



## ‘Catching up with the curve’: the participation of women in disarmament diplomacy

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*Though it cannot be up to women alone to capture gendered impacts in treaty texts and outcome documents, their perspective has often helped to pave the way. Research shows that women’s participation in a negotiation process is more likely to lead to the inclusion of gender provisions.*

*In this post, ICRC Senior Arms Adviser Véronique Christory shares a personal reflection on how the involvement of women in disarmament negotiations has grown over the last 20 years, the tools that have helped spur this advancement, and the ups and downs along the way.*

ICRC Humanitarian Law & Policy Blog · 'Catching up with the curve': the participation of women in disarmament diplomacy

I remember being present at the UN Security Council in 2000 during the adoption of the landmark *resolution 1325* on Women, Peace and Security. This resolution formally acknowledged the changing nature of warfare, in which civilians are increasingly targeted, and how women continue to be excluded from participation in peace processes. It specifically addressed how women and girls are disproportionately impacted by armed conflict and violence and recognized the critical role that women can and already do play in peacebuilding efforts. UNSCR 1325 stressed the importance of women's 'equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution' (preamble para. 5).

The incredible normative power of this text and subsequent resolutions has been used to advocate for increased participation of women in formal peace negotiations, the military, peacekeeping and post-conflict governance bodies. It has been a driving force for inclusion and, with time, its perspectives have been mainstreamed in multilateral arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament negotiations.

Progress has certainly been slow. Before UNSCR 1325, women were largely absent from disarmament diplomacy. Even in 2012, there were no women in the first Group of Governmental Experts on outer space. Likely cognizant of the slow rate of progress, in 2018, in *Securing our Common Future: An Agenda for Disarmament*, UN Secretary-General António Guterres prioritized gender parity as 'a moral duty and an operational necessity'. Today – of milestone significance – the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs and High Representative for the Secretary-General is led by a woman, Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu. Many States, international organizations, civil society organizations, and academics have also stressed the importance of including the voices of women in disarmament and international security negotiations.

In other words, progress is weak, but it still has a pulse.

'*Still behind the curve*' is a captivating study published by the UN Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) in 2019, presenting quantitative analysis and key figures illustrating the gender balance in multilateral forums dealing with arms control, non-proliferation, and disarmament diplomacy. The study demonstrates two main avenues through which gender perspectives can be addressed. The first track focuses on 'promoting gender equality and improving women's meaningful participation and agency in disarmament diplomacy'. The second track involves 'applying gender analysis (or a "gender lens"); that is, considering how gender norms – the attributes, opportunities, and relationships associated with a gender identity – shape how weapons are seen and used in society, as well as the impacts of weapons and violence'.

The ICRC plays a leading role in the promotion and development of laws regulating the use of weapons, as international humanitarian law (IHL) imposes limits on the choice and use of weapons and prohibits or restricts the use of specific ones. For the last quarter of a century, I have been participating in all major negotiations and discussions at the United Nations related to weapons issues. I have witnessed first-hand the increased participation of women in various disarmament fora, as well as the inclusion of gender references in resolutions and treaties.

## Gender in action in treaty negotiation: women in the room and gender in the text

I have been privileged to be part of the negotiations leading to the historic adoption of the *Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons* (TPNW) in 2017. Nuclear weapons have always been immoral, and since the treaty entered into force in January 2021, they are now also illegal for States parties. The leadership, determination, and dedication of women as diplomats, activists and survivors of atomic testing and bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the process, inside and outside the conference rooms, has been outstanding. Women occupied prominent positions in the negotiation: the chairperson was Costa Rican Ambassador Elayne White Gomez, and women were among the heads of delegation of some of the most active States in the deliberations (e.g. Ireland, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland and Thailand).[1] Women at all levels of the ICRC have been a driving force during the negotiations of the TPNW. The delegation itself was led also by a woman.

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons is a beacon of hope in many respects, including in the way it incorporated a gender perspective in its text. The preamble of the treaty recognizes the importance of 'equal, full and effective participation of both women and men for promoting peace and security as well as the engagement of women in nuclear disarmament'. The TPNW also acknowledges the disproportionate impact of nuclear weapons on women and girls. It calls on States parties to provide gender-sensitive victim assistance (Article 6).

The TPNW is the first nuclear weapons treaty to include these types of acknowledgements and calls. While it has been established that women and children are disproportionately affected by ionizing radiation, little is known about its effects on reproductive health, though some *documentation* has been undertaken. As mentioned in the ICRC Working Paper submitted to First Meeting of States Parties to the TPNW, 'the role of biological sex as a factor in radiation harm among adults and children is an area for future research'.[2]

The 2017 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons. ICAN was represented by two women, Ms. Beatrice Fihn, its Executive Director, and Ms. Setsuko Thurlow, a *hibakusha* (nuclear weapon survivor), who delivered the Nobel Peace Prize lecture. I was honored to be present at this unforgettable ceremony.

The increased participation and leadership of women in the UN Open-Ended Working Groups on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security (OEWGs on ICTs/Cyber) is also a welcome development. This has a clear correlation to the 'Women in International Security and Cyberspace Fellowship', created in 2020 by Australia – notably by the determination of cyber team leaders *Johanna Weaver* and *Briony Daley Whitworth* – together with Canada, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. I am privileged to be involved in this unique program, which supports attendance at the OEWG and delivers negotiation skills training to more than 50 mid-career women diplomats and cyber experts from around the globe, from Malaysia to Colombia, from South Africa to Indonesia.

In March 2022, during the second session of the current OEWG, out of 280 statements, over 120 were made by women, with a particularly high number on the international law segment. Some 50% of diplomats taking the floor were women – including those representing the ICRC – to discuss the applicability of international law, including IHL in cyberspace.

A group chat of all the Women Fellows and the UN Women in Cyber LinkedIn group allow us to share timely info, guidance, and support each other on various issues related to cybersecurity. We are all conscious of the need and the importance of narrowing the gender digital divide. To better understand how gender shapes specific cybersecurity activities, the report *Gender Approaches to Cybersecurity* from UNIDIR proposes 'a new cyber-centric framework based on the three pillars of design, defence and response, aligned with prevalent perspectives among cybersecurity practitioners and policymakers'. In each of these three pillars, the research identifies distinct dimensions of cyber-related activities that need to be considered from a gender perspective. As demonstrated by Deborah Brown and Allison Pytlak in their report *Why gender matters in international security*, the problem of gender diversity is not a 'cyber' problem, but a broader societal one which manifests as gender inequality in cyber security spaces. To address this, broader changes in the overall culture is vital.

## Four tools of the trade

Over my years in negotiating rooms, I have seen that a few different tools can help advance the inclusion of women in the disarmament sector.

One of these is clear commitments from leadership. I am a proponent of the initiative of 'boycotting all-male panels'. In 2014, a couple of men pledged not to speak on all-male panels in global disarmament. This followed an expert meeting on autonomous weapons at the United Nations where men took up all 18 expert speaking slots. Initially, the initiative was a response to the invitation by women in the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots not to speak on all-male panels. The purpose was to draw attention to the issue and get people to think about it. The initiative has been taken seriously by the ICRC President, who is also part of *the International Gender Champions (IGC)*, 'a leadership network that brings together female and male decision-makers determined to break down gender barriers and make gender equality a working reality in their spheres of influence'.<sup>[3]</sup>

It's also worth specifically praising civil society, which has consistently done much better than States at both including gender-related issues in their statements and positions, and in ensuring that women get equal (or disproportionately high) speaking time among civil society representatives.

Second, it helps to be clear-eyed and keep track of where we are. During the 2021 session of the UN General Assembly First Committee (Disarmament and International Peace and Security) 137 States made statements – although only 33 were delivered by women, including the ICRC. It is indicative of the long way to go in achieving equal gender participation and representation, and the First Committee has since continued to increase its incorporation of gender related issues and considerations. According to *WILPF*, 'an unprecedented number of resolutions include gender references: 19 resolutions out of 61 resolutions, or 31 per cent out of all adopted resolutions call for women's equal participation; stress the gendered impacts of weapon systems and armed violence; and/or underscore the need for gender considerations in disarmament efforts more broadly. For comparison, in 2020, 25 per cent out of all adopted resolutions included gender references, while this was only 12 per cent in 2015.'

Third, everyone has a role to play. All the 'first' and positive examples mentioned should become the norm and not the exception. We have all a personal and collective responsibility to catch up with the curve. It begins in our families, at school, at work, in our society. There is always room for more progress.

Finally, we can embrace mainstreaming of a gender perspective throughout the processes that develop and apply international law. The ICRC, in its new Report on *Gendered impacts of armed conflict and implication of international humanitarian law*, notes that 'efforts to promote awareness and implementation of IHL could add value to the UN Security Council's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda, and vice versa'. To this end, the ICRC recommends that as part of the implementation of their IHL obligations and the WPS agenda, States could commit to interpreting IHL with a gender perspective.

Challenges in disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation are daunting. New technologies of warfare are developed at high speed. Crucial discussions and negotiations on cyberspace, on outer space and on the prohibition and regulation of autonomous weapons systems, to name a few, are on the way. In all these debates and deliberations, the need for full, active, and equal participation of half of the global population has never been more important, not 'only' for the sake of women, but for the sake of all humanity.

[1] R. Acheson "The Nuclear Ban and the Patriarchy: A Feminist Analysis of the Opposition to Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons", *Critical Studies on Security*.

[2] ICRC Working Paper for the MSP1 of the TPNW (not yet published).

[3] The ICG initiative was co-founded by former UN Geneva Director-General *Michael Møller* and former US Ambassador to the UN in Geneva *Pamela Hamamoto* and Women@TheTable CEO/Founder *Caitlin Kraft-Buchman* in 2015. The network numbers over *250 active Champions* and **160 Alumni** who are the heads of International Organizations, Permanent Missions, and Civil Society Organizations.

## See also

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