] Obviously, there are ethical challenges to placing survivors in front of perpetrators, not least the risk of re-traumatization. Women, non-binary people and the wider LGBTQI+ community have experienced men's violence and may find working with men, masculinities and violence personally challenging. This indicates that such engagements require a feminist ethic of care. However, novel ideas are required to confront and transform the violent masculinities of DDR participants. The advocate in Colombia further argued that workshops on masculinities and violence were essential and should be obligatory; gang members participating in the DDR process who did not attend such workshops would not receive financial and other benefits. Progressive ideas such as these, and many more, must be tested to fill the masculinities deficit in knowledge and practice on armed violence reduction.

---

85    IDDRS gender module, United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on DDR, "5.10 Women, Gender and DDR", (forthcoming).

86    Strengthening Peace Processes to Confront Criminal Agendas: Lessons for Urban Peace in Colombia", Workshop organized by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Bogotá, November 2023.

# 4. Conclusion: Mainstreaming masculinities

Currently, there is no institutional focal point, no specific United Nations programme, no agency and no research centre that develops and advocates for men- and masculinities-focused interventions to reduce armed violence. One expert wrote, "there is a tendency to talk about 'including men and boys' without this meaning anything".[87] It is useful, then, to consider how progress can be made.

Men are at the epicentre of a global epidemic of armed violence. This much we know. Therefore, unless there is a focus on the "maleness" of armed violence, it cannot effectively be stopped. This requires developing interventions and programming through existing United Nations agencies and institutes (e.g., UNIDIR, UNODA, UNDP, UN Women, UNFPA, etc.) and Member States, but also working with academia, civil society and others. However, to date, the promotion of men-and-masculinities initiatives through current institutions has not taken place or has fallen short. Unless there is a concerted effort, specific advocacy, good offices and political will, recommendations will continue to be recycled and scarcely implemented: a *Groundhog Day*, as mentioned earlier in the report.

If working with marginalized young men as a gender category is a way to disrupt armed violence, then this needs to be driven forwards. Something has to change in terms of implementation and accountability, hence the call for greater support within the United Nations system to ignite this process. As a starting point for the United Nations, this could begin incrementally as an initiative or inter-agency working group. However, arguably, to create the necessary momentum for change, a dedicated institutional home within an existing agency is required to counter inertia and to make a decisive effort to push innovation and accountability to ensure that progress is made. To achieve this goal, advocacy and political support is vital, and optimistically could even lead to the development of a new institution in the future. Moreover, and

> "
> critically, to win allies and make progress requires that programming is developed and evidence is built from the bottom-up in order to demonstrate that working with men and masculinities has an impact on reducing armed violence.

---

87    Expert feedback on earlier draft of the report, May 2024.