

ATT MONITOR 5.11

A step back? “Gender-based violence” vs “violence against women and children”

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Yesterday, in discussions on the preamble text, a few delegations (the Holy See and CARICOM) suggested that the inclusion of previously supported language on “gender-based violence” should be deleted and replaced by different language on “violence against women and children” or “vulnerability of women and children”. Other delegations (Australia and Liechtenstein) disagreed with the deletion of the wording on gender-based violence and proposed as a compromise to keep both.

What is the difference between these various formulations? What implications do they have?

There is a difference in the terms and the terminology matters. Narrowing the language in the preamble to “violence against women and children” and “vulnerability of women and children” represents a step backward. It is not inclusive of the forms of violence that must be covered. Furthermore, it is not the language supported by over 28 member states in their plenary statements.

Firstly, since “violence against women” includes any act of gender-based violence (GBV), for purposes of the Treaty preamble, goals and objectives, and criteria, the broader language of GBV should be used. The arms trade affects everyone—men, women, boys and girls—in different ways. There is a gender dimension to the trade whereby women and girls are disproportionately affected by armed gender-based violence. The term “gender-based violence” acknowledges the gender dimensions of armed violence, from the perspective of both perpetrators and victims.

Secondly, references to “women and children,” put together as though a homogenous group, are unhelpful as they imply that women, like children, are powerless victims, rather than adults with agency and therefore a key resource in combating gun violence. Children are minors and cannot vote, and as such, require specific and different attention and protection than women. It is vital to make the distinction between women and children to ensure both that each group gains the specific attention it requires and is enabled to make the contributions of which it is capable.

Thirdly, instead of only emphasizing the vulnerability of women in the preamble of the ATT, it would be more effective to also emphasize women’s key role in conflict prevention and resolution, arms control and peacebuilding.

Agreed language could be drawn from UN General Assembly Resolution 66/130, 65/283 and 65/69 and UN Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security (SCR 1325 (2000), 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009), 1889 (2009) and 1960 (2010)) such as: “Reaffirming the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peacebuilding” and “Recognizing the importance of the full and effective participation of women at all levels, at all stages and in all aspects of the peaceful settlement of disputes, conflict prevention and resolution” (A/RES/65/283 preamble text). Furthermore, UNGA resolution 65/69 on “Women, disarmament, non-proliferation, and arms control” recognizes “the valuable contribution of women to practical disarmament measures carried out at the local, national, regional and subregional levels in the prevention and reduction of armed violence and armed conflict, and in promoting disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control.” Any or all of these texts could be referenced or drawn upon in the ATT preamble.

Finally, if the preamble of the ATT is to be consistent and comprehensive, it should include language recognizing the gender dimensions of the arms trade. For example, “recognizing the gendered dimensions and impacts of the arms trade, particularly gender-based violence, including rape and other forms of sexual violence, and further emphasizing and reaffirming the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peacebuilding”. Member states must not take steps backward given the gravity and urgency of preventing all forms of gender-based violence in the context of the international arms trade. •