



UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

DEVELOPMENT FUTURES SERIES

APRIL 2022

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UNDP Global Policy Network Brief

Small Arms Control – The Case for Gender Mainstreaming

Experiences from South-East Europe

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Small arms² and gender are intrinsically linked. A rich body of research in South-East Europe has documented how gender norms and roles can, in a complex interplay with other factors, fuel demand for small arms and shape patterns of their misuse. Gender also conditions specific risks that women and men face with respect to small arms misuse, in particular the forms and extent of their exposure to armed violence. On the other hand, widespread availability and misuse of small arms exacerbate existing gender inequalities, both in conflict and non-conflict settings, and *reinforce power imbalances between women and men*,³ which is most evident in the context of violence against women. These patterns are remarkably stable and, until recently, policy and the operational response have been weak and have mostly failed to adequately address links between gender and small arms. However, institutions in the Western Balkans, with support from UNDP SEESAC, are increasingly making efforts to mainstream the gender perspective across arms control frameworks, providing a blueprint for more gender-responsive policy solutions and contributing to more resilient communities. Elaborating on such experiences, this brief provides an overview of key evidence which has shaped arms control debates in the region and facilitated making a case for mainstreaming gender in small arms control. The brief further outlines practical strategies for gender mainstreaming and highlights the importance of gender analysis in enhancing the gender responsiveness of arms control. Finally, it discusses policy implications of bringing gender perspectives into arms control policies as well as ways forward.

Context

The large-scale proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons (hereinafter SALW) have been widely recognized as serious threats to international peace and security, fueling instability and negatively affecting overall social and economic development.⁴ Furthermore, the widespread availability of illicit SALW and their ammunition is regarded as a key enabler of conflict and endemic crime.⁵

Due to the legacy of armed conflicts or unrest in the 1990s, the Western Balkans continues to face multiple challenges related to illegal possession, misuse, and trafficking of firearms, which could have a destabilizing effect on the situation in the region. In addition, challenges related to small arms control continue to evolve and new threats are emerging, a situation that calls for a holistic and versatile policy and operational approach.

In parallel, long-standing efforts have been undertaken to address those multiple challenges. Since 2002, the United Nations Development Programme, through the South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (UNDP SEESAC, hereinafter SEESAC), has worked to strengthen the capacities of national and regional stakeholders to control and reduce the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons, advance gender equality, facilitate regional cooperation and thus contribute to enhanced stability, security and development in South-Eastern and Eastern Europe. Within its mandate, SEESAC provides institutions with 360-degree support ranging from weapons

destruction, security upgrades of storages and stockpile management, marking, tracing and record-keeping of weapons, support for policy development, awareness-raising campaigns for reducing illicit possession and misuse of firearms, and research and data collection.

In the past decade, considerable progress has been achieved by the region in establishing legal, policy and institutional frameworks for SALW control. For instance, SALW commissions⁶ as interinstitutional bodies in charge of policymaking and overall coordination of arms control implementation were established across the region. Most recently, authorities adopted [the Roadmap for a Sustainable Solution to Arms Control in the Western Balkans](#). The Roadmap envisages the Western Balkans as a *safer region and an exporter of security where comprehensive and sustainable mechanisms, fully harmonized with the European Union and other international standards, are in place to identify, prevent, prosecute and control the illegal possession, misuse and trafficking of firearms, ammunition and explosives*. The Roadmap was developed with SEESAC's technical support under the auspices of France and Germany and in consultation with the EU and all other relevant actors. The Roadmap places special importance on gender equality and calls for full integration of the gender perspective and balanced representation of women into SALW control. With respect to implementation, the Roadmap is operationalized through action plans developed and adopted in each jurisdiction in the Western Balkans.

Gendered nature of firearms

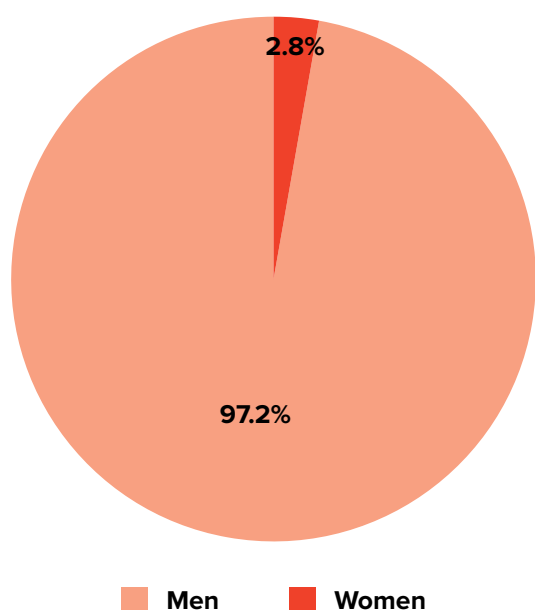
The growing body of research has provided extensive evidence of the highly gendered nature of firearms and has documented multiple manners in which gender and firearms intersect. The available data indicates that gendered aspects of firearms can be tracked in terms of ownership of firearms, including the links between masculine norms and demand for firearms, the differentiated impacts of firearms misuse on women and men, the role of firearms in gender-based violence and violence against women, differences in experiences and attitudes towards firearms, and gendered nature of policymaking process and debate.⁷

As documented by several research studies conducted by SEESAC⁸, the specific situation in the region closely follows those gendered patterns.

1. **Firearms ownership is highly gendered.** In South-East Europe (hereinafter referred to as SEE), men own 97.2% of all legally owned firearms, compared to 2.8% owned by women.⁹ In 2016 alone, 81,372 men and 2,037 women (97.6% and 2.4%, respectively) acquired new licenses, which further perpetuates men's dominance in this regard. Gender differences are, to a certain extent, also reflected in attitudes towards firearms ownership. Data from a regional survey conducted in 2017 revealed that

men are two times more likely than women to say they would own a gun, at 35.3% and 18.7%, respectively. This particularly holds true for men from the youngest and oldest age groups, who are more inclined to own a firearm than men from other age groups. With respect to women, it should be noted that while a significant share of women said they would own a gun, they accounted for only a minor share of actual applicants for new licenses.

Figure 1: Firearms ownership in SEE, by sex, 2016



Source: SEESAC, 2019

Men were also more likely than women to invoke tradition as a key reason for owning a firearm, which could be, to a certain extent, connected with the traditional perception of manhood in which firearms have a special appeal or could have even played a role in rites of passage.¹⁰

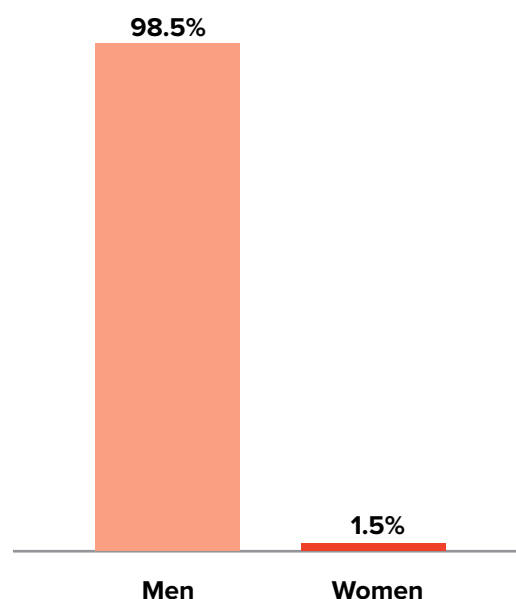
Due to such distinctly gendered patterns of demand for firearms, it has been noted that it is necessary to explore *both the notions of masculinity and the role of guns in male culture and to develop practical strategies to decouple them*.¹¹ Furthermore, it was argued that the extent to which firearms define the gender construct of masculinity would affect SALW control work.¹²

2. Apart from civilian possession of firearms, **men also dominate security sector professions and activities that involve firearms**. In 2016 in SEE, men accounted for 91.2% of all security sector personnel authorized to carry firearms, compared to 8.8% for women. Such differences are also indicative of the overall

underrepresentation of the security sector itself, which, despite the growing inclusion of women, still remains heavily dominated by men. In addition, men also dominate activities such as hunting and sporting, which include routine access to firearms.

3. **Patterns of armed violence are highly gendered, and such violence is predominantly committed by men**. In 2020, men accounted for 98% of perpetrators¹³ of firearm-related incidents, confirming previously documented patterns. Armed violence committed by men is also age-related, and young men are more likely to misuse firearms than men from any other age group. In 2020 alone, men aged 19 to 35 years accounted for just under one-half (48.7%) of all perpetrators of firearm-related incidents. With regards to the context of firearms misuse, men most often misused them in criminal activities or in a public dispute or argument, at 42.7% and 26.6%, respectively.

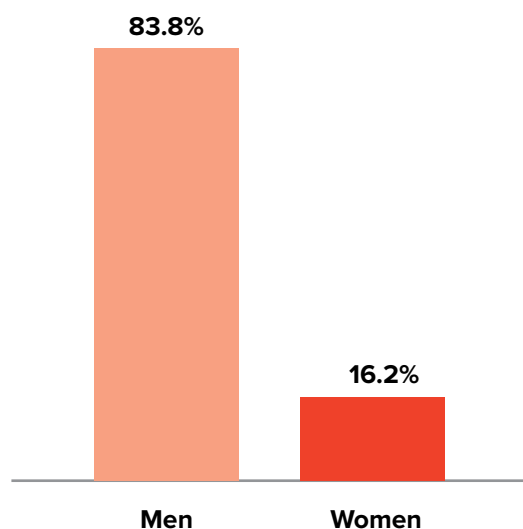
Figure 2: Perpetrators of firearm-related incidents in SEE, by sex, 2016



Source: SEESAC, 2019

4. **Effects of firearms on women and men are gender-differentiated**. Men are significantly more likely than women to fall victim to firearm misuse. In SEE, they account for 83.8% of victims of firearm homicide, compared to 16.2% for women.¹⁴ Apart from different distribution among victims, there is also an apparent discrepancy in patterns of women's and men's victimization within the context of firearm-related violence.

Figure 3: Victims of firearm-related homicide in SEE, by sex, 2016

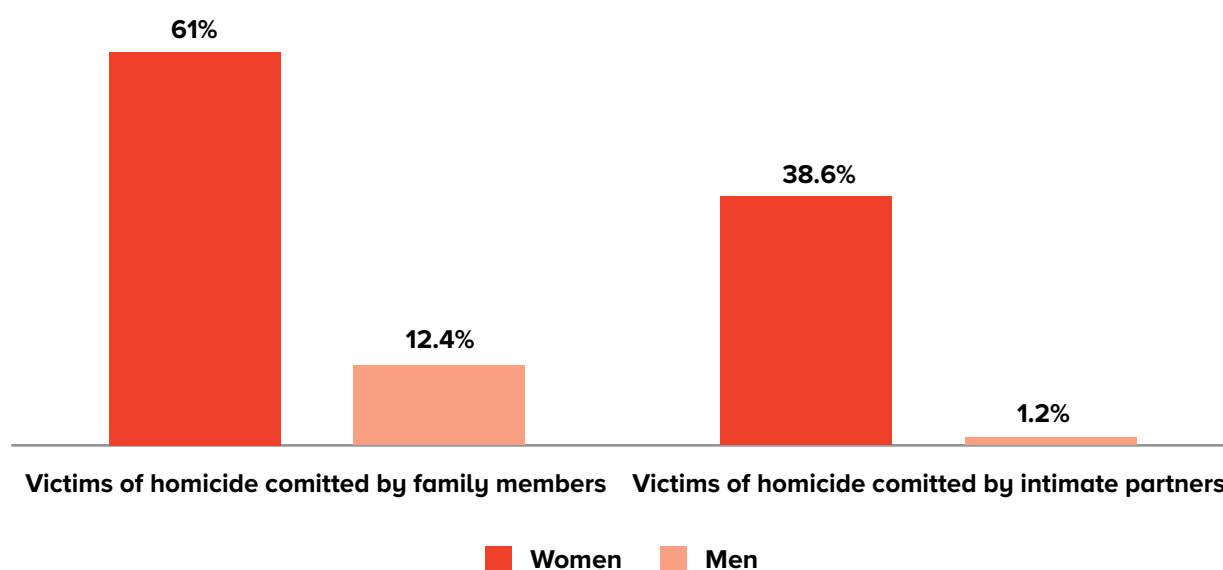


Source: SEESAC, 2019

5. Armed violence against men primarily happens in criminal contexts, public disputes and undetermined shootings. A recent analysis¹⁵ has indicated that of all men killed with firearms in SEE, 31% were killed in shootings in which the cause was unidentified, pending further investigation; 27.2% were killed in criminal contexts related to organized crime activities, armed robberies, etc.; 25.2% were killed in public disputes; and 16.5% were killed by a male family member.

6. Women account for the majority of victims of firearm-related violence in the domestic violence context. While men are more likely to misuse firearms than to fall victim to them, women are 10 times more likely to be victims than perpetrators of firearm incidents. Such disproportionate representation of women among victims of armed violence is primarily related to the use of firearms in domestic and intimate partner violence. Previous research¹⁶ conducted by SEESAC documented that homicide committed by a family member is the most common form of femicide in SEE and that women, unlike men, are at particular risk of intimate partner violence (Figure 4). Firearms are often weapons of choice in domestic violence contexts. In the period from 2012 to 2016, 37.7% of homicides committed by a family member were committed with firearms. 36.5% of women killed by a family member were killed with firearms, as were 43.5% of women killed by an intimate partner. According to SEESAC's Armed Violence Monitoring Platform, 23 women were killed by their family members in 2020—four more than in 2019, indicating how the specific conditions of the pandemic likely increased the risk to women from firearm misuse in the domestic violence context and, ultimately, its lethality.

Figure 4: Victims of homicide committed by family members/intimate partners out of total homicide victims, by sex (2012-2016)



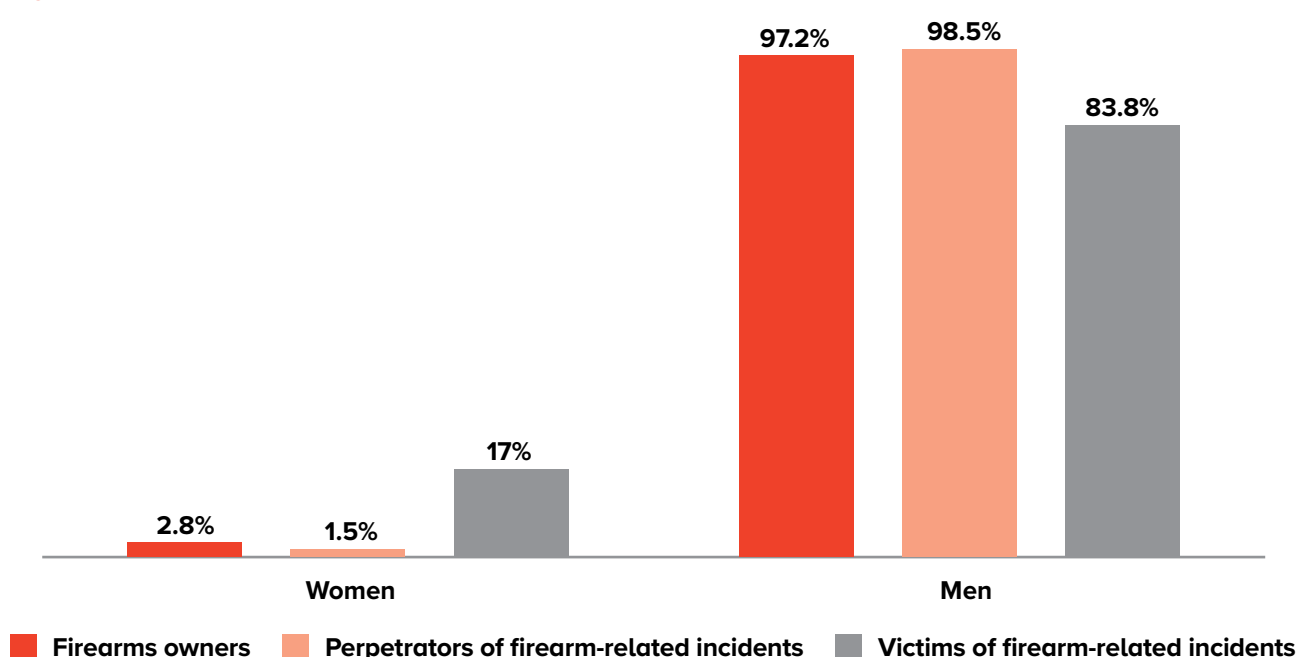
Source: SEESAC, 2019

Recent analysis has also shown that firearm incidents in the context of domestic violence were the cause of the highest number of firearms deaths in 2020, outnumbering those reported in all other types of incidents, including criminal context, public disputes and undetermined shootings.¹⁷ In the same year, 92% of all women killed with firearms in SEE were killed in the context of domestic violence, with 65% killed by intimate partners. No men were killed with firearms by their intimate partners in the same period. Despite the apparent use of firearms in domestic violence, scarce data indicate that the misuse of firearms in

domestic violence often goes unreported to the relevant institutions, and the history of domestic violence is only sporadically invoked as a ground for rejection of approval of firearm license.

7. **Firearm suicides are highly gendered.** In the period 2012–2016 in SEE, men made up 84.7% of people who died by firearm suicide, compared to 15.3% for women.¹⁸ Fifteen murder-suicides occurred in 2020, which, in the majority of cases, occurred in the domestic violence context, involving family members and intimate partners as victims, and were predominantly committed by men.

Figure 5: Gender differentiated patterns related to small arms in South East Europe



Source: SEESAC, 2019

Starting point—Gender-blind arms control

Despite those highly gendered aspects of small arms, the dominant approach in arms control until recently tended to be gender-blind, failing to adequately respond to the highly gendered nature of firearms. The SEESAC's research from 2016¹⁹ extensively documented that gender perspectives had not been integrated into arms control and that gender considerations were rarely a part of prevailing arms control debates in the region. Consequently, gender was severely underprioritized and not considered an essential part of arms control policy development. On a practical level, relevant policies failed to recognize linkages between armed violence and gender-based violence, the differentiated impact of firearms on women and men, as well as the role

of gendered factors, including specific notions of masculinity, in fuelling demand and misuse of firearms. A gender-blind approach to a highly gendered phenomenon such as firearms misuse cannot adequately address the challenges at hand and negatively affects the effectiveness of operational measures to curb and prevent armed violence. Such effect was documented by persistent trends of femicides committed with firearms and also young men's exposure to armed violence—both as perpetrators and victims. Furthermore, the gendered risks associated with small arms become even more difficult to address due to their interaction with other risks, such as evolving forms of gender-based violence.

The same research identified the factors impeding gender mainstreaming in arms control. For instance, arms control policies have often been developed in an institutional setting dominated by men, while women, gender equality agencies and women's organizations that could contribute to gender-responsive solutions are severely

underrepresented. Furthermore, insufficient knowledge and low awareness among decision- and policymakers about the gendered aspects of small arms can further hinder the integration of the gender perspective. This was exacerbated by the lack of sex-disaggregated data and the underuse of gender analysis in policy development.

Reversing the trends—Practical strategies for mainstreaming gender in small arms control

Building on such an extensive evidence base, SEESAC, in cooperation with SALW commissions in the region, undertook a comprehensive set of activities to reverse those trends and address identified challenges by bringing the gender perspective to the core of policymaking.

The holistic approach taken to enhancing gender responsiveness of SALW control measures in SEE is based on four interconnected pillars:

1. **Building capacities of institutions in charge of arms control to mainstream gender in their work**

To facilitate the establishment of enabling institutional environments for gender-responsive policymaking, a wide range of impactful capacity-building activities were initiated. To this end, the [Gender Coach Programme](#) (GCP) was launched to strengthen the capacities of heads of SALW commissions to integrate the gender perspective into SALW control policymaking. The GCP aims to boost the gender responsiveness of institutions by developing competencies and fostering *commitment among the senior management*.²⁰ The implementation of the

control. Such a wide range of knowledge products, which include [SALW Surveys](#), [Gender and Small Arms: Fast Facts series](#) and [In Focus Armed Violence Monitors](#), provide an extensive evidence base which serves as a basis for arms control policy development. Within the framework of a broader development agenda, such a body of research also provides insight into linkages between the gender dimension of arms control and the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5 on gender equality and SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions.

3. **Increasing participation of women in arms control policymaking**

Continuous efforts have been made to ensure the balanced representation and active participation of women across arms control, with a specific focus on capacity-building initiatives and increasing women's expertise in a field traditionally dominated by men. This builds on SEESAC's long-standing efforts to increase women's participation in the security sector.²¹ In addition, pioneering efforts have been initiated to support the establishment of the cooperation

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