Gender and disarmament
Reaching Critical Will

Background
The negative impacts on our society of patriarchy and male privilege are perhaps nowhere more pervasive and pernicious than in the field of weapons, war, and militarism. By consequence, much of the discussion on disarmament perpetuates the highly problematic gender constructions of men who are violent and powerful and women that are vulnerable and need to be protected. Gender perspectives in disarmament, peace, and security must be about exposing and challenging this state of affairs, not about including more women in the existing systems of structural inequalities and violent masculinities.

Gender issues intersect with weapons issues in at least three ways:

Gendered impacts of the use and trade of weapons. Women and men can suffer disproportionate or differential impacts from the use or proliferation of weapons, inside or outside of armed conflict. Men tend to make up the majority of direct victims of armed violence. Sometimes, they are targeted just for being men. Women, however, can face differential impacts from the use of weapons such as exacerbated social and political inequalities and pressures from the increase in female-headed households; inequalities in access to survivor assistance; and higher risk of sexual violence, especially when they are displaced from their homes. Women are the majority of victims of gender-based violence, which is directed at a person because of their sex. However, gender-based violence is also directed at a person because of their gender identity or sexual orientation, or perceived transgressions of gender norms.

Gender diversity in disarmament. There is a stark disparity in the level and volume of participation of women, men, and others in disarmament and arms control discussions, negotiations, and processes. Recent research has shown that at any given intergovernmental meeting on disarmament, only about one quarter of participants are likely to be women and almost half of all delegations are likely to be composed entirely of men. This underrepresentation is fueled in part by the tendency to treat women as vulnerable victims, usually grouped together with children and the elderly—this framing reinforces persistent constructions of women as the “weaker sex” in need of protection by “powerful” men and enable women’s continued exclusion from authoritative social and political roles. Meanwhile, the framing of all military-aged men as “potential” or actual militants entrenches a tendency to support “violent masculinities”—a social construction in which masculinity is linked with preparedness to use military action and to wield weapons.

Gendered perspectives on disarmament and arms control. The framing of women as weak
and vulnerable is also often used to construct “a feminized and devalued notion of peace as unattainable, unrealistic, passive, and (it might be said) undesirable.” This devaluation, coupled with the equation of masculinity with violence, gives war positive value as a show of masculine power. This means that even if women do participate in negotiations or discussions on matters related to peace and security, their positions or ideas are often forced to conform to the dominant perspective in order to be taken seriously. This is not to say that women bring one perspective to a conversation and men bring another. It rather highlights the gendered understandings of war and peace, disarmament and armament, strength and weakness, which dictate what is considered “acceptable” by the dominant perspective in such conversations.

Current context
UN Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and its follow-up resolutions provide a political framework recognising that men and women experience wars differently. It requires these differences be taken into account and recognises that women’s full and equal participation in all aspects and stages of peace processes is essential to building sustainable peace. In 2010, the General Assembly began to consider the specific implications of 1325 for disarmament with the adoption of resolution 65/69 on “Women, disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation”. In 2014, the UNGA adopted a fourth resolution on this subject, which urges member states and other relevant actors to promote equal opportunities for women in disarmament decision-making processes and to support and strengthen the effective participation of women in the field of disarmament.

While important, promoting women’s participation does not fully address the need for incorporating a gender perspective into the
implementation weapons-related instruments. A more robust reflection of the relationship between weapons and gender-based violence, differential impacts of the use of weapons or of the arms trade on the sexes, and gendered aspects of armed conflict and armed violence are crucial to addressing the challenges associated with the proliferation and use of weapons in and out of conflict. The inclusion in the Arms Trade Treaty of a legally-binding provision on preventing armed gender-based violence is a good example of such efforts, but much more is needed.

**Recommendations**

**During the First Committee, delegations should:**
- Welcome the inclusion of the provision on gender-based violence in the ATT and highlight the need for implementation of this criterion;
- Highlight the need to ensure gender diversity in disarmament discussions and negotiations and gender and sexual diversity in their delegations;
- Share their experiences with ensuring gender perspectives in disarmament policies and initiatives; and
- Submit reports to the Secretary-General on their implementation of the UNGA resolution on women and disarmament.

**Beyond First Committee, states and other actors should:**
- Avoid gender essentialisms, victimisation of women, and reinforcement of violent masculinities in resolutions and action plans on disarmament and arms control;
- Effectively implement the ATT provision against GBV by training export licence officials and updating their risk assessment procedures accordingly;
- Seek to ensure gender diversity in discussions, negotiations, and peace processes;
- Continue to research and assess the specific impact that weapons and armed conflict have on people of different sexes in order to ensure a gender perspective in all policies on weapons and disarmament initiatives; and
- Invest in gender equality and other human rights and sustainable development goals instead of militarism.

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