

# Women, Gun Violence and the Home

In a study of 25 high-income countries, high household gun ownership rates were correlated with much increased female homicide rates.

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A Belgrade domestic violence support group noted that there was an increase in demand for their services especially after the screening of TV programs hyping up nationalism in preparation for war.

A Croatian woman recognised a shift resulting from increased weaponry. "No more wooden sticks, shoes and other 'classic' instruments of violence but guns and bombs etc...Everybody has weapons."

**Cynthia Cockburn  
Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence, 1999.**

The primary risks of violence to women come from their intimate partners, and the home is much more likely to be the scene of violence than anywhere else.

Gun violence can be part of the cycle of intimidation and aggression that many women experience from an intimate partner. Domestic violence is a feature of every nation, irrespective of social, economic, religious or cultural preferences. At least one in every three women will be physically abused at least once, usually by an intimate partner, with most experiencing multiple instances of abuse<sup>1</sup>.

Among industrialised countries, national gun homicides rates, including intimate partner homicides committed with guns are greater where there are higher rates of gun ownership. However, in many parts of the world, data on intimate partner violence are not collected systematically. But we do know that guns kept in the home, are much more likely to terrorise, kill or injure inhabitants than outsiders.

## **For every woman killed or physically injured by firearms, many more are threatened.**

Most women who are victims of gun violence experience multiple types of abuse beforehand, including sexual, psychological and/or physical attacks. Patterns of attack are similar across cultures and often involve shooting family pets as a warning or bringing guns out for cleaning during an argument. As many women are emotionally involved and economically dependent on those who abuse them it can be extremely difficult to leave the situation.

## **In intimate partner violence, legally held guns are just as dangerous as illegal ones.**

Despite the emphasis among law enforcement on illegal handguns and crime, legal firearms are the primary weapons used in domestic homicides. A recent Canadian study found that 40% of women killed by their husbands are shot to death; most (80%) are killed with legally owned guns.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, a legally held gun in the home is much more likely to be used to intimidate or physically injure members than to be used against an outside intruder.

While gun related domestic violence occurs in peaceful settings as well as in conflict zones, **domestic abuse increases during and after conflict.** After a conflict officially ends, guns circulate in the community. Post-conflict stress, combined with economic prospects and a reduction in basic services, contribute to the dynamics of domestic violence after war. In Cambodia in the mid 1990s, as many as 75% of women in one study experienced domestic violence, often at the hands of men who had kept the small arms they used during the war<sup>3</sup>.

Justice systems have historically overlooked violence against women, and human rights standards have tended to perceive the 'private sphere' as outside the scope of state interventions. While legal protections for women experiencing domestic violence exist in 45 countries, many of these laws are not regularly enforced, especially during periods of conflict where domestic violence incidents are likely to be seen as irrelevant to the broader issues of conflict.

Women's organisations have a long history of campaigning to draw attention to intimate partner violence. Both gun control and women's organisations are now campaigning to:

- Introduce strong domestic small arms legislation reinforced by rigorous regional and international agreements as an essential step to improve the safety of women against gun related domestic violence.
- Support the development of gender-sensitive international agreements concerning small arms and peace building.

- Find avenues to promote women's participation at leadership levels in discussions and decision-making processes, even in militarised areas.
- Address the connection between small arms proliferation and sexual violence.
- Identify successful strategies implemented by women in the control of small arms and determine how these can be replicated in different parts of the world.
- Increase research on the impacts of gun related violence in domestic situations.
- Promote specific legislation to prevent men with a history of domestic abuse and other types of violence from acquiring a firearms license.

The Women's Network of the International Action Network on Small Arms aims to support organisations to mobilise, energise, organise, and resist gun violence in their communities and to ensure that the experiences and views of women are adequately represented in decision-making forums.

To join the IANSA Women's Network and find groups working on women and gun violence visit the IANSA Women's Network Portal [www.iansa.org/women](http://www.iansa.org/women) or e-mail [women@iansa.org](mailto:women@iansa.org)

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<sup>1</sup> Krug et al. 2002) *World Report on Violence and Health*. World Health Organisation. Geneva. [www.who.org](http://www.who.org)

<sup>2</sup> Kwing Hung (2000). *Firearms Statistics (Jurisdictional Tables)*. March 2000. Canadian Department of Justice. Canada

<sup>3</sup> Rehn, Elisabeth & Johnson Sirleaf, Ellen (2002) *Independent Experts Assessment on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and the Role of Women in Peace Building*. [www.unifem.org](http://www.unifem.org)

In 2002 at the Fort Bragg army base in North Carolina, USA, four military personnel murdered their wives over a six-week period, three had recently returned from Afghanistan.

"The rates of domestic violence in the military are no higher than they are in similar populations of civilians, despite the high stress of military deployments," a U.S. Defense Department Official stated (United Press International July 27 2002).

Despite these claims, recent studies indicate that military domestic violence is significantly underreported. A recent study shows that military couples have a rate of domestic abuse two to five times higher than in the general population.

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