

Women and Gun Ownership

Policy and research on the role of firearms in women's lives usually stress women as victims of gun violence. Around the world, firearms are used in roughly 40 per cent of the estimated 66,000 annual homicides with female victims. Guns are even more commonly used to injure, intimidate, and coerce women (Alvazzi del Frate, 2011, pp. 117, 131–32).

Although women own and use guns, or live in households where firearms are present, firearms policy and research tend to focus on the role of and effects on men, who are the majority of firearm owners worldwide (Alvazzi del Frate and McDonald, 2014, p. 2).

While relevant data is scarce, it reveals a substantial gap between male and female civilian firearm owners and users. As shown in this Research Note, women account for a smaller proportion of gun owners than men, and they are not as aware of or not as willing to acknowledge the presence of firearms in homes and communities.

Bridging this gender gap will help shed light on perceptions of and attitudes towards firearms, which could help to inform the agenda for women, peace, and security as well as the development of comprehensive and efficient safety policies.¹ By showing what can be said with relative certainty, this Research Note establishes a baseline for systematic analysis and careful policy-making.

Women as gun owners

There is no single source of sex-disaggregated data on civilian gun owners. In states where gun licensing is mandatory and widely accepted, licensing data is often the most reliable available indicator of civilian firearm ownership, even though it misses unlicensed owners (Karp, 2011, pp. 1–2).

In some countries, data on licences, which entitle individuals to legally own guns, can be divided by sex, revealing the male-to-female ratio of gun owners. The examples below show that men comprise the overwhelming majority of licensed gun owners. In the nine countries for which disaggregated gun licensing data is available, men account for an average of 96 per cent of licence holders, while women represent the remaining 4 per cent (see Table 1).

These figures do not necessarily disclose the total number or proportion of guns women own in these countries, partly because licences often permit owners to have several registered guns, and partly because some nominal gun owners do not actually own any firearms. Moreover, neither licences nor registrations reveal any details about illegally owned weapons, which can be very common. In some cases, women may take legal responsibility, but not practical ownership, notably as 'proxy' or 'straw' purchasers for men who are trying to evade legal restrictions on their gun ownership (Kraft, 2013).

Table 1 Proportion of licensed civilian gun owners in selected countries*

| Country | Total licensees | Male licensees | Female licensees | Male % | Female % |
|----------------|-----------------|----------------|------------------|-----------|----------|
| Andorra | 2,554 | 2,497 | 57 | 98 | 2 |
| Austria | 237,729 | 218,355 | 19,374 | 92 | 8 |
| Czech Republic | 308,068 | 283,219 | 24,849 | 92 | 8 |
| Estonia | 29,000 | 28,000 | 1,000 | 97 | 3 |
| Lithuania | 58,754 | 57,598 | 1,156 | 98 | 2 |
| Malta | 28,492 | 27,443 | 1,049 | 96 | 4 |
| Montenegro | 76,478 | 75,224 | 1,254 | 98 | 2 |
| Serbia | 874,368 | 827,718 | 46,650 | 95 | 5 |
| Spain | 1,846,823 | 1,784,738 | 62,085 | 97 | 3 |
| Average | | | | 96 | 4 |

Note: *Countries selected based on availability of relevant data. The table lists the number of licences on record in 2011 or 2012.

Sources: Small Arms Survey (2014a)

Trends in female gun purchasing can change, for example as a result of heavily publicized crimes. In New Delhi, for instance, female gun licence applications increased more than 20-fold in the weeks following a highly publicized rape and murder in December 2012, which led to unprecedented protests and fear among women in India (Ghosh, 2013; IAVA, 2014). In the United States, there have been dramatic increases in gun ownership among women, as well as among men, for more than a decade (Miniter, 2013). While such changes in absolute numbers suggest that more women are becoming gun owners, they do not indicate what proportion of gun owners are female, nor the proportion of guns they control.

Gender in household surveys

Large-sample public surveys are the most comprehensive technique for establishing the scale and breakdowns of civilian gun ownership. Surveys are especially important in countries

where gun licensing and registration are not required or easily evaded. Surveys also introduce statistical problems, such as issues of data comparability, formulation and translation of questions, sample construction, canvassing techniques, and interpretation of findings. Consequently, survey findings must be used cautiously. They are most reliable revealing *trends* in gun ownership and perceptions of firearm issues.

The trends that emerge from surveys often differ from those indicated by licensing data. Survey results tend to confirm a gender gap in gun ownership, but less so than licensing data. They typically show that women account for a smaller proportion of gun owners than men, and that women are not as aware or not as willing to acknowledge the presence of firearms in their household or community.

In the United States, two major surveys show different levels for total public gun ownership, and also for male-to-female ownership ratios; nevertheless, they are consistent on the existence of a significant gender

gap. Recent Gallup surveys find that in the United States 45 per cent of men and 15 per cent of women say they personally own a gun (Jones, 2013).² A Pew Research Center survey identified a comparable three-to-one gender gap in gun ownership, with three times more men than women (37 vs. 12 per cent) acknowledging that they personally own a gun. In response to the Pew survey, 45 per cent of men said they lived in a gun-owning household, compared with 30 per cent of women, suggesting that women are less likely to be aware of guns in the household (Pew Research Center, 2013).³

According to a 2013 Eurobarometer Survey, firearms ownership in Europe is much less common, with 5 per cent of European respondents acknowledging they own a firearm, while another 5 per cent say they used to own one (EC, 2013, p. 8). Among European gun owners, a gender disparity of eight-to-one prevails between male and female owners. More women than men report that they do not own a gun, and an even greater proportion of women report never having had one (see Table 2).



A shopper listens as a salesperson explains the features of a pistol in a gun shop in Orange County, California. December 2012. © Jebb Harris/AP Photo

Table 2 Firearm ownership in the 28 European Union member states, by sex, 2013

| | You currently own a firearm | You used to own a firearm | You never owned a firearm |
|----------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Men | 8% | 9% | 82% |
| Women | 1% | 2% | 97% |
| Average | 5% | 5% | 90% |

Note: One per cent of men refused to answer or said they 'don't know'.

Source: EC (2013, p. 8)

Perceptions of firearms in the home and community

Patterns of firearms ownership and use tend to be rooted in strong cultural and social values (Alvazzi del Frate and McDonald, 2014, p. 2). These values often diverge dramatically between the sexes. Not only are women and men affected differently by firearms, but they also tend to perceive them differently, as shown in surveys of household ownership of firearms.

Polling commissioned by the Small Arms Survey reveals the strength of such differences. These surveys were administered separately in eight countries and, while their findings are not entirely comparable, they suggest general trends and differences. In all surveyed countries, fewer women acknowledged the presence of firearms in the household, sometimes reporting gun ownership at about half the rate of male respondents. One out of three women against two out of five men reported household firearm ownership (Pavesi, 2014).

Why the disparity in acknowledging household possession? Are women less likely to know about the presence of guns, which tend to be owned by men? Or do women feel less comfortable reporting gun ownership than men? Surveys can only do so much to provide the answers. While women may be more likely to be at home at the time of the interview, surveying women also may be more challenging due to cultural factors.

In addition, these survey problems appear to affect responses between and even within countries, particularly in conflict-affected regions. Rather than measuring actual gun ownership, surveys may provide indicators for socio-cultural values surrounding gun ownership linked to gender.

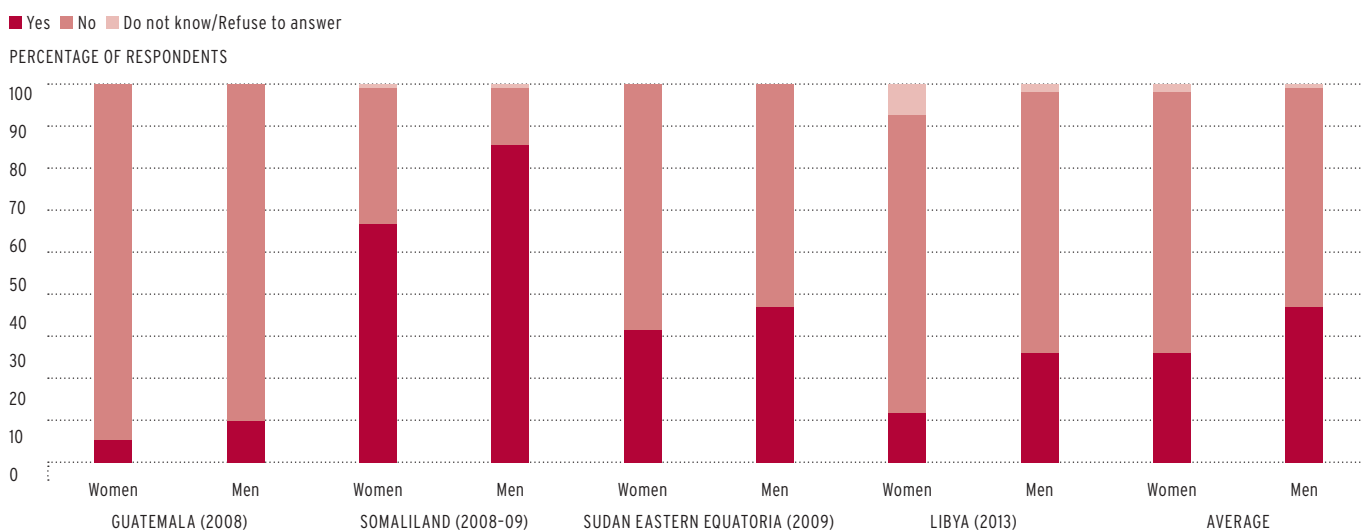
Furthermore, questions on firearm ownership may reveal more about how likely people are to acknowledge the presence of weapons rather than actual gun ownership. In a 1993 survey of gun ownership in the United States, approximately 50 per cent of married men said there were firearms in the

house, as opposed to only 37 per cent of married women. Kleck argues that survey respondents tend to report on their own guns but may feel 'it is not their place to "inform on" other household members' (Kleck, 1997, p. 67). Given that married women own fewer guns than married men, this explanation may shed light on the discrepancy between responses offered by men and women regarding household gun ownership.

Comparisons of country findings require caution, especially in view of different contexts (such as trends in violence, or discrepancies between rural and urban gun ownership) and variations in the wording and presentation of questions. Even when questions are very similar, issues related to translation or cultural factors may affect a respondent's interpretation and reply. These limitations make it difficult to move beyond broad generalizations.

Nevertheless, such generalizations are useful in identifying patterns. Women's gun ownership and awareness is not independent of their environment; their awareness of firearms reflects broader trends in each society, including the availability of firearms and gun control policies. In conflict or immediate post-conflict settings, such as in Eastern Equatoria in Sudan, Libya, and Somaliland, many more women acknowledged the presence of firearms than did women in the abovementioned European and US surveys (Small Arms Survey, 2014b; see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Responses to the question, 'Do you or anyone in your household own any firearms?', by sex of respondent



Source: Small Arms Survey (2014b)

Survey data in fragile contexts suggests that gender differences are not only limited to actual ownership, but also affect perceptions and attitudes towards firearms. Female respondents appear more inclined to describe firearms as a threat to safety and as difficult to acquire, dispositions that may be part of a reluctance to own guns or to admit ownership.

Explaining the gender gap: advancing the research agenda

Licensing data and surveys are gradually bridging the knowledge gap regarding the connections between women and gun ownership. Country research shows significant differences between women and men when it comes to actual ownership, the reporting of household ownership, and attitudes towards firearm possession.

Understanding these differences is a first step in enhancing laws and policies aimed at improving the safety of women and of populations in general. As shown in this Research Note, more gender-related research is needed to inform effective policies to reduce gun violence. ■

Notes

- 1 Compare, for example, UNSC (2010).
- 2 Based on annual Gallup polls asking more than 6,000 adults in the United States about gun ownership from 2007 to 2012 (Jones, 2013).
- 3 Based on a Pew Research Center survey conducted in February 2013 among 1,504 adults (Pew Research Center, 2013).

References

- Alvazzi del Frate, Anna. 2011. 'When the Victim Is a Woman.' In Geneva Declaration Secretariat. *Global Burden of Armed Violence: Lethal Encounters*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 113–44.
- and Glenn McDonald. 2014. 'Introduction.' In Small Arms Survey. *Small Arms Survey 2014: Women and Guns*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–7.
- EC (European Commission). 2013. 'Firearms in the European Union.' Flash Eurobarometer 383. Brussels: EC. <http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_383_en.pdf>

- Ghosh, Dwaipayan. 2013. 'Delhi Women Gun for Licences: Rape Triggers Big Rush to Acquire Arms.' *Times of India*. 1 January.
- IAVA (India Armed Violence Assessment). 2014. *Violence against Women in India*. Issue Brief No. 5. Geneva and New Delhi: IAVA.
- Jones, Jeffrey. 2013. 'Men, Married, Southerners Most Likely to Be Gun Owners.' Gallup Politics. 1 February. <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/160223/men-married-southerners-likely-gun-owners.aspx>>
- Karp, Aaron. 2011. *Estimating Civilian-owned Firearms*. Research Note No. 9. Geneva: Small Arms Survey.
- Kleck, Gary. 1997. *Targeting Guns: Firearms and Their Control*. New York: Walter De Gruyter, Inc.
- Kraft, Dina. 2013. 'Women: The Newest Weapon in the Fight against Gun Violence.' *Atlantic*. 30 October.
- Minter, Frank. 2013. 'Is the Obama Administration the Cause of Gun Ammunition Shortages?' *Forbes*. 20 October.
- Pavesi, Irene. 2014. *Gender Dimensions of Attitudes and Perceptions towards Firearms: Analysis of Household Survey Data*. Unpublished background paper. Geneva: Small Arms Survey.
- Pew Research Center. 2013. 'Why Own a Gun? Protection Is Now Top Reason.' <<http://www.people-press.org/2013/03/12/about-the-survey-60/>>
- Small Arms Survey. 2014a. 'Holdings Database: Civilians.' Geneva: Small Arms Survey.
- . 2014b. 'Victimization, Security Providers, and Firearms: Attitudes and Perceptions.' Consolidated Database. Geneva: Small Arms Survey.
- UNSC (United Nations Security Council). 2010. *Women, Peace and Security: Report of the Secretary-General*. S/2010/173 of 6 April. New York: United Nations.

For more information about civilian possession of small arms, please visit: <<http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/?civilians.html>>

About the Small Arms Survey

The Small Arms Survey serves as the principal international source of public information on all aspects of small arms and armed violence, and as a resource centre for governments, policy-makers, researchers, and activists. In addition to Research Notes, the Survey distributes its findings through Issue Briefs, Working Papers, Occasional Papers, Special Reports, Handbooks, a Book Series, and its annual flagship publication, the *Small Arms Survey*.

The project has an international staff with expertise in security studies, political science, international public policy, law, economics, development studies, conflict resolution, sociology, and criminology, and works closely with a worldwide network of researchers and partners.

The Small Arms Survey is a project of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva. For more information, please visit:

www.smallarmssurvey.org

Publication date: September 2014

Credits

Authors: Hannah Dönges and Aaron Karp

Copy-editing: Tania Inowlocki

Design and layout: Rick Jones
(rick@studioexile.com)

Contact details

Small Arms Survey
47 Avenue Blanc
1202 Geneva
Switzerland

t +41 22 908 5777

f +41 22 732 2738

e info@smallarmssurvey.org

