



GENDER AND EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS

Tuesday 26th November 2019

Summary report from a joint AOAV-Chatham House round-table

1. CONTEXT AND WHY IT MATTERS

From Afghanistan to Yemen, in the past few years the devastating impacts of explosive violence have been all too apparent.

Between 2011 and 2018, Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) recorded 309,044 casualties from explosive weapons, including 231,909 civilians.¹ There is a growing public awareness of the damage caused by these weapons.

At the Vienna Conference on the Protection of Civilians in Urban Warfare in October 2019, around 80 countries voiced support for a political declaration on explosive weapons. However, discussions around the harms of explosive weapons often fail to take the gendered aspects of this harm into account.

Through analysing the gendered impacts of different weapons types, including the long-term effects such as displacement, and the gender analysis of both state and non-state perpetrators, this round-table aimed to build a more detailed understanding of explosive weapons and the manner in which men and women are affected differently by their use.

2. EVENT STRUCTURE AND REPRESENTATION

Funded by the Australian government, the event aimed to investigate the gendered impacts of explosive weapons use. This was the first-roundtable to take place as part of this project and it took place at Chatham House, London, on 26th November 2019. It involved over 40 people invited from government, international diplomatic staff, academia, civil society, journalism, UK military, and the medical profession. Discussions were organised around five main sessions, each led by a moderator and featured two or three presenters speaking for 15 minutes. Debate and discussion took place under the Chatham House Rule.

The first session examined the role of state perpetrators of explosive violence, looking at states' commitments under international law to consider a gender perspective on explosive weapons use and what are the gendered impacts of states' use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles.

Session 2 assessed how non-state actors use explosive violence, how women may participate in explosive violence in different jihadist groups, including as suicide bombers.

Session 3 scrutinised civilian harm from explosive weapons through a gendered lens, including the impact of different weapons types, experiences of humanitarian surgery in conflict, and gendering data collection.

¹ For more, see: <https://aoav.org.uk/explosiveviolence/>.

Session 4 provided an opportunity to turn our focus to military harm from explosive weapons, how the proliferation of IEDs impacted soldiers sense of heroism and why genital trauma is not properly discussed.

Finally, session 5 looked at the reverberating gendered effects of explosive violence, focusing on migration, healthcare, and mental health.

3. INTRODUCTORY SESSION: EXAMINING THE DATA

Participants agreed early on that accurate data, disaggregated by gender, on explosive weapons casualties was critical. It was acknowledged that while such data is sparse at the moment, it was vital to examine the data that does exist to understand the full extent of civilian harm, encourage further data collection and analysis, and look towards building a comprehensive framework on how to record gender in casualty counts. There was some debate as to whether 'gender' or 'sex' was the more appropriate term with regards to casualty recording. Given that those killed by explosive weapons are unable to self-identify their gender, some felt that sex may be more accurate. However, an analysis of explosive weapons casualties also encompasses social constructions such as the make-up of the public space, behavioural habits, and the domestic sphere, so others felt gender was the correct term.

AOAV's Explosive Violence Monitor is one of the few datasets currently which does record both explosive weapons use and gender. This monitoring project, launched in October 2010, uses English-language media reports to capture information on who has been killed and injured by incidents of explosive violence. Participants were quick to acknowledge the disproportionate impact that explosive weapons use in populated areas (EWIPA) has on civilians. AOA V found that 75% of explosive violence casualties over the past eight years have been civilians.

While the current data on gendered casualties from explosive weapons is significantly limited, the datasets which do exist record between 10 and 22% of adult civilian casualties as women, when gender was known. This proportion was consistent across six of the major datasets. However, this data also revealed that as explosive weapons use in conflict increased, the proportion of female casualties decreased. It was suggested that this may be a result of a loss of granularity in casualty recording as the conflict intensified.

Speakers noted that there was a significant disparity in this figure when it was disaggregated by weapons type and perpetrator. Manufactured weapons caused a higher proportion of female casualties than improvised explosive devices (IEDs). An analysis by AOA V found that in Syria, airstrikes have caused the highest proportion of female civilian deaths (24%). Whereas IEDs have caused the highest proportion of male civilian deaths (90%).²

Actors who relied largely on either manufactured weapons or IEDs thus also produced different proportions of female civilian casualties. For example, AOA V found that in Syria, Russia's use of explosive weapons has resulted in the highest proportion of female civilian casualties (32%). However, ISIS' use of explosive weapons resulted in the highest proportion of male civilian casualties (86%).³ Participants observed that this disparity may be due to the makeup of public spaces in countries witnessing high levels of explosive violence. Airstrikes may be more likely to target domestic spaces, which have a higher proportion of female civilians, than IEDs, which are more likely to be used in a public space such as a marketplace. Participants agreed that more research was needed to understand these patterns.

Speakers also looked at global trends of female casualties from explosive violence. A comparison of AOA V's Explosive Violence Monitor and the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED)

² For an extended analysis, see: <https://aoav.org.uk/2019/gendered-impacts-overview-of-existing-datasets/>.

³ *Ibid.*

was used to explore these trends. Speakers noted that women are facing increasing levels of targeted political violence globally. Explosive violence attacks are distinct in several ways. ACLED's data shows that 70% of political violence against women is non-sexual in nature. However, this type of violence is not widely understood or researched by academics.

The geographical patterns of perpetrators of explosive violence varies a lot between state and non-state perpetrators. State perpetrators tend to be much more clustered in particular areas, while non-state perpetrators were much more geographically disparate. Speakers stated that unknown actors were also much more likely to be scattered geographically.

There is little correlation between sexual violence and explosive violence attacks against women. ACLED's data indicates that while sexual violence is much more prevalent in Africa, explosive violence tends to occur in the Middle East and parts of Asia. Speakers noted that the perpetrators of these types of violence against women also were not the same. This suggests that the logic and motivations behind explosive violence are distinct.

Participants and speakers acknowledged the lack of data on gender and explosive weapons and the issues with recording it. Many datasets do not disaggregate by gender or by weapon type. Certain datasets do disaggregate by both gender and weapon type but do not allow users to cross-compare. There was a call for greater discussion about how best to include gender in these counts.

Questions Raised

- How can NGOs and casualty recorders collect better data on gender and explosive weapons?
- Is it possible to standardise methodologies in collecting gender to encourage best practice?
- What is the best way for civil society to work with government and militaries to encourage them to include gender in their civilian counting?
- Why do manufactured weapons produce a higher proportion of female civilian casualties than IEDs?
- How are direct casualties linked to the gendered reverberating effects?

4. STATE PERPETRATORS OF EXPLOSIVE VIOLENCE

In this session, issues around states' commitments under international law to consider a gender perspective on explosive weapons use and the rise of new technologies were raised.

Speakers began by reiterating concerns that discussions around explosive weapons and state obligations have often been gender blind. One speaker said this could partly be traced back to the United Nations' Security Council's decision not to include references to the arms trade or militarisation when it passed Resolution 1325, the first Resolution on Women, Peace, and Security. It was acknowledged that feminist advocacy and civil society actors did discuss the gendered impacts of the arms trade. However, this language was deemed to be too politically inflammatory and was thus not included in UNSC Women, Peace and Security resolutions. This may be partially why or at least indicative of the fact that gender has not been on the agenda when it comes to regulating explosive weapons use.

The UNSC's decision to adopt Women, Peace and Security resolutions inherently depended on the support of state actors. UNSC resolutions are unlikely to include language which criticises states' own weapons use or militarisation. Thus, R1325 also does not mention ending war either, even though it is in the remit of the Security Council. Participants acknowledged that collecting accurate data was crucial for holding states accountable and encouraging greater scrutiny of the gendered impacts of arms.

The rise of new technologies, especially UAVs or drones, has had a notable gendered impact on state perpetrators of explosive violence. One speaker provided a theoretical framework for how militarised masculinities had been changed by drone technology. Historically, soldiers' conceptions of heroism depended on putting their lives on the line. Yet the increased use of drones and remote warfare has complicated this idea. Now, members of the air force, disparagingly referred to by some as the 'chair force', operate drones from thousands of miles away, without any risk of being shot. In response to this change, some have suggested that militarised masculinities may become linked to technical proficiency instead. Rather than producing a crisis of heroism and masculinity, there may instead be a transferral of notions of 'masculine virtue' in these technical skills.

Speakers also noted that the distancing of military action by drones can have significant impacts on soldiers' own sense of self. Drone operators typically live near their airbase, unlike other soldiers, and so are constantly oscillating between participating in a conflict and ordinary home life. This can provide soldiers with a stark reminder of the severity of their actions, possibly having long-term mental health impacts. While operators do receive interpretations of international humanitarian law that give legitimacy to their actions, often many still experience moral unease.

Questions Raised

- Could discussions around the Arms Trade Treaty and gender also be applicable to explosive violence and gender?
- How might other technological developments in the military also impact gender?
- In what way does drone operators' training impact this?
- How are the impacts of drones, both in terms of casualties and beyond, gendered?
- Are there more effective ways for feminist civil society actors to get arms and gender on the agenda?

5. NON-STATE PERPETRATORS OF EXPLOSIVE VIOLENCE

Certain types of explosive violence, such as IEDs and suicide attacks, are primarily perpetrated by non-state actors. Focusing on Salafist-Jihadist groups, especially ISIS, Boko Haram, and Al-Shabaab, this session explored the gendered dynamics of these groups and their use of explosive weapons.

The question of whether women are permitted to be combatants in ISIS has been prevalent since the group's rise. Speakers noted, however, women's participation in explosive violence and combat has not materialised in the way that many commentators anticipated. ISIS' use of suicide operations peaked around the Battle of Mosul in 2016-2017. It was around this time that they also lifted the moratorium on women participating in combat. On social media, the first video of ISIS female fighters began to spread, although this was not received well by ISIS' followers. The situation is now that it is permissible for women to fight for ISIS but it is not encouraged by the group.

Women's involvement in ISIS is distinctly different to that of other groups, such as Boko Haram. While factions within Boko Haram may vary wildly, women and girls have participated in explosive violence for the group, particularly in suicide attacks. Participants noted that it was difficult to make claims about consent and coercion in these contexts. Even if women do not participate directly in explosive violence, they can provide crucial support roles.

One speaker discussed how women in Al-Shabaab were crucial for obtaining weapons. They are able to pass through checkpoints undetected much more easily to smuggle weapons and supplies. Al-Shabaab have been able to cultivate this support network partly due to the social support they offer to these women, whether in the form of financial or physical security. However, Al-Shabaab are targeting this developed message specifically to a conservative Somali context. ISIS meanwhile have been using social media to attract much more globalised support from women.

This session also offered the opportunity to discuss masculinities within these groups — a topic which is often under researched. One speaker noted how the vast majority of suicide bombers have been male, 94% since 1970. While a significant body of work has been produced on militarised masculinities, this is typically applied to state actors and little attention has been given to explosive weapons in particular. Participants agreed that discussions of masculinity, and gender more broadly, should be grounded in an intersectional approach. That is to say that race, class, and religion, amongst many other factors, must form a part of this analysis of explosive violence.

It was noted that male suicide bombers in salafist-jihadist literature are often lionised and presented in a hyper-masculine way. For example, early issues of ISIS' magazine *Daqib*, martyrdom was linked to brave, offensive territorial expansion. However, as ISIS began to lose territory and increased its use of suicide attacks, martyrdom became portrayed in this literature in a much more fatalistic way. One speaker noted that there may be a sexualised element to the portrayal of male suicide bombers. Many salafist-jihadist groups have made promises to potential martyrs with an idealised and often sexualised conception of paradise. It was acknowledged, however, that discussion of martyrdom and ideology should also acknowledge their political contexts to avoid essentializing claims.

Questions Raised

- Were there consequences of the use of Kurdish female fighters in Syria?
- How do non-state groups of various ideologies present masculinities differently?
- What role does practicality play in different groups' decisions to use male or female combatants?
- What are some important ethical considerations about a researcher's position when examining issues of race and gender?
- To what extent are non-state groups' framings of gender and religion also political?

6. CIVILIAN HARM FROM EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS USE

AOAV's Explosive Violence Monitor records that 90% of those killed in populated areas are civilians. This panel examined the ways in which this harm is gendered. It looked at how the direct harms of explosive weapons impact men and women differently and also began to link these harms to more indirect or long-term effects.

One speaker noted that when conducting investigations into explosive violence incidents, there was a slight gendered discrepancy as to where bodies were likely to be found. Female casualties were more likely to occur in indoor environments, such as homes, while male casualties were more likely to be found in outdoor environments, such as streets or marketplaces. This is likely to be reflective of social norms and customs in areas of the Middle East and North Africa which have been devastated by explosive violence.

The gendered discrepancy in casualties continues long after the initial fighting. For example, Raqqa in Syria has a high level of Unexploded Ordnances (UXOs) as ISIS deliberately mined the city and coalition strikes also left behind unexploded materials. Women and children were particularly vulnerable to these threats as they often search through rubble for recyclable materials and objects. Some men in Raqqa have become 'unofficial deminers', making up for the shortage of professional deminers. This is inevitably highly dangerous work and places them severely at risk of explosive threats. Another speaker highlighted that in Yemen, especially in Sana'a and Sa'dah, men are typically rescuers and are particularly exposed to 'double-tap' airstrikes.

Speakers and participants also commented that gender plays a significant role in accessing medical care to treat explosive weapons injuries. One speaker noted that the few women who were treated in Camp Bastion were largely for diseases or pregnancy complications, rather than explosive weapons

injuries. Women in Afghanistan were much less likely to access medical services if it was carried out by a foreign or male doctor. Rescuers would also not necessarily help injured women due to cultural norms about touching women, especially if parts of their bodies were exposed. This means that women had much more limited access to medical care in Afghanistan.

A participant related one case in Afghanistan where a woman was rescued by the military and taken to Camp Bastion for urgent medical attention. However, the woman was subsequently not allowed to return home to her village due to cultural customs. There was an acknowledgement in the session about the importance of sensitivity training and improvements to be made with rescue and medical procedures to prevent situations such as these from occurring.

One speaker noted, in the context of Yemen but also applicable more broadly, the difficulty of collecting accurate data on gender in explosive weapons casualties. It was suggested that a greater engagement with open-source data collection and verification may aid efforts on the ground. Groups such as the Global Legal Action Network and Bellingcat were pointed to for their innovative use of these techniques.

Questions Raised

- How can civil society actors work with states to collect casualty data disaggregated by?
- Is it possible for states to incorporate mental health into their proportionality evaluations?
- Is there any evidence of explosive weapons casualty figures being used to cover up the number of honor killings?
- How does gender impact the legitimacy of targets?

7. MILITARY HARM FROM EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS USE

The proliferation of explosive weapons use in conflict has had a significant impact on both the mental and physical well being of soldiers. Yet the gendered nature of these impacts are often not discussed. This panel explored how explosive violence has changed militarised masculinities, conceptions of heroism, and the types of injuries soldiers receive. While soldiers occupy a complex position in these discussions as perpetrators of explosive violence themselves, it is important to acknowledge the harm experienced by individual soldiers and to differentiate them from states. The session predominantly focused on the experiences of British soldiers in Afghanistan.

One speaker explained the nature of the threat from explosive weapons to soldiers. Afghanistan was one of the first conflicts British soldiers fought in which heavily featured IEDs. So while soldiers received excellent training from veterans of conflicts such as Kosovo and the Gulf War, they could not prepare for the Taliban's changing tactics. The Taliban's use of IEDs changed the behaviour of soldiers on the ground. It meant that soldiers were constantly looking down, uncertain about when they would next be attacked. The speaker noted that this had a significant impact on soldiers' senses of heroism. Rather than being active and brave participants, IEDs made many feel helpless. This may be augmented by the uncertainty about who is an insurgent in the context of Afghanistan.

IEDs also significantly changed the nature of injuries that soldiers experienced. One speaker noted that IEDs are much less likely to cause a 'neat' or 'clean' injury in comparison to other weapon types. This had an impact on soldiers' recovery, with some experiencing an increased stigmatisation due to their injuries. It was also commented upon that some support efforts, such as The Invictus Games, may place an emphasis on soldiers being heroic and hyper-masculine.

One of the most under discussed injuries that IEDs cause is genital trauma. Historically, the rate of genital injuries amongst UK soldiers in conflict was 5%. In Afghanistan, this more than doubled to 12.5%, likely due to the increase in explosive violence. These injuries were particularly frequent from

2009 to 2012, when the British armed forces issued new pelvic protection gear. The well funded and high quality medical care available to British soldiers, whether in Afghanistan or back in the UK, has provided those suffering genital injuries a number of options. For example, doctors are able to salvage sperm from patients or provide them with long-term options such as IVF. One speaker stated that there have been 7 live births from sperm salvaged from British soldiers in Afghanistan. Surgeons are also able to take tissue from areas such as the forearm and nerves to create a penis.

Genital injuries often take a significant psychological toll on soldiers. Speakers noted that the vast majority of soldiers injured in Afghanistan were male. More generally, academic literature and the lived experiences of many men suggests that men are less likely to reach out for mental health support. Participants said this may be intensified for servicemen due to the hypermasculine nature of the army, the emphasis on heroism, and physicality of the job. This is especially pertinent for genital injuries. During this session, it was said that while soldiers may be able to discuss other types of injury and trauma, genital injuries remain almost taboo.

Questions Raised

- What are the long-term psychological impacts of genital trauma on soldiers?
- How do the experiences of civilians with genital injuries compare?
- How can support systems for soldiers who have been injured by explosive weapons, whether psychosocial, financial, or medical, be improved?
- What is the best way to remove the taboo around genital injuries?
- Do the British armed forces discuss masculinity or gender in recovery for soldiers injured by explosive weapons?

8. REVERBERATING EFFECTS OF EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS USE

Explosive weapons use has devastating, long-term impacts as well as direct casualties. This session aimed to provide a more detailed understanding of how these impacts, whether on employment, migration, or infrastructure, are deeply linked to gender.

At various points in the day, speakers and participants noted that explosive violence has a significant impact on the makeup of households. The data indicates that men are consistently more likely to be killed by explosive weapons. This often leaves women in a financially precarious position and poses a significant risk to their physical safety in some countries. One speaker noted that this meant there may be pressure on the woman to remarry quickly. However, in Syria, for example, there have been cases of women who have been injured by explosive weapons finding it more difficult to remarry due to disability stigma.

While men who have been injured by explosive weapons may find it easier to remarry, there are many other issues they face. It was observed that men living in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps or refugee camps in Syria may experience decreased self-esteem and increased mental health issues. Those with severe injuries and disabilities from explosive violence may feel unable to live up to their traditional gendered role as breadwinners. One speaker said that this increased vulnerability amongst men potentially leads to domestic violence against women and children.

Women who have lost husbands or other family members are also often much more vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Economic precarity pushes many women into sex work, exposing them to sexual violence, trafficking, and isolation from communities. This is also true for many women living in refugee camps or IDP camps. One speaker noted that it was estimated that 75% of displaced people in Yemen are women. Faced with having to provide for themselves and possibly their children as well, women may be less discerning about who they will marry. It was stated that these conditions also lead to greater numbers of forced marriages and child marriages too.

The damage to infrastructure from explosive weapons also has severe repercussions for women. In Yemen, contaminated water supplies has led to a spread of disease. This may be particularly harmful to pregnant women or those with newborns as many of these diseases can be passed on through close contact when breastfeeding. Infrastructural damage also increases the difficulty many women experiencing in accessing healthcare due to cultural norms. One speaker noted they had found that in Syria, women were more likely to self-medicate than attend a healthcare centre. The large number of hospitals damaged or destroyed by explosive weapons also impacts the ability of women to give birth in a safe environment and access postnatal care.

Questions Raised

- How can NGOs and researchers better identify more unexpected gendered reverberating effects?
- Is the UK moving closer to recognising the reverberating harms of explosive weapons in the protection of civilians treaty?
- How does explosive violence impact forms of gender based violence?
- What are the gendered reverberating impacts on children?

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