

## **Oxfam, Amnesty International and IANSA**

### **Speech for Control Arms Concert Event, NYC, 2006**

*Written and adapted by Wendy Knerr, The Write Effect Limited*

Guns in the home, in communities, and during and after conflict lead to considerable suffering for women and girls, whose lives are affected even when they are not directly in the firing line. When male relatives are killed, injured or disabled by gun violence, women become the main breadwinners and primary carers. During conflicts, women are often displaced and forced to flee their homes, exposing them to starvation, disease and further violence. And women, like men, are frequently caught in the crossfire, both in times of war and of peace.

The presence of guns invariably has the same effect everywhere: more guns mean more danger for women.

In May 2003, a nineteen-year-old woman in Iraq was shot in the legs by her husband. The incident happened in front of her husband's family and their neighbours.

She asked us not to use her real name because of threats to her safety, so we will call her Fatima.

Fatima was married when she was 12 years old, and in her husband's family she was treated as a servant and regularly beaten. Eventually, she ran away, but her husband said she should go back. When she refused, he took a piece of wood to beat her. It broke, making him even angrier. That's when he took out his gun and shot her. This is what Fatima told us:

'He was very angry and he took out his Kalashnikov... The neighbours said: "Leave her alone"... But then he didn't stop; he shot my legs, I could not feel them, they were numb.

'The sun was setting, I was looking at the sky, I said to the men: 'I don't want to die.' They took me to the hospital.'

Despite the number of eyewitnesses and the seriousness of the crime, neither the family nor the hospital reported the case to the police, and Fatima's husband was not arrested. The family said it was a matter to be solved within the community.

Fatima returned to her father's house after she left the hospital. Her husband expressed regret and offered her compensation, seeking reconciliation with her through the mediation of community elders. But she refused to return to him. Her future is still uncertain.

Traditionally, the home is considered to be a safe haven, and in many societies it is the place where women spend a great deal of their time. But when a gun is present, being at home exposes women, like Fatima, to a particularly high risk of death.

Fatima's experience is similar to that of women all over the world. Violence against women persists in every country and in all sectors of society. In places where there is armed conflict, the risk is compounded because of the widespread availability of guns.

Even when conflicts end, their brutalizing effects do not disappear. The return of men to their communities – many traumatized by the conflict – can bring violence directly into the home.

One example of this is Cambodia, a country that is no longer at war, but where around 500,000 small arms are believed to remain. It is estimated that half of these weapons are controlled by the official military and police forces, and half by militiamen, demobilised soldiers, and other individuals.

In Phnom Penh, Cambodia, a 34-year-old woman – who we will call Socheat, to protect her identity – told this story of being shot by her husband:

'One day we argued. I was with some other people, planting vegetables, and he shot me through the leg – my left leg, here above the knee. Then he shot me through the chest, and the third bullet just skimmed my hair. It was so close. He used an AK-47 and was only about 60 feet away, and then he came closer. At

first everyone was afraid to intervene, but when he'd finished firing, the neighbours came and stopped him from bashing me with the butt of his gun.

'I still get pain from my wounds. I only had the metal pin taken out of my leg five months ago. And now I can only do about half of what I used to do.'

Socheat and Fatima echo the experiences of many women who live in fear among their families and in their homes and communities. Violence against women is nothing new, but as guns have become more widely available and easier and cheaper to get, the effects of the violence have become more terrifying and far more deadly. (5min 7sec)