



Gender and Armed Violence Reduction in West Africa

**Lessons learned from weapons and
ammunition initiatives**

2022

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Abbreviations

AVR

armed violence reduction

GICHD

The Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining

ISLO

l'Institut Supérieur de logistique de Ouagadougou

NATCOM

National Commissions on small arms and light weapons

OECD

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

SADD

sex and age disaggregated data

SALW

small arms and light weapons

UNIDIR

United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research

UNODA

United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs

UNREC

United Nations Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Africa

UNSC

United Nations Security Council

WAM

weapons and ammunition management

Introduction

This briefing paper summarises ongoing and planned gender mainstreaming activities across MAG's programmes in the West Africa region and draws lessons learned from MAG's efforts in this area. It is intended for a range of stakeholders engaged in arms control, weapons and ammunition management (WAM) and broader armed violence reduction (AVR), who are also making efforts to deliver more inclusive programmes of work, including other implementers, security sector stakeholders, policymakers, and donors.

Considering gender leads to an inclusive approach that takes into account the different needs, perspectives, and lived experiences of women, girls, men and boys, and has a series of positive effects. First, a gender-sensitive approach reduces the risk of perpetrating gender inequalities and harmful power dynamics and structures in the beneficiaries' community: a concrete and context-sensitive implementation of the fundamental 'do no harm' principle.

Secondly, this approach is coherent with the reality of many conflicts where women and girls are disproportionately impacted by both immediate and long-lasting consequences of conflicts, including the related insecurity in both the public and private realms. This often includes the different types of harm caused by the illicit circulation, diversion, and possession of small arms and light weapons (SALW), which is often fuel criminal activities and gender-based violence.

Thirdly, a gender inclusive approach allows access to different sources of knowledge overlooked by a gender-blind approach. Research demonstrates that the inclusion of women allows us to go beyond the realm of power to understand the realities of people. In fact, women have access to spaces, actors, and communities often restricted to men. Equal participation of women captures a wider range of early warning signs leading to conflict and facilitates addressing root causes of violence. This leads to longer and more effective conflict-prevention measures, and long-lasting peace and security.

The effectiveness of a gender-sensitive approach also stems from its ability to consider the needs and perspectives of women who play roles that are traditionally assigned to men, such as women serving in the armed forces, law enforcement agencies, or as political or religious figures.

Gender-sensitive analysis, planning, and implementation lead to more comprehensive and inclusive AVR and conflict prevention, which are essential for promoting long-term transformation of societies and sustainable peace and security.

Background

MAG's extensive track record in WAM initially emerged as a natural offshoot of mine action programming, which includes stockpile destruction as one of its five pillars. The opportunity to engage with states is dependent on trust between actors; many of MAG's early WAM interventions arose from long term co-operation on mine action and the interpersonal relationships established during that process. WAM interventions have since proven to be a highly effective confidence-building measure in their own right, providing a programmatic cornerstone and political entry point for engagement on a broader range of SALW and ammunition-related issues.

Drawing on the OECD's armed violence reduction lens, MAG has developed a theory of change that builds on WAM activities to incorporate community risk reduction and engagement, research, and advocacy. The approach is founded on the key principle of working in close strategic partnership with international experts with complementary expertise, such as Small Arms Survey, the Centre for Armed Violence Reduction, and International Alert, as well as key UN agencies including UNIDIR and UNODA regional offices. Local partnerships are also fundamental to the approach to facilitate dialogue and ensure a sustainable response. By focusing not only on the instruments of armed violence (i.e. weapons and ammunition), but also on relevant institutions and agents, MAG's objective is to build an approach to both programming and policy that is driven by the needs of the people most affected. This means an approach that takes into account the differing impact of armed violence by age and gender, as well as other vulnerabilities, is absolutely critical.

MAG's long term mine action programming, which is driven by community liaison and prioritised according to impact, provides a rich source of lessons learned with regards to gender mainstreaming, as well as diversity and inclusion more broadly. Direct engagement with communities provided a natural focus and vehicle for MAG's initial steps in this area, focusing on inclusive participation to inform operational planning and advocacy at both national and international level, as well as a vehicle to promote employment opportunities for women in mine action.

Since 2020, MAG's global programmes have been supported by a dedicated Gender, Diversity & Inclusion Advisor, reflecting this area of work as a key priority in MAG's strategic direction. With dedicated resources, MAG is now able to delve into more complex discussions and begin to expand the focus from gender mainstreaming to youth and other diversity and inclusion aspects more broadly.



Challenging assumptions

Due to the technical nature of many activities and the fact that the direct beneficiaries are security sector actors, discussions on SALW/ammunition and gender discussions have most often focused on increasing women's participation, particularly at the technical level in WAM activities. The AVR approach is an opportunity to bring the communities into discussions and identify routes to more gender-sensitive programming by exploring the gendered impact of SALW, raising awareness of safe behaviours and understanding the drivers behind weapons ownership, and building dialogue between communities and security sector stakeholders.

Mainstreaming gender in AVR in West Africa

MAG convened discussions on gender mainstreaming with security sector stakeholders in West Africa for the first time in December 2018.

With support from the Canadian Government, MAG organised a regional workshop for sharing best practices and lessons learned between the National Commissions on SALW (NATCOMs) of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. The workshop focused on technical aspects of WAM and included dedicated sessions on gender equality as an initial step to start conversations about gender in SALW control at a regional level. MAG recruited a Gender Advisor in Mali in 2020 to build the capacity of the Gender Focal Point in the Mali NATCOM, supporting them with the development of a gender policy and gender mainstreaming training manual, as well as raising awareness in the NATCOM about United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security and highlighting links to WAM. The Gender Advisor has since transitioned to a regional role to respond to increased demand for this expertise.

Since 2021 MAG has been undertaking a range of activities aimed at actively promoting inclusion of women and other groups in our direct programming in West Africa, as well as working with partners to challenge gender norms and seek to understand and address power dynamics.

Training

Training and awareness raising activities remain key tools to challenge attitudes and practices regarding gender equality and to promote gender and diversity mainstreaming.

- Having started with training the Mali NATCOM in 2020, MAG expanded these activities to include civil society and regional government offices in Mali. In 2020 and 2021, MAG trained 94 people (37% female) across Mali, in addition to 23 MAG Mali staff. Training included explaining conceptual differences between sex and gender, relevant legislation at national, regional and international level, including the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, the gendered impact of SALW-fuelled violence, along with the role of SALW in perpetrating gender-based violence.

Following the training, the Mali NATCOM plans to reorganize itself and proactively seek to give more responsibilities to women within its bodies. At the same time, local civil society organisations trained by MAG have identified a number of priorities in the fight against SALW proliferation, particularly at the youth and community levels, such as raising awareness of SALW legislation, and AVR-focused livelihoods projects.

- In Burkina Faso, MAG has been developing a training module on “Women in Conflict and Peacebuilding” for l’Institut Supérieur de logistique de Ouagadougou (ISLO), which trains officers from 23 countries across Africa.

As part of the preparation for this, the programme is conducting focus group discussions with women in Burkina Faso to ensure the module draws on lived experiences of the impact of SALW on women in the region. The module will be finalised by August 2022.

A core component of MAG’s WAM work is delivering training courses in a range of subjects such as armoury and ammunition storekeeping, weapons marking and weapons destruction. MAG now includes a gender and diversity module for all officer-level training courses.

After a successful pilot module delivered to mid-ranking officers in The Gambia in 2020, MAG delivered the next round of a standardised gender module in March 2022 in Burkina Faso and Mali. Training and discussions helped participants challenge their own perceptions regarding potential limitations to the participation of women in security forces, and recognise underlying assumptions. There was also limited knowledge among the participants regarding national legal frameworks to promote female participation in security forces and SALW management. Appreciating the level of literacy varies in some programmes, MAG is now looking at the best way to deliver this module to all levels in the security forces, including developing an animated film and training a national and regional network of staff to deliver the training.

Gender Champions

MAG is drawing on its strong relationships with the security and defence forces in the region to challenge gender norms and promote gender equality with this group. MAG has been engaging with key stakeholders in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger to identify personnel willing to receive gender and diversity training and to act as “gender champions”. The individuals are senior, well-respected representatives who can influence their peers in the security and defence forces. Critically, MAG has worked with national authorities to ensure men are represented among the gender champions, recognising that those who currently hold the greatest power must play a role in bringing about change.

This year, MAG has identified four gender champions for the region, including the retired Chair of the Burkina Faso NATCOM. They have received gender and diversity training from MAG already and will receive on-going support, based on an agreed Terms of Reference, to undertake interventions that promote gender equality and women’s participation in the security and defence forces. Although not gender experts, the champions have been selected based on existing interest in gender equality, the respect and influence they command amongst target groups, and, as noted above, a gender balance to maximise impact. This is intended as a self-sustaining activity, which MAG will support through mentoring and setting up a Gender Champions network in the region.

Several events were held on International Women’s Day 2022 where the Gender Champions spoke of the role women can play in the security forces and in SALW management.

Data collection and targets for women’s participation

The first step to ensure gender parity and to better mainstream gender is through collection of sex and age disaggregated data (SADD). MAG was already disaggregating data regarding beneficiaries of SALW risk education projects in Mali. MAG has also been recording more systematically disaggregated data for beneficiaries of WAM training.

The Government of Germany, one of the key donors to MAG’s AVR work, particularly in the West Africa region, recently introduced a requirement to strive for at least 30% female participation in all project activities and meetings. As a result, eight countries in the region have started to collect disaggregated data for all activities. Initial findings show that women make up an average of 32% of participants in MAG project activities in the region, although this varies significantly between countries. In some contexts, this is heavily influenced by the presence of community risk reduction activities in a country, as MAG’s approach is to have equal participation in community activities, which is easier for MAG to influence than the participation of security sector stakeholders in training.

This data collection has shown The Gambia, Mauritania and Niger need the most support to increase female participation in any activities as women represent between 0% and 0.4% of participants in projects in these countries. MAG requires SADD collection across all AVR programmes by the end of 2022, in line with existing practice in mine action.

Internal tools to ensure gender mainstreaming

MAG has developed a gender checklist to ensure gender is systematically mainstreamed across all projects. Initially developed in Mali and now being rolled out across the region, the checklist helps determine if gender is adequately mainstreamed at proposal design stage, including gender sensitive activities and target outputs, and ensuring a dedicated budget line for gender responsive work. MAG also actively encourages a gender-sensitive approach in all surveys and research initiatives conducted directly or through partners.

Internal Gender, Diversity and Inclusion plan

In March 2021, MAG organised a workshop to develop its first gender, diversity and inclusion plan for the West Africa region, in line with objectives in MAG's strategic direction. The plan includes internal gender assessments in all MAG programmes in the region, training, and milestone plans.

By endorsing this approach at the regional level, individual MAG regional and sub-regional programmes are mandated and encouraged to pursue and prioritise these activities and set expectations for mainstreaming of gender considerations.

Key objectives include localisation and working increasingly in partnership with local civil society organisations to address armed violence; employing more diverse regional staff; and creating a network of national and regional staff to act as internal gender focal points. The focal points are responsible for monitoring and supporting implementation delivering the gender module to security sector actors. The region aims to exceed gender awareness, striving to be increasingly gender-responsive over time.

The plan established the GICHD Gender and Mine Action course as mandatory for all MAG Technical Field Managers. In addition, a key priority for MAG is to review the French-language version of Standard Operating Procedures, which utilise the male form, to use more inclusive language.

Where possible, MAG in West Africa is conducting internal and contextual gender baseline assessments across the region. They are underway in Nigeria, Mali and Burkina Faso and planned for Sierra Leone, Mauritania and Benin in 2022. The assessments help identify key areas for attention, national frameworks and specified action plans.

Supporting other initiatives

As a growing number of stakeholders engage in mainstreaming gender and diversity, it is important to coordinate and participate in other initiatives in order to create synergies, build complementarity and avoid duplication. In Mali, MAG has been supporting the NATCOM Gender Task Force, a group comprised of the NATCOM, UNREC and MAG which meets monthly to prepare for training sessions and implementing gender-based activities in Mali.

Working with UNREC and Small Arms Survey, MAG supported Sierra Leone to apply a gender lens to the review of the expired National Action Plan on SALW and the development of a new plan, looking particularly at links between SALW action and Women, Peace and Security strategies. MAG hopes to do the same in Burkina Faso and other ECOWAS Member States.



Next steps

MAG will continue to work with key stakeholders to support development and rollout of gender policies and action plans with the aim of reducing barriers to women's participation in WAM, including in decision-making roles.

Mainstreaming gender not only achieves better results, but it also helps states comply with various international agreements, such as Resolution 1325, the UN Programme of Action and the ECOWAS Convention on SALW. In addition to encouraging gender mainstreaming in SALW National Action Plans, MAG is planning to work with Ministries of Gender, Women's Affairs or similar government agencies that are responsible for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda to encourage inclusion of SALW in 1325 National Action Plans. Priority countries for 2022, include Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, with increased GDI activity planned in the Gulf of Guinea states from 2023.

MAG also plans to support ECOWAS SALW division to revive and implement a regional gender and SALW strategy, with a focus on SADD and promoting gender-sensitive SALW legislation.

In 2022, MAG is looking to pilot a regional network of female police or military personnel, especially with focus on SALW or WAM training, to support professional development, peer to peer support and sharing of lessons learned. MAG is increasingly providing humanitarian mine action support to several states in West Africa with a focus on institutional capacity development. This offers additional opportunities for gender mainstreaming, particularly as the inclusion of landmines in the scope of the ECOWAS Convention also mandates SALW National Commissions as the responsible authorities for mine action.

MAG is looking to expand its work to be more inclusive of youth, a key marginalised group significantly affected by SALW.

Lessons learned

- **Gender mainstreaming is everyone's responsibility.**

MAG has recognised the value offered by WAM as a confidence-building measure with security sector stakeholders in the West Africa region. As a respected implementer with on the ground presence and ongoing dialogue, MAG is uniquely positioned to promote gender mainstreaming with these actors. It is important to acknowledge the influencing power – and therefore responsibility – of international actors, and use this to drive positive change and avoid the risk of reinforcing negative gender stereotypes. Mainstreaming gender and promoting gender equality is not only the right thing to do, but it also brings a qualitative improvement to WAM and AVR activities.

- **Capacity development is a key vehicle for promoting gender mainstreaming.**

MAG's position and strategic approach in relation to WAM is that technical activities should be embedded in broader capacity development. This enables a focus on building of "soft" institutional skills alongside technical training. These interventions provide additional space for dialogue and awareness raising with a broader range of activities within security sector institutions, including the opportunity to advocate for gender-focused activities at higher levels. Critically, this is also an opportunity to emphasise the importance of dialogue between communities and security sector actors, advocating for security forces who are accountable not only in terms of WAM but also towards populations.

- **Engagement with communities is critical in addressing armed violence.**

Armed violence affects men and women differently. While globally men represent the highest percentage of victims and perpetrators, women also suffer as victims of domestic violence and gender-based violence. This cycle of violence is aggravated by cultural gender norms and views of masculinity and femininity that encourage men to take up arms to acquire status. MAG is looking to do awareness raising activities with the general public and affected communities and apply a gendered lens to all contextual research work undertaken. Opportunities to genuinely mainstream gender solely in WAM are limited, but becoming significantly broader when a community dimension is included.

- **Dedicated resources and expert capacity are required.**

The recruitment of dedicated Gender, Diversity and Inclusion Advisors has enabled significant progress, including design and implementation of the regional gender strategy for West Africa. Implementers can, and should, set aside gender budgets both in individual projects and as part of their own core work. However, some incremental steps towards promoting gender equality can also be taken with minimum resources. For instance, in Benin, advocacy on gender equality by MAG's Country Director throughout engagement with national stakeholders has led to increased participation in WAM activities.

- **Donors play an important role in promoting gender, diversity and inclusion**

Many donors have stated that gender mainstreaming and/or diversity and inclusion are key priorities for them and this has been reflected in dedicated gender sections in project proposals and reports. A handful of donors, such as Canada, Germany and Sweden, are engaging more meaningfully on the subject, requesting dedicated budget lines and GDI activities and outcomes and encouraging dialogue with implementers, such as through the establishment of the Gender Equality Network for Small Arms Control. Willingness by donors to commit funds and proactively drive innovation in the areas of gender complements – rather than detracts - from the core technical activities and helps accelerate progress in the sector.

- **Change is incremental and requires long term vision.**

The beliefs and norms that need to be challenged are embedded and deeply held, rooted in culture and institutional history. Training and awareness raising should be accompanied by initiatives that focus on embedding sustainable ownership within security forces and other national actors. The incremental change required over years and decades must not be reliant on the presence and intervention of international actors.

- **National stakeholders are open to dialogue on issues of gender and diversity.**

A significant proportion of WAM activities take place in states with conservative values and male dominated environments, which can lead to the perception that stakeholders – especially in the security – are not interested in gender equality. While it is true that gender stereotypes prevail in many places, there is a willingness from many actors to bring about change, with the main limitation being the knowledge, resources and capacity to do so. For instance, MAG has witnessed a lot of interest in and requests for support with gender mainstreaming from the NATCOM in Mali and was successful in identifying gender champions among security sector stakeholders in the region. Assumptions must be avoided so that conversations are not silenced before they begin.



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