



# ADVANCING GENDER AND INCLUSIVITY IN SMALL ARMS CONTROL: KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM REVCON4



**WILPF**  
WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL  
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Advancing Gender and Inclusivity in Small Arms Control:  
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	4
Participation .....	5
Gendered Impacts .....	8
Gender-Based Violence .....	10
Gendered Roles .....	11
Health .....	13
Gender-Responsive Policies .....	15
Gendered Impacts .....	16
National Engagement .....	19
Looking Ahead .....	20

# Introduction

In June 2024, the United Nations (UN) convened the Fourth Review Conference (RevCon4) for the UN Programme of Action (UNPoA) on the illicit trade of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) and its International Tracing Instrument (ITI). The UNPoA is a politically binding framework for UN member states that was adopted in 2001 and aims to establish a comprehensive framework for preventing the illicit proliferation of these weapons, which contribute to conflict, violence, and instability worldwide.

The proliferation, illicit circulation, and misuse of small arms and light weapons (SALW) have a devastating toll both inside and outside of conflict zones. In 2021, nearly 45 per cent of global violent deaths were committed with firearms, reflecting the widespread impact of these weapons.<sup>1</sup> With over one billion firearms in circulation globally as of 2017, the need for effective SALW control is more urgent now than ever.<sup>2</sup>

The devastation caused by SALW affects people differently according to their gender.<sup>3</sup> Gendered power dynamics can affect the likelihood of being targeted by small arms violence, prospects of becoming a victim or survivor of armed violence, and even the ability to access medical attention in the aftermath of armed conflict. Gender also plays a role in who is acquiring and using these weapons. Furthermore, the often militarised and technical nature of arms control processes has contributed to the lack of meaningful participation of women and nonbinary or gender non-conforming people in disarmament efforts, and to the absence of considerations of gender in approaches to small arms control, which have resulted in their limited effectiveness in reducing violence, stopping illicit arms trafficking, promoting stability, and accelerating development.<sup>4</sup> Many international development and security agendas, such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, have yet to fully recognise how advancing gender responsive small arms control fits within broader aspirations of both building peaceful societies and achieving development goals.

When the UNPoA was adopted in 2001, the only gender-related language included was a reference in its preamble to the disproportionate impact of small arms on women, grouping them together with children and the elderly. Since then, gendered language was more or less absent from the UNPoA process until the Third Review Conference (RevCon3) in 2018, when states made efforts to mainstream gender in the UNPoA. States built on this language in the seventh Biennial Meeting of States (BMS7), the eighth Biennial Meeting of States (BMS8), and in RevCon4. Twenty-three of the 228 paragraphs in the final outcome document of RevCon4 contain language related to gender.<sup>5</sup> The document recognises gender roles, norms, and expectations for women and men to acquire illicit arms. It includes new language on violence associated with SALW, new references to encouraging the engagement and participation of men and boys in mainstreaming a gender perspective as well as new language on public and mental health concerns. It also refers to updated language such as gender-responsive policies instead of gender-sensitive policies as in BMS8.

This briefing paper aims to outline the provisions of the adopted outcome document from the RevCon4 that relate to gender, inclusivity, and small arms and contextualise the language included therein. Several of these paragraphs do not solely address gender but also address other categories of identities that can result in unique combinations of discrimination and privilege. This paper explores how gender relates to other factors, such as disabilities and youth, that are also mentioned in these paragraphs.

Civil society plays a vital role in the UNPoA's implementation by holding states accountable, advocating for stronger measures, and raising awareness about the devastating impact of illicit arms flows. The UNPoA provides a platform for civil society to influence policy and advocate for more robust international cooperation, stronger national controls, and the effective inclusion of human rights and gender perspectives in arms control initiatives. Through strategic advocacy, civil society can help shape the future of global small arms control and ensure that the voices of affected communities are heard in decision-making processes.

## What does the outcome document say about meaningful and diverse participation?

### **In the following paragraphs, the outcome document states:**

38. We recognize the need to promote the full, equal, meaningful and effective participation of women in decision-making and implementation processes relating to the Programme of Action and the International Tracing Instrument at all levels, including in leadership roles.

57. To promote the full, equal, meaningful and effective participation of women in mechanisms relating to the implementation of the Programme of Action.

126. To address the persistent barriers to the full, equal, meaningful and effective participation and representation of women, including in leadership roles, in all decision-making, planning and implementation processes related to the Programme of Action, such as national small arms commissions, programmes relating to community safety, violence reduction, collection and destruction of small arms and light weapons, stockpile management, conflict prevention and resolution and peacebuilding.

222. Encourage the equal, full, meaningful and effective participation of women in the meetings on the Programme of Action and the International Tracing Instrument and take steps to address their underrepresentation in this regard.



223. Recommend to the Secretariat that it report at Biennial Meetings of States and Review Conferences on overall progress on the participation of women.

224. Encourage Member States to nominate women as candidates for the positions of President of the Review Conference and Chair of the Biennial Meetings of States and encourage Presidents and Chairs to continue to strive for both gender and geographical balance within the bureaux of future meetings.

**D**iverse participation is essential for improving our understanding of the complex issues surrounding small arms control. A broad range of perspectives enhances the inclusivity of policy development and implementation, leading to more comprehensive, sustainable, and effective solutions for all people. This diversity is not only vital in international forums, such as those discussing the UNPoA and the ITI, but also at all levels of implementation and policymaking. The perspectives of people of different genders, youth, and people with disabilities must be meaningfully included to ensure that policies reflect the lived experiences of all affected communities. Additionally, as mentioned above gender intersects with many factors such as race, ethnicity, class, and disability, among others, which results in unique combinations of discrimination and oppression or privilege.<sup>6</sup>

However, underrepresentation remains a challenge due to several factors, including lack of opportunities for women to obtain technical expertise needed to work in the field of arms control and disarmament. Opportunities to obtain technical expertise have traditionally been acquired via police or military training, which tend to be male-dominated, and in many settings can reinforce a militarised and violent approach to security. Research has also shown that women working in technical roles experience gender stereotyping within their organisations due to what they describe as the male and/or military nature of the field. Addressing these barriers, including reviewing recruitment processes, is critical to ensuring more inclusive and effective policies. The fact that these jobs are increasingly performed by civilians from outside security institutions constitutes a key opportunity to increase the diversity in the field and improve women's and gender diverse participation.<sup>7</sup>

Paragraph 38 of the outcome document from RevCon4 calls for the “full, equal, meaningful, and effective participation of women.” Language advocating for the full, equal, and meaningful participation of women was first introduced in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, and has become a standard entry point for discussions on gender inclusivity.<sup>8</sup> Attempts were made during RevCon4 to expand this language to include “women and men in all their diversity,” a phrase widely used in civil society and UN Women documents but not yet standard in UN outcome documents. The failure to include this phrase limits the intersectional scope of the text, excluding underrepresented groups from explicit mention. While this excluded language is still a narrow representation of gender diversity, it nonetheless hints that there is gender beyond a binary. Additionally, language highlighting the leadership roles and agency of

women as “agents of change” mentioned in earlier drafts was removed from paragraph 57, reflecting a broader hesitation to fully embrace progressive gender language. However, there has long been the argument that “just add women and stir” will not suffice. Effective participation requires that everyone is equipped with the tools, opportunities, and platforms to engage in decision-making processes actively. This principle is reinforced in paragraph 57, which emphasises women’s involvement in the mechanisms related to UNPoA implementation.

Paragraph 126 mirrors language seen in previous documents (BMS8 and RevCon3), but shifts the focus from promoting equal opportunities to actively addressing the barriers that prevent many women from engaging in disarmament processes. This proactive approach is crucial for breaking down institutional and societal obstacles that hinder gender inclusivity and, in this way, the onus shifts from women themselves to the relevant institutions.

Improving women’s participation in arms control can be measured both qualitatively and quantitatively, as highlighted in paragraphs 222, 223, and 224. These provisions call for the collection of data on participation and recommend that the UN Secretariat report on progress during Biennial Meetings of States and Review Conferences. Advancements in this area are sorely needed, as representation at RevCon4 remained uneven. According to the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), only 21 per cent of speakers in the RevCon4 general debate were women.<sup>9</sup> This underscores the need for sustained advocacy to ensure that gender balance is prioritised in future meetings.

The outcome document also includes paragraphs that go beyond participation in the context of gender. Starting with BMS8, greater attention has been paid to youth inclusion in arms control processes, a group that is disproportionately affected by the illicit trade in SALW. Recognising the growing youth population globally—according to the UN there are approximately 1.2 billion people aged 15 to 24 years old<sup>10</sup>—and the particular vulnerabilities<sup>10</sup> of children to armed violence, these provisions seek to ensure that youth voices are not marginalised in discussions on SALW. For example, paragraphs 59, 130, 225 and 227 in the outcome document call for mechanisms to incorporate the needs, perspectives, and contributions of youth into policies and action plans and emphasises the need for youth considerations and engagement. Paragraph 55 addresses the need to ensure that national systems, strategies and action plans link to the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda.

Similarly, several paragraphs of the outcome document specifically mention people with disabilities. Paragraph 60, 82 and 132 refers to data collection on the differential impact of the illicit trade of SALW on persons with disabilities. Paragraph 226 addresses the inclusion of persons with disabilities, noting the importance of accessibility in meetings and the broader arms control processes. This is particularly important, given the range of disabilities often experienced by surviving victims of gun violence. This aligns with the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy,<sup>11</sup> which the Secretariat is encouraged to reinforce. The outcome document also includes several paragraphs addressing the importance to ensure the participation and engagement with civil society actors and academia.

# What does the outcome document say about the gendered impacts of SALW?

## **In the following paragraphs, the outcome document states:**

29. We are determined to prevent and reduce the human suffering caused by the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons in all its aspects and to address the differential impact of the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons on women, men, girls and boys.

82. To take into account the differential impact of the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons on women, men, girls and boys, including, where feasible and safe to do so, by collecting data disaggregated by sex, age and disability, and utilizing analysis mechanisms to inform evidence-based gender-responsive policymaking and programming with a view to strengthening the full and effective implementation of the Programme of Action at all levels.

124. To take account of the differential impact of the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons on women, men, girls and boys, and to strengthen or, where they do not exist, develop response mechanisms to address that impact.

132. To encourage, where feasible and safe to do so, the collection of data related to the differential impacts of the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons disaggregated by sex, age, disability and other characteristics relevant in national contexts, including through national reports, and to increase understanding of the gender-specific impacts of the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons, in particular for the purpose of improving corresponding national policies and programmes.

200. To urge the promotion of good practices and lessons learned concerning modalities and procedures for international cooperation and assistance aimed at ensuring the effective implementation of the Programme of Action by, among other things, promoting the full, equal, meaningful and effective participation of women, engaging youth and further encouraging the mainstreaming of a gender perspective and youth-related considerations in the implementation of the Programme of Action.

**T**he illicit trade, proliferation, and misuse of SALW have distinct gendered impacts. While men are more frequently both victims and perpetrators of SALW violence, women bear the brunt of social and economic consequences of gun violence amongst men,<sup>12</sup> including increased vulnerability to poverty, displacement, and gender-based violence. Furthermore, small arms are often used to facilitate gender-based violence, exacerbating the risks faced by women and trans



or gender non-conforming people in conflict and non-conflict settings alike. Recognising these gendered dynamics is critical to creating effective arms control policies, and this is done in paragraph 29.

While the call for gender-responsive measures in small arms control is a critical step forward, it is important to examine the framing of women in these discussions. Much of the language surrounding women in arms control tends to treat them as victims, emphasising their role as passive victims of gun violence rather than acknowledging their agency and diverse experiences. That UN policies often have referred to “women and children” is something feminist scholars have problematised for decades, since it refers to an understanding of women and children as being politically, socially, and legally equivalent. To critique the common use of this abstract category, feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe coined the phrase “womenandchildren” to show how it does not allow for nuance and context specific solutions as it refers to women as helpless as children. This framing of “womenandchildren” as victims risks reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes that see women solely as those needing protection (by men), rather than as active participants in security and peacebuilding processes.<sup>13</sup>

Paragraphs 82 and 132 of the RevCon4 outcome document address the need for better data collection to inform more gender-responsive policies. The disaggregation of data by sex, age, and disability is essential to understanding the differential impact of the illicit trade in SALW on women, men, girls, and boys. Paragraph 132 also include a reference to “other characteristics relevant in national contexts”, which represents new language and reflects that some states already collect data beyond sex, age and disability and may collect data on diverse populations including sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC), race, ethnicity and other minorities. Such data, when collected responsibly and respecting privacy rights, provides policymakers with the tools needed to design targeted interventions that address the specific needs of different groups, making arms control efforts more inclusive and effective.

The terminology used in paragraph 82 represents an important shift in how gender is addressed within SALW control efforts. The term “gender-responsive” goes beyond “gender-sensitive,” indicating a commitment not only to recognising gender differences but to actively responding to the specific gendered needs of the population. This concept is reinforced in paragraph 200, which pulls from BMS8 and calls for the promotion of good practices and lessons learned, particularly in ensuring the full, equal, and meaningful participation of women in the UNPoA’s implementation. It also emphasises the importance of youth engagement and the mainstreaming of both gender and youth considerations in international cooperation and assistance efforts.

Paragraph 124 similarly stresses the importance of addressing the differential impacts of the illicit trade on women, men, girls, and boys, reinforcing the need for tailored response mechanisms to tackle gender inequalities within SALW control efforts. By responsibly gathering data and developing gender-responsive mechanisms, states can more effectively mitigate the harms caused by SALW.

# What does the outcome document say about gender-based violence?

**In the following paragraph, the outcome document states:**

25. We reaffirm that eradicating the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons contributes to preventing and combating human rights violations, gender-based violence and conflict-related sexual violence.

The links between SALW and gender-based violence (GBV) were first acknowledged within the UNPoA process in the outcome document of RevCon3 in 2018, where states recognised that eradicating the illicit trade in SALW is a key part of combating GBV. GBV refers to violence that is directed at a person because of their sex or based on socially-ascribed gender differences, meaning sexual orientation, gender identity, or non-conforming behaviour or presentation of sex and gender.<sup>14</sup> GBV can take different forms. It can refer to sexual violence such as harassment, rape, sexual exploitation or sexual slavery. It can also involve other forms of physical violence such as beating and assault, or emotional and psychological violence such as humiliation. GBV can also refer to socioeconomic violence including unequal access to services, opportunities, and rights.<sup>15</sup> Small arms can be used to facilitate GBV, and to commit intimate partner violence or domestic violence. For example, studies have shown a direct correlation between femicide rates and the use of firearms.<sup>16</sup>

The first international instrument to acknowledge the link between SALW and GBV was the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), adopted in 2013. The introduction of GBV into the ATT was not uncontroversial. Due to varying cultural and societal perspectives, the term “gender” is not always easily accepted and during the ATT negotiation some delegations argued for including violence against women rather than GBV.<sup>17</sup> The negotiations on gender-related language in the UNPoA process have also shown states different positions regarding their understanding of the concept of gender. However, compared to violence against women GBV is a broader concept that includes violence against women and girls, men and boys and violence against people of diverse genders.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) have advocated for a broader understanding of gender that looks beyond the socially prescribed men-women binary to include people of diverse gender identities that often are disproportionately targeted by gun violence and often ignored in national policies. A working paper presented by Mexico, Spain, and the Small Arms Survey to the Ninth Conference of States Parties to the Arms Trade Treaty shows that in countries where data collection is possible, armed violence against people on the basis of their actual or perceived SOGIESC remains a serious issue. Trans people, especially trans women, seem to be disproportionately targeted.<sup>18</sup>

Paragraph 25 of the RevCon4 outcome document also specifically refers to conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), which compared to previous outcome documents is a new addition. The proliferation of SALW in conflict can arguably be linked to CRSV in two ways: one, SALW are used by perpetrators to commit rape, to threaten individuals into sexual acts against their will, and to injure and kill survivors and victims of sexual violence, and/or two, proliferation of SALW also fuels armed conflict, which in turn contributes to the conditions that may facilitate CRSV. While available data on CRSV incidents is limited, a study of six countries where data was available, showed that 70–90 per cent of CRSV incidents involved weapons such as firearms. This indicates the need to address proliferation of SALW as part of efforts to prevent CRSV and GBV more generally.<sup>19</sup>

## What does the outcome document say about gendered roles and the engagement of men and boys?

### **In the following paragraph, the outcome document states:**

125. To recognize that eradicating the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons, including by addressing gender roles, norms and expectations for women and men to acquire illicit arms, contributes to preventing and combating gender-based and sexual violence and conflict-related sexual violence.

133. 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.

**A**s noted earlier, men represent the majority of perpetrators of weapon-related incidents and the majority of victims of gun violence, while women and people of diverse genders are killed at rates disproportionate to their participation in armed conflict or armed violence. Likely over 90 per cent of intentional armed homicides are committed by men,<sup>20</sup> while global data from 2021 shows that 91 per cent of victims of firearms deaths were men and boys.<sup>21</sup> This has often been explained by cultural and social norms and expectations that associate men with the use of weapons and violence. SALW violence often relates to how gender roles are constructed, performed, and expressed in relationships within and between different groups. That men often are expected to protect, while women are expected to be protected, are socially constructed norms that often impact interest in acquiring weapons. These norms are often illustrated in the

marketing of weapons, often targeting men, and reproduced in popular culture and so called “militainment”.<sup>22</sup> Common norms, such as that men are expected to be economically successful providers, can also impact the will to acquire weapons. For example, in cases where there are high barriers to income and status, young men can be more likely to use small arms as a tool for making a living and elevate their status in criminal gangs, as a successful cattle raider or as part of an armed group. Women can reinforce this social status by supporting ideas that armed men are sought-after sexual partners.<sup>23</sup>

Despite this, not all men relate to guns in similar ways.<sup>24</sup> In order to better inform policies and designing programmes related to the disarmament and arms control of SALW we need to understand the underlying drivers of why cisgendered, heteronormative men are overrepresented when it comes to gun-related violence. Exploring the construct of masculinities and other gender norms in relation to SALW, including casting women as victims, is therefore vital for implementing the UNPoA.

In recent years, there have been increased efforts to address the role of men and norms about masculinities as part of gender analysis within the UN system, not least in relation to SALW. In *Securing Our Common Future: An Agenda for Disarmament*, the UN Secretary-General highlights how “ownership and use of arms is closely linked to specific expressions of masculinity related to control, power, domination and strength.”<sup>25</sup> In *A New Agenda for Peace*, the UN Secretary-General emphasises how gendered power dynamics also impact and severely constrain men and boys. The report stresses the need for transformative progress on the WPS agenda and argues it requires consideration of the role of men, “who have traditionally dominated decision-making, and addressing intergenerational power dynamics”.<sup>26</sup> The Modular Small-arms-control Implementation Compendium (MOSAIC), which is a coordinated effort within the UN system that provides guidance and operational advice regarding small arms control measures, recognises that small arms can represent potent symbols of power for marginalised young men. The module is used by over half of member states and it addresses how marginalised young men often perceive small arms violence as a way to attain positions of social and economic status to which they feel entitled but that are otherwise closed off to them.<sup>27</sup> Building on recent initiatives, WILPF, GENSAC, and Pathfinders published *Men and Masculinities in Gender Responsive Small Arms Control* in 2022, to shed light on and provide practical analysis of contemporary issues related to men and masculinities in gender responsive small arms control.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the increased focus on the overrepresentation of men in gun violence and the need to understand and address these relationships, the UNPoA does not explicitly address the link between masculinities and SALW. Paragraph 144 in the earlier draft outcome document of RevCon4 called on states to “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.”<sup>29</sup> However, this language was removed in the final outcome document adopted by member states.

The resistance to addressing masculinities in international policies is nothing new. The understanding of gender as equal to women or “women’s issues” rather than relationships between different genders is something feminist activists and scholars have problematised for decades. This interpretation of gender has contributed to men being a silent or non-existent

category in policies, similar to non-disabled and heterosexual people who are treated as “normative” or “standard”.<sup>30</sup> Against this backdrop, it is significant that RevCon4 for the first time adopted an UNPoA outcome document referencing the engagement and participation of men and boys in mainstreaming a gender perspective, as referenced in paragraph 133. It is similarly significant that paragraph 125, which recognises that eradicating the illicit trade in SALW will require addressing gender norms including masculinities.

## What does the outcome document say about health?

### **In the following paragraph, the outcome document states:**

134. To fully assess the intricate linkages between armed violence associated with illicit small arms and light weapons and the health of women, men, girls and boys, which constitutes both a public health and a mental health concern. Addressing the mental health impacts of such violence requires strategies and programmes aimed at prevention while also providing comprehensive social safety nets for victims and survivors.

In paragraph 134, the outcome document specifically addresses the linkages between armed violence associated with illicit SALW and the health of women, men, girls, and boys. This paragraph highlights both public health and mental health concerns in relation to SALW. The experiences of armed violence-related injuries and trauma often have gender differentiated impacts. While men often are socialised in ways that prevent them from seeking care, in many cases due to stigma of victimhood, women are often expected to care for family members and to be responsible for unpaid labour,<sup>31</sup> which can impact their possibility to participate in the public sphere.

Besides a reference to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the outcome document of RevCon3, noting that the illicit trade in SALW has implications for the realisation of several SDGs, including health, paragraph 134 is new. But approaching SALW from a public health perspective is far from new. The report *Small Arms and Global Health*, prepared by the World Health Organisation (WHO) for the first UNPoA meeting in 2001, aimed to broaden the definition of the problem of SALW beyond “legal, industrial, strategic or tactical considerations” by demonstrating its public health implications. The report also aimed to introduce existing research on health and SALW as well as the public health community’s focus on scientific methodologies and prevention. The report addresses how the non-fatal consequences of small arms, spinal cord injuries, traumatic brain injuries, and amputations are usually among the most disabling, often



leading to permanent disability in many individuals. The report also addresses gendered impacts and different aspects of mental health, such as links between the development of specific mental health consequences to small arms injuries.<sup>32</sup> The initial UNPoA meeting in 2001 was followed by an international medical conference on Small Arms, Gun Violence, and Injury, which took place in Helsinki, Finland. The meeting gathered hundreds of medical professionals, researchers, and public health experts to address the humanitarian dimensions of small arms violence, an aspect that had been marginalised in UN conferences.<sup>33</sup>

Public health and civil society actors, who are active in areas heavily impacted by armed violence, have seen for decades that SALW is a public health issue requiring preventative and responsive actions. Many of these actors have advocated for this perspective to be acknowledged within the UNPoA. Despite the persistent efforts from civil society organisations advocating for an increased focus addressing root causes of armed violence and structural risk factors, which can drive the demand for guns, the UNPoA has remained focused on the supply side of arms making arms control into a technically dominated field.<sup>34</sup>

Recent initiatives have revitalised the important link between SALW and public health. In April 2023, the heads of government of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) addressed crime and violence as a public health issue, describing the epidemic of crime and violence in the Caribbean, fueled by illegal guns and organised criminal gangs, as a threat to democracy and the stability of societies.<sup>35</sup> During RevCon4 there was a side event exploring possible synergies between the public health approach to violence prevention focusing on the context of Caribbean.<sup>36</sup>

A working paper submitted by the Philippines to RevCon4, which suggested similar language to what ended up being paragraph 134, also addressed how crises like the COVID-19 pandemic can contribute to health issues, leading to individuals resorting to gun violence due to untreated health conditions. The working paper argues that poverty is a root cause of public and mental health issues, especially in societies experiencing high rates of suicides and mass shootings. It argues it is important to address how victims and survivors of gun violence can develop mental health issues, why support systems and mental health services are essential, and argues that perpetrators can have pre-existing mental health issues, which is why it is important to include mental health in strategies to prevent gun violence.<sup>37</sup>



*Photo © Chip Vincent / Unsplash*



# What does the outcome document say about gender-responsive policies?

## **In the following paragraphs, the outcome document states:**

24. We express concern that the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons impedes the achievement of gender equality, and we encourage States to mainstream a gender perspective in the design and implementation of gender-responsive policies and programming on small arms and light weapons control.

60. To take account of the differential impact of the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons on women, men, girls and boys, including, where feasible and safe to do so, by collecting data disaggregated by sex, age and disability, and utilizing analysis mechanisms to inform evidence-based gender-responsive policymaking and programming with a view to strengthening the full and effective implementation of the Programme of Action at all levels.

82. To take into account the differential impact of the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons on women, men, girls and boys, including, where feasible and safe to do so, by collecting data disaggregated by sex, age and disability, and utilizing analysis mechanisms to inform evidence-based gender-responsive policymaking and programming with a view to strengthening the full and effective implementation of the Programme of Action at all levels.

127. To ensure the coordination between national authorities responsible for the implementation of the Programme of Action and relevant ministries or other national authorities responsible for women's affairs, gender equality or youth, as well as civil society groups.

129. To incorporate good practices in mainstreaming a gender perspective into policies and programmes on small arms and light weapons, including in the areas of programme design, planning, implementation, reporting, monitoring and evaluation, taking into account, as appropriate, relevant guidances.

**T**he RevCon4 outcome document places significant emphasis on the need for gender-responsive policies in the control of SALW. The document specifically acknowledges the gendered impacts of SALW proliferation and the role of gender mainstreaming in promoting more effective and inclusive policies. Key references include paragraph 24, which calls for states to integrate gender perspectives into SALW control efforts, and paragraphs 60 and 82, which encourage the collection of disaggregated data by sex, age, and disability to inform evidence-based, gender-responsive policymaking and programming.

Compared to the BMS8 discussions, RevCon4 made several advancements in terms of gender responsiveness. The language in the RevCon4 outcome document goes beyond the more general calls for gender sensitivity found in earlier documents. This switch implies that rather than simply noting gender differences in policies, there would be efforts to “respond” to specific gendered needs. It emphasises evidence-based policymaking informed by sex-disaggregated data and more explicit interagency coordination, as seen in paragraph 127, which calls for cooperation between national SALW authorities and gender equality ministries or civil society groups. This is a notable shift, as it recognises the need for collaboration across government departments to ensure that gender-responsive policies are effectively implemented. RevCon4 also highlights the need to mainstream gender in all aspects of SALW control, from programme design and implementation to monitoring and evaluation, as reflected in paragraph 129.

Despite the importance of gender-responsive policies, it is necessary to consider the tendency of some states to engage in “box-ticking” exercises—meeting the formal requirements of gender mainstreaming without making substantive changes to their policies. Without sustained monitoring and engagement from civil society, particularly women’s groups, there is a risk that gender-responsive policies will remain superficial.

## What does the outcome document say about the engagement at a national level?

### **In the following paragraphs, the outcome document states:**

55. To ensure that national systems, strategies and voluntary action plans to address the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons consider the links between national points of contact for the review of the Programme of Action and respective national focal points and action plans on women and peace and security and youth, peace and security where they exist.

56. To encourage the development and implementation of voluntary national action plans or other national policies in support of the implementation of the Programme of Action by making better use of existing information to improve the review of progress and to coordinate the development and implementation of such plans or policies, as appropriate, in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, including those from civil society, the private sector and industry, with those relevant to target 16.4 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and to the relevant United Nations resolutions on women, disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control.

127. To ensure the coordination between national authorities responsible for the implementation of the Programme of Action and relevant ministries or other national authorities responsible for women's affairs, gender equality or youth, as well as civil society groups.

128. To enhance, as appropriate, coordination processes, including voluntary national action plans, relating to the implementation of the Programme of Action with processes relating to women and peace and security, women, disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control.

131. To encourage the coordinated implementation of voluntary national action plans on small arms and light weapons with national action plans established under United Nations resolutions on women and peace and security, and youth, peace and security, and relevant goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Since the UNPoA is a politically binding rather than a legally binding instrument, its successful implementation largely depends on the commitment and actions of sovereign states. The responsibility for developing, implementing, and sustaining efforts to combat the illicit trade in SALW rests with individual governments. As such, national mechanisms and interagency coordination are essential to ensuring comprehensive implementation. At the national level, governments are encouraged to utilise a range of instruments to support the implementation of the UNPoA. These include National Action Plans (NAPs), National Commissions on small arms, and other relevant strategies. These instruments are important tools in ensuring that SALW control measures are comprehensive and integrated across various sectors of national governments. For instance, paragraph 55 emphasises the importance of linking national points of contact on the UNPoA with national focal points and action plans on WPS and on YPS, where they exist. This cross-sectoral coordination ensures that small arms control is integrated with broader security and development agendas.<sup>38</sup>

Paragraph 127 stresses the need for interagency coordination among national authorities responsible for the UNPoA and relevant ministries dealing with gender equality, youth, and civil society groups. Moreover, paragraphs 128 and 131 encourage the alignment of voluntary NAPs on SALW with WPS, YPS, and other related agendas. By coordinating across multiple agendas, states can adopt a more holistic approach, integrating gender and youth perspectives into broader disarmament and arms control efforts.

While the RevCon4 outcome document rightly emphasises national-level engagement, it is important to acknowledge some challenges and limitations in this approach. While national governments hold the primary responsibility for implementing the UNPoA, many states lack the necessary resources, capacity, or political will to fully abide by their commitments. Without robust international support and capacity-building assistance, many states may struggle to implement the UNPoA effectively.

It is worth noting that engagement at the regional level can also support interlinkages with the WPS agenda and encourage states to take gender differential impacts into account. Although paragraphs 41, 65 and 72 of the outcome document that addresses regional and/or subregional cooperation do not specifically reference gender, they are relevant to advancing gender-responsive policies through legally binding regional instruments, such as the Inter-American Convention against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives, and Other Related Materials (CIFTA) or the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Convention, which often include references to the WPS agenda or climate change that may not gain traction at the international level. These regional frameworks present opportunities to maintain momentum and address gender concerns as part of broader small arms control, even as national governments and political landscapes shift.

Civil society, including women's groups, plays an indispensable role in holding governments accountable for their commitments under the UNPoA. Because the UNPoA lacks enforcement mechanisms for non-compliance, the involvement of CSOs is crucial to monitor progress, track implementation, and advocate for more robust national controls. Women's groups in particular emphasise the inclusion of human rights and gender perspectives in arms control initiatives. They ensure that arms control policies do not overlook the differential impacts of SALW on women, gender diverse people, and other marginalised groups. The inclusion of civil society also encourages broader stakeholder engagement in arms control processes, as highlighted in paragraph 56, which calls for collaboration with relevant stakeholders, including civil society and the private sector, in the development and implementation of national policies. Despite this, women's groups and CSOs frequently face barriers, including but not limited to constrained funding, restricted access to decision-making forums, and in some cases resistance by national actors to their involvement. Other obstacles for more diverse representation at the national level can be when policies focus on so-called hard security issues that might not fit with the objectives of women's groups and CSOs. "Technical jargon" often used in the field can also be a barrier for a more inclusive participation at the national level.



*Women in delegations lining up for a photo shoot on the International Day for Women in Diplomacy during RevCon4  
Photo © UNODA*

# Looking Ahead

In order to ensure the effective implementation of the UNPoA, states and civil society actors need to assess aspects of demand for SALW and root causes of armed violence and understand the gendered and socioeconomic factors that are drivers behind armed violence. As we look toward the future of small arms control, the upcoming UNPoA review cycle offers critical opportunities to advance gender-responsive policies and inclusivity within the framework of the UNPoA. The Fifth Review Conference of the UNPoA (RevCon5) is scheduled for 2030, coinciding with the deadline for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which further underscores the importance of aligning arms control with global efforts to achieve sustainable peace, gender equality, and security. Before then, two Biennial Meeting of States will take place in 2026 and 2028. These meetings will constitute opportunities to secure and strengthen the gender-related language in the RevCon4 outcome document, as well as to ensure that states implement their commitments under the UNPoA. One of the most effective ways to track this progress is through national reports, which allow for transparency and accountability on the part of states.<sup>39</sup> Civil society can advocate for increased national reporting and ensure that states maintain their commitments to gender and inclusivity.

It is essential to recognise that the progress made at RevCon4 in terms of gender and inclusivity was not without resistance.<sup>40</sup> Twenty-three paragraphs include language related to gender. While this is a step forward, there was notable pushback on gender-related language, which mirrors a wider trend of resistance to gender issues across various UN fora. The inclusion of this language is a positive outcome, but it should not be taken for granted. Gender equality and diversity remains a contentious issue in many multilateral settings, and the progress made thus far is fragile. As such, simply holding the ground on these issues is not enough—we must continue to push for further gains.

This is especially important because there will likely be a continued resistance to gender-responsive language and policies, and there will be pressure to weaken the commitments made. Advocacy should therefore aim not only at maintaining the gains made at RevCon4 but also at expanding the gender-related provisions in future meetings. The upcoming Open-Ended Technical Expert Group (OETEG) on small arms, the mandate of which is described in the RevCon4 outcome document but does not mention the need to apply a gender perspective in its work, offers another opportunity to integrate gender perspectives into technical and policy discussions, ensuring that gender is a core consideration in all aspects of small arms control. National-level efforts, such as engaging with national commissions on small arms and influencing national reporting, will be key tools in ensuring that gender and inclusivity remain central to SALW control policies.



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The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), the oldest women's peace organisation in the world. It is a global feminist movement for peace, disarmament, economic and social justice, and environmental protection.

Reaching Critical Will, WILPF's disarmament programme, works for disarmament and for an end to war, militarism, and violence. It also investigates and exposes patriarchal and gendered aspects of weapons and war. RCW monitors and analyses international processes and works in coalitions with other civil society groups to achieve change, provide timely and accurate reporting on all relevant conferences and initiatives, and maintain a comprehensive online archive of all statements, resolutions, and other primary documents on disarmament.

The Gender Equality Network for Small Arms Control (GENSAC) is a membership network that aims to make small arms control policy and practice more gender responsive. The Network works to amplify international, regional, national, and local best practices of those who have been doing "small arms control behind the curtain," including representatives from civil society organizations, women's groups, conflict prevention, and development communities. It further aims to foster cross-regional learning through focused sharing of knowledge and experience among regionally diverse groups of women's rights advocates and technical experts on gender and/or small arms control. Learn more: [www.gensac.network](http://www.gensac.network)



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