



Transcription - Interview between Katherine Aguirre Tobon and Peter Squires (ORIGINAL)

Katherine: My initiative with this call is to push a little bit the discussion of women and weapons in Latin America, taking into consideration that this is kind of a new field in Latin America. As you know, we have very violent countries, very violent cities, but since, I think, four years ago, our perspective of guns control was gender-blind. It was only arms control, like campaigns to recover some weapons, and restrictions in cities such as in Bogotá, but we didn't include the gender perspective. And that was included, like, four years ago when we started to consider mainly the topic of toxic masculinities, violent masculinities, that demand firearms to protect themselves, to protect the family and the community.

Mainly in this perspective was considering mainly women as a victim in the house: probabilities of gender violence and accidents and suicides increase when you have firearms at home. But we are starting now to try to push the discussion to talk that women are also vulnerable, as men, in the public space. And we realize that when violence increases a lot, violence against women with firearms in the public space increases even more than men. And that was very clear in the data, for example, of Mexico, when we had this very steep increase of violence in the midst of the 20s, and violence against women increased more [than men]. And now we are seeing it in Ecuador, when violence is increasing a lot, and women are more vulnerable in the public space by firearms. Also, when we break some information at the subnational level, we realize, for example, in Argentina, that is a country with very low homicide rates, we have seen Santa Fe, which is a very violent province, a region, we have biggest, highest proportions of homicide and femicide by firearm. So we started to push more the discussion on women and parents in the public space,

What I found particularly compelling in your book is how it adds a new perspective to this narrative—highlighting that women, too, have motivations to access firearms. You examine how markets and culture, especially in the U.S., actively encourage women to acquire firearms. This perspective has prompted me to consider the role of women in public spaces with firearms, including their motivations, demands, and use of firearms in contexts like public forces, where their experiences differ from men, and organized crime.

Katherine Aguirre: I know your book is set in the United States, and that is very important for us in Latin America. We have a similar narrative between politicians, for example, between Brazil and the United States. What is your perspective about the differentiated role of women compared to men? I wanted to push a little bit more on the violent use of firearms. How are the patterns different and what are the differences in Latin America? What was your initial motivation to start researching women and firearms, and weapons?

Peter Squires: My own work was much more specifically focused on the American gun market. In a sense it is useful in some ways but in other ways not as useful as you might hope.



You might wonder why someone from Britain would be working on these issues, as it is a low gun ownership and low gun crime country. I think that a number of the points made about women and the risk and vulnerability, even in a low gun ownership country are still a problem. Because the problem of quite a significant number of women are victims of gun violence in the home, as part of a long process of domestic violence and as they get older some of these women are being shot by their partners. We have had a number of quite terrible family annihilations where the gun owner perhaps is becoming old and infirm perhaps suffering some kind of dementia, alcoholism, other type of mental health problems issue and kills partner, self, pets, children. These kinds of tragedies.

We have had a number of these tragedies and it's always men, never women, the man is always the gun owner. And in some cases the guns are taken from the gun owner by the police as a result of various assessments made of their superability to own guns, and then because no court case follows and no conviction is secure the police gives the gun back. I can think of five recent cases where the police have given the gun back and the guy has gone on and shot his partner and himself and other members of the household. There is still this problem that the law takes a far too tolerant view of men as gun owners. And even in a country like Britain where gun ownership is supposed to be a privilege, and not a right, the police are often reluctant to take appropriate action to remove guns from dangerous situations. The issue with the gun market in America for me came out of a serious thing. I was doing work on the global issue, much like Small Arms Survey. I use SAS work a massive amount because it's very good. The very statistics tell you the story, that something like 90% of the civilian owned guns in the world are in the hands of men. And that is a massive imbalance. Around the world, there are lots of unsuitable men with a kind of strange notion of masculinity who are perpetrating violence and rape against women, aided and abetted by the firearms they own.

When you look at South Africa, large parts of Latin America, Europe, America, even Britain, this problem is truly global. At the same time, there has been a gun advocacy movement in America that has kind of reflected that whole - it's very much NRA led initiative of 'refuse to be the victim' - but at the same time we have seen a cultural phenomenon whereby women are - certainly in movies and TV shows - where women are as cops, and secret agents, Resident Evil, women are becoming armed icons of femininity and somehow this is being represented as a good thing. At the same time, we have had these long debates about the role of women in combat areas of the military, so a change is coming and I think the debates about that and the way in which the sort of risks face by women - we have seen a perverted form of feminism, being allied with a neoliberal individualism to promote the idea that women can set themselves free of all this sort of violence if only they carried a gun and were prepared to use it. Now, I think that is gun industry marketing. I don't think it's a real social movement, but of course, that begs a particular type of question. So we have seen the likes of the NRA, promoting this sort of guns are ways of freeing yourself from rape culture, guns are ways of - and I think this is heavily underpinned by racism, as is much of the american gun debate, that



white folks are supposed to protect themselves from the black underclass by arming themselves. And I suppose we saw some of that in the context of the mobilizations around Trump and all he was trying to do during his first period in office. And you know, lots of states then went for concealed carry laws and stand your ground type laws, and this was supposed to be a kind of way of preventing crime except as I tried to show in the book, a lot of it is a con and the way in which popular conceptions of rape as stranger danger are mobilized in America the persons most likely to assault or kill a woman are people she already knows. So it begs the questions of carrying guns in public to protect yourself from the black rapist or the mugger, which is how a lot of this was sold to people, is probably rather misleading.

The irony then is that when you look at the whole series of high profile court cases, when women did use guns to defend themselves against men, trying to invoke this whole stand your ground principle, they were prosecuted anyway because the ground they were supposedly standing on the man was equally entitled to be there. The pretext by which women were sold guns to protect themselves, the people they needed to protect themselves from were already there, and the courts took a very unsympathetic view. We have seen this over a long long time. Globally, there has been some good work in Australia about this, in Britain about how women who utilize lethal self defense against an abusive partner after many years of victimization, when they snap and fight back, they are then accused of murder because they attack the perpetrator when it's thought to be not a situation of imminent violence. They get their retaliation in before their absolute last resort. All of this was a sort of familiar story but I wanted to use it partly to suggest that armed self defense was perhaps not the best way for a safer society. More guns do not make a general sense, but at the same time make a gender argument that women were being conned. I have seen some work in Canada that talk about the pistolization of society. This sort of pistolized feminism is very much a blind alley.

It is not the solution and I have lately come across - partly of some other work I am doing on the ways in which the police involve themselves in violence against women - Apart from the fact that police are often part of the problem because they often arrest women for violent acts against women when all women were doing was defending themselves. It fits into a notion of what's called carceral feminism, that feminism allies itself with neoliberal law enforcement, just to increase mass incarceration and largely its mass incarceration of poorer, blacker, darker members of society and the women themselves. This sort of pistolization version of feminism seems to me to be aiding and abetting the mass incarceration security state, which is not really a solution that any of us would want. So that is kind of what took it from being a theoretical issue that was a spin off from other work I had been doing to having legs of its own.

The last point was a very kind of particular point made by Franklin E. Zimring and his colleagues writing in America in about 1990, around the time when there was a debate about



whether a national handgun strategy could ever come to be in the United States, and Zimring very much argues that women were crucial to the politics of this. Because men were usually more progun and women were usually more anti gun in a way Zimring said that the whole question of gun politics for the future is gendered and it is gendered around the idea that if women stay opposed to widespread argument, then its possible to imagine that in the future gun control policy that takes in hand guns and introduces sensible hand gun control will come about. But if women get swayed to the other side of the picture, then that is not going to happen. And I saw what the NRA was trying to do in terms of “refuse to be a victim” and expand the women’s market in guns was not just a marketing strategy to bail out the gun industry but also a political strategy to propagandize guns for women, brainwash is probably too strong of a word, but to increase women’s acceptability of guns so the politics of gun control could never come to fruition. It was big picture, little picture, as well as a detailed story that has a sort of an aspect of false equality about it. Even in America, which has a less unequal gun distribution than other places, only about 15% of guns owned in America are owned by women. So 85% are owned by men, but that is less unequal than the rest of the world. So if they can get that 15% higher in a way the future of the gun is much more secure. I was hoping to build a critique of all of that, the big picture, the little picture, the contradictions in selling guns but then still find women guilty of using them and the ideological manipulation that was happening there in order to sell the idea that guns will set you free and guns will make you safe.

KA: I think this gender perspective is the specific part of the discussion of gun violence that is missing. More in the part where we are starting to discuss toxic masculinities but in the interventions to access to control to provide a specific intervention to cope with gun violence. When we consider the “myths” around gun demands, consider first that a gun in the house, increases the probability of domestic violence and security so women have a big risk if they have firearms. We have a lot of feminists that know how to use firearms who also commit intentional homicides and suicides. So a gun is a risk .

Peter: Well, that is the point too isn’t it? There have until recently been more suicides than homicides. So it is that we need to take it seriously too and that has not been part of the picture. I think the balance has been shifting of late in America. But in countries where there are more homicides its a different kind of story.

Katherine: yes, and the second myth that I debate a lot is that firearms don't dissuade crime. When you have a firearm it doesn’t dissuade from a mass shooting in any case. The presence of a firearm does not dissuade mass shootings or a killing. There is a bigger possibility that you are shot with your own firearm and women who carry a gun in the public space are not protected by their own firearms. So we need to talk about more of these myths around firearms. Including the new myth that women with a firearm is not more protected than a



man with a firearm. I think this is a very important point to start. I wanted to ask the second question, Peter, that do you think that women have a different position or a different relation to firearms than men? Men have this perspective of I will have a gun to protect myself, my family, and my community from different actors. Women it is for protectign themselves against violent men who are willing to make sexual violence and other things. How do you think the behaviour differs for a woman with firearms in the street and in a criminal context. Are there some hypothesis that women could be more violent? Or do they consider more human rights in contexts, for exampes as conflict? How is this relationship? We have not seen as much documentation of women in pandillas (gangs) with guns, that they are mainly the companion of the chiefs with the guns but are now starting to be involved more as active actors in these group?

Peter: A lot of questions there! I did not do enough of this in the book, and I had originally thought of another chapter. The missing chapter was looking at women's role in gun control. Around the world whether it be in african communities in Latin America, Brasil (i.e Viva Rio) and all of that, women often took lead roles in gun control organizations. In America you have the million mom march and women's involvement in Everytown and campaigns against armed domestic violence, there needs to be that recognition.

And without slipping into a sort of essentialism whereby women are mothers and about peace and care and men are about macho and patriarchy and power and coercion. I think those ideologies of gender are still playing a massive part in shaping people's opportunities, experiences, perceptions, and ideas about what they need to do. The attempt to shift - nothing is being done to disarm men, but what seems to be happening is we are talking about women become more armed. And I am not saying for women to be more like men, but it's almost like mutually assured destruction, which used to be the old nuclear weapons debate, that if we arm women, they will be safer because we are not going to disarm men. I do not think there are essential characteristics that women must be like this and men must be like that, but I really don't think that putting technology into the hands of women like that is necessarily really making them any safer, given the kind of roles they play and the assumptions about families and communities. Keen as I am to see communities rendered safer, I don't think pouring more guns in them is the way you do that. In a book I have been reading recently about police violence against african americans, a woman called Elizabeth Hinton, she has argued that often what black groups did was to get guns so they could fight the racist police who were constantly harassing them, but all that did was lead to further oppression of the groups.

What we need is more community based collective strategies to reduce the kind of tensions that guns are meant to solve. I don't have any real strategies here, except to say that the answers don't lie in pouring guns into a situation, the answers lie in rather more collective strategies and in attempts to overcome rifts and tensions and conflicts that people arms themselves about. In the States its more in relation to race, thats pretty obvious.

Katherine: To reduce the demand, I like alot the perspective of demand and supply. Demand is one of your motivations to access firearms, so we can break off motivations for



men and for women. There are different patterns of the demand of firearms and you can develop interventions in the side of the demand such as education, communication, that try to focus on why people are accessing firearms. The other side is the supply, how do the pull of weapons and how to reduce the number of weapons in the market. That was a paper of Small Arms Survey actually, that shows we can break the market of firearms across demand and supply and the motivations and rationale of the two and try to do interventions on both sides.

Peter: Breaking the demand is absolutely vital and in some ways that is happening. The more education, the more urban, the better off people are in North America, the less likely they are to own firearms. Speaking in generalities there. Firearms are very much part of a historical culture, the south and the west, the old race states, the old frontier states, whereas people with white collar professional jobs in cities, both east coast and west coast are less likely to be gun owners than west and south and old rust belt. Gun ownership is falling in the states and it would be falling faster were it not for this constant drip feed about how you need a gun to protect yourself from violent crime, from the black underclass, and to be a man. The whole thing that was central to the advertising of assault rifles around the time of the Sandy Hook killings “get your man card back, stand up and be counted”, be a real man own a gun, protect your family, it’s real brainwashing and I think it has a global significance.

You know when Brazil had the referendum on gun control in 1995, the NRA were very influential in trying to pitch gun ownership as part of a protection agenda for the white middle class. I had a student write a dissertation about it, she was from Brazil and was very active around the time when Bolsonaro came in and was trying to drive things back to the dictatorship years. It’s very much that guns and beef and power politics, that was part of a culture that said you must have a gun to protect yourself and everything you stood for in a dangerous world. That is a very compelling argument to people who are fearful that they don’t have any control over their lives. And you look at the demographic that is most likely to own guns in the state, often they are ex military, they are used to gun, they are old men, they are rural, they may have done hunting in the past. But the new handguns for self defense are based on a racist white fear, the same sort of thing that led to the white flight from cities in the 1960s like Detroit and Chicago.

Do you know Jennifer Carlson’s work on citizen protection. I think that demand has to be constructed, it is a sort of artificial demand of people being told what they need to do - a particular kind of masculinity - historic masculinity - that sees itself as the keeper of its families, the keeper of its women, patriarchy, and I think that is why, I think that is why Jennifer Carlson’s work is interesting because it sees very much that men are - it’s a psychological condition that men are encouraged to cling to power and clinging to power is via access - they have the car, the gun, the higher income - so this is an element of a patriarchal culture. And in that patriarchal culture, women are there to be protected and be homemakers. It’s not far from a fairly traditional sexual division of labor, which is changing anyways, and in a sense one of the arguments about what we used to call women’s liberation is that what comes with that is also a higher propensity to be involved criminally in less so called chivalrous protection from



the consequences of the law and in a sense having to make it in the man's world. And all of that is part of this mess that we now call gun culture that women are being told that they need to become more involved in to protect themselves because she can't rely on men. It's a construct isn't it? It's a construct of the industry itself.

Katherine: And the gun control politics have introduced these changes in the debate. And in Latin America this is a discussion that is not in the field. Maybe in Europe, in South Africa, but the topic in Latin America is not open for this and its important that we start pushing the discussion. It is not only women in the home that are at risk, women in the public space because they are also owning guns and being involved in crime. Do you think there are some differences between women involved in crime with firearms in relation to men? Even in the United States? In UK? Or in Latin America?

Peter: Involvement in crime at many levels - there was some work done in the UK, idk how relevant it is to Latin America - the argument was that men often act out crimes of violence as part of their own personal macho agendas, whereas women's crimes were often about survival and protection of others so whilst men would rob banks, women would shoplift at the supermarket or involve themselves in check fraud. They would do things to protect families. There is a bit of a stereotype in all of that too. I didn't get a sense that women's involvement in gun crime was changing very much. There has been a certain amount of talk about women in gangs in certain parts of the country, in certain countries, women's involvement in gangs was also increasing but I never really got a strong sense that this was women significantly increasing their involvement in armed crime. I don't think I have seen the research on that so I don't know whether it exists.

Katherine: It is something that is not known, Peter, and that is one of the focuses of Amassurru. We did a big seminar in Argentina in November, trying to disentangle the involvement of women because we have a lot of mixed information. In Latin America we have these matronas, for example in Colombia as you know we have Griselda that is pictured as this very violent women that are engaged against men. We have a caricature of women involved in crime and there are armed women, I like alot this perspective of women in Ukraine, that there are sexy women with firearms, and a lot of the way as women are portrayed as violent but they are also suspect to other characteristics of involvement in crime. I don't know for example, if involvement in Africa is usually very complex in context of conflicts, but here in Latin America we have some documentation of involvement with guns in Central America, in Ecuador, in Guatemala, in Honduras, where everyone is involved where women start to become involved as partners. Also in Colombia we have some examples of "feminism guerillas" that do a very interesting group that we could start to develop. It's a topic that is not developed.

Peter: I could see how that's happening, but on a very small scale I would guess because it seems that guns are overwhelmingly in the hands of men. The other area I didn't really write about was in the whole area of suicide terrorism, whereby its often women who are the walking bomb because they are thought of as less likely to be picked out by security forces. But that's a pretty desperate form of armed women. If cartels and gangs and organized crime



groups are sort of using women in that way it seems to me its as much of a grooming problem as it is...

Katherine: Mhm, there is instrumentalization of violence?

Peter: An instrument of the men who are running the gangs. There have been a number of writers who have tried to excavate a history of a hitherto hidden history of women involved in firearms and I know that that is there, women as outlaws, women in the Amazon tradition, and as you said right up to date, women in the Vietnam war Vietcong, women troops and now in Ukraine. But there is also that other side of this, that highly sexualized version of women and guns where women and guns have a hold on porn area. So there are some very kind of dubious associations between women and guns who are there more for the titillation of men more than anything to do with their own addressing themselves. I am skeptical of some of that but I have not seen the research on that.

Katherine: Yes, that is something I think we will push and this conversation, this dialogue, is something that will help us to push because we are in Latin America in a problem of gun violence so we really need to disentangle to break the different patterns and the different ways to do interventions. We need to start to think in more innovative ways so that would be including gender as an aspect, gender and armed violence and trying to understand what is the role that women can play as you say in prevention of gun violence but also how could we reduce the access of women in gun violence even if its marginal, that adds to the layer of violence

Peter: But if you were seen to be doing that and nothing else, reducing the access of women to guns, I think you would get hammered by the right for exposing women to risk. I mean the number of times I have done a talk about guns for self defense and someone will get up having listened to my talk and say are you not just letting me be raped? And it's very hard to deal with that because it always comes down to the very last instance.

Katherine: it is not an issue to point out but to identify the pattern that could exist and point out that with increasingly levels of violence, for example in Ecuador, it's a country that in the position below the 20th most violence countries and from the Homicide Monitor now with the new homicide calculations its the country with the second highest homicide rate only with the Jamaica at the top. So we have a step increase of violence, Mexico, Brazil, trying to understand the role of women.

KA: So the final question Peter is, and you developed a lot these - what do you think are the specific intervention on gun violence that would consider these gendered perspective to gun control. We talked about demand but could we think about how women are less prone to access firearms could be portrayed in campaigns to recover firearms. What do you think could be these gendered perspectives to gun control considering the position of women?

Peter: Wow, I mean, this has become for me a much more complicated question because as I was talking earlier about the idea of the carceral feminism, one of the last things you want to do is introduce gun controls that empower the police and security forces even more than they are at the moment because they have a pretty bad record for their rather selective often



racist and discriminatory application of the law. We recently had a major case in the UK where a police officer kidnapped a woman and raped and killed her and it opened up a real can of worms about misogyny in police forces themselves. The one thing that this inquiry found, is that because we do not routinely have armed policing in Britain, is that what was found in this national inquiry was that the armed units within policing were the most macho, most patriarchal, most misogynistic, most violent military of any police units. The problem of saying to police forces that we want you to do more about guns in poor communities, is that you just transform more power to a group of police and security forces that you don't trust anyways. So I think that in a way, women's organizations and community organizations have to be very careful in terms of the agreements or arrangements they make for liaison with state forces because they can turn around and bite them in a very bad way.

I think something has to be done in terms of who can lawfully own guns, but the problem of who can lawfully own guns is that you then transfer the problem to a load of criminal guns that are not licensed and not regulated at all. At least with lawfully owned guns you might know who has got them and where they are. If you try to impose too tough gun control all you do is ship them out and no one knows where. I think there is a strong case for a network or neighborhood community intelligence, people have to be willing to anonymously report like there used to be about child abuse cases, there should be a line where people can call to say there is an illegal gun somewhere. But then the trouble is police are going to come in to raid - to find it - and that again could be more problematic. I think there were some interesting examples in a number of African societies about getting guns out of houses out of communities, but it was a lot of classic DDR work within communities incentivizing people to get rid of guns and buy farming and household equipment. So some kind of technology question. We'll take your gun but give you a new cooker or a new fridge. So it's anything to reduce the overall number of guns and increase surveillance of them at a community level. But I think they are still quite problematic because they often involve working with the state, so I think you need active community third sector organizations working there that can develop a level of trust and confidence outside the state, that have the kind of capacity to do this sort of work, but it's a long shot, it's difficult.

Katherine: Yes, I think my perspective, Peter, on that field is starting with the more involvement of women in all the treaties, and international discussions of firearms. Women are more involved in the ATT. We already have gendered violence as a risk factor that could allow a country to not get a license to export firearms, so in the international field that's and also we have some references that the involvement of women in peace accords is like the key aspect to the peace accords to be long lasting and in Liberia and Colombia, this is the first part. The second part is the involvement of - to put together gun control in the cases where men is related to gun violence and domestic violence, to put in line interventions to reduce femicide and guns. If you have a house where you have some ideas to have domestic violence to retrieve the firearms from the house and this is at the top of the discussion on gun control in Latin America with the perspective of policies to reduce femicide. And on the part of the discussion is to try to disentangle and include these gender perspectives in campaigns and communications. I think this is what we are doing now but as you say we could not put women



at risk in trying to put the women in front of the discussion. So Peter I think that was the question we had.

Peter: What I am worried about slightly is, you know I come at this as a criminologist, and I think this debate is not about individual crimes and individual incidents and abuses, this is a question about almost global and national politics. And somewhere between the two, the incident on the ground that shows there's a problem has to be connected up - and I have never really been good at - I am a member of the UK gun control network which formed after Dunblane but we don't have that big a problem, but countries that do have a big problem, I think as you are saying organizations like Small Arms Survey, IANSA, other kind of disarmament groups have got a handle on the much bigger picture. Those need to be connected up.

I think things like, anyone with a domestic violence arrest cannot own a firearm, anyone with a gang background cannot own a firearm, anyone with a drug problem, and the gun has to be seen as community property. So if a man wants to own a gun he has got to talk to his neighbors to get them to say it's alright. We are moving towards this in the UK, if a man wants a firearms license he's got to take to his partner, she's got to agree. If there are children in the house she has definitely got to agree, neighbors need to be okay with it and a doctor needs to know and the information systems need to be able to talk to one another.

Katherine: In Argentina, there is a system that when someone wants to access a firearm, they appear in a public list, and people can refuse. And the biggest number of refusals come from women saying 'no, this man cannot have a firearm,' so these are simple interventions that could be developed. Say, there is a public list for those with access to firearms so everyone knows for legal guns.

Peter: That is absolutely the right kind of thing. I read, my colleague Roxana, who was from Brazil, told me that during the time of the referendum in Brazil, there were also women who almost went on a sex strike and denied their partners. That kind of grassroots widespread politicization of an issue.

Katherine: In Colombia too.

Peter: I don't know whether it really worked or whether it was a gimmick but its a way of taking it beyond just a question of my gun my right to have it but almost rendering yourself accountable in the context of something that really changes the power relations between you and anyone else around you that doesn't have a gun. I think it's - the ownership of these things need to be accountable, it needs to be regulated, and like you said, it needs to be visible, and can raise questions about it. We don't even have that in this country which talks about itself as a safe society. And yet, the irony of it is, like in America they have got this misunderstood right to bear on which people latch onto and feel is their god given right. And you will know yourself, that when the UN was looking at the programme of action on SALW, America was refusing to sign and talking about the global right to own a gun as if the second amendment was a global entitlement and somehow saw the UN as almost changing the American constitution. There is so much myth here that I despair about getting a sensible conversation on it with the other side because they are so implacably committed to this as an individual



right issue. I did a debate with Wayne LaPierre, who used to be the Vice-President of the NRA, and his starting line was, 'the only people who have ever been free have been armed people. Guns will set us free.' And whilst people sort of start from that point I worry that we will ever get to a sensible view, particularly while states endorse that kind of view. Anyways, well.

Katherine: Okay, Peter thank you alot.

Peter: It's been great to talk. Let's stay in touch.