Gender and disarmament
Reaching Critical Will/WILPF

Background

On 27 March 2017, the US ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, opened a press conference opposing negotiations of the Treaty for Prohibition on Nuclear Weapons by stating, “First and foremost I’m a mom, I’m a wife, I’m a daughter.” And, “as a mom, as a daughter, there’s nothing I want more for my family than a world without nuclear weapons. But we have to be realistic” (emphasis added).

Ambassador Haley’s statements are rooted in patriarchy. She identifies the desire for disarmament with her womanhood, but connects her desire to “protect” her family to the “necessity” of retaining nuclear weapons. She links caring about humanitarian concerns to being weak and not relevant for the job of “protecting” one’s people. This approach—taken by many governments previously, including during First Committee debates’—not only suggests that caring about the use of nuclear weapons is silly, but also makes the pursuit of disarmament out to be an unrealistic, irrational, and even “emotional” objective.

By consequence, achieving disarmament becomes relegated to the realm of fantasy while in reality, military budgets continue to rise and increasingly high-tech weapons of violence are developed and deployed. This must be challenged, and a gender perspective is useful for doing so.

Employing a gender perspective means investigating and analysing the ways in which weapons and war are coded with gender norms. The framing of war and violence as “strong” and “masculine” is often coupled with a framing of peace and disarmament as “weak” and “feminine”.

Changing these norms can be aided by increasing 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.

Yet women often suffer disproportionate or differential harm from the development, use, and trade of weapons. 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 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.
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 UN General Assembly (UNGA) 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 2016, the UNGA adopted a fifth resolution on this subject, which urges member states and others 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.

Recent nuclear weapon forums have taken forward this charge. The Chair’s summary of the 2017 nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Preparatory Committee reflects that NPT states parties “emphasized the importance of promoting the equal, full and effective participation of both women and men in the process of nuclear non-proliferation, nuclear disarmament and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.” It draws out research brought to the Preparatory Committee by Ireland showing that women’s participation in NPT meetings is lower than in other multilateral forums, and notes that states parties “were encouraged, in accordance with their commitments under United Nations Security Council resolution 1325, actively to support participation of female delegates in their own NPT delegations and through support for sponsorship programs.”

The Chair’s summary also recognises the “disproportionate gendered impact of ionizing radiation,” as does the new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. The nuclear weapon ban treaty, adopted 7 July 2017, recognizes that nuclear weapons “have a disproportionate impact on women and girls, including as a result of ionizing radiation.” The treaty also recognises “that the equal, full and effective participation of both women and men is an essential factor for the promotion and attainment of sustainable peace and security, and committed to supporting and strengthening the effective participation of women in nuclear disarmament.”

These developments are very welcome. They should be used to increase women’s participation in disarmament and to encourage efforts in other forums, including toward the achievement of relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and to highlight disproportionate impacts where relevant. However, a more robust reflection of the relationship between weapons and gender-based violence, and other 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.

Recommendations

During the First Committee, delegations should:

- Welcome the gender perspectives included in the 2017 NPT Chair’s summary and the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and commit to advancing the goals contained therein
- Welcome the inclusion of the provision on gender-based violence in the Arms Trade Treaty
and highlight the need for implementation of this aspect of the Treaty;
• 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;
• Submit reports to the Secretary-General on their implementation of the UNGA resolution on women and disarmament; and
• Continue work began this year on strengthening gender perspectives in effective small arms control to ensure this is an area of focus at the 2018 Review Conference of the UN Programme of Action.

Beyond First Committee, states and others 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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1 See for example Ray Acheson, “Full-spectrum change,” First Committee Monitor, 2015, No. 2, Reaching Critical Will of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, 19 October 2015; Ray Acheson, “First Committee fairy tales and a measure of reason,” First Committee Monitor, 2016, No. 3, 17 October 2016; Statement by Jean-Hughes Simon-Michel to the UN General Assembly First Committee, New York, 7 October 2014; Statement by Rose E. Gottemoeller to the UN General Assembly First Committee, New York, 7 October 2014.
3 Women and multilateral forums: Pattern of underrepresentation, Article 36, October 2015.
4 Sex and drone strikes: gender and identity in targeting and casualty analysis, Reaching Critical Will of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and Article 36, October 2014.
5 Women and explosive weapons, Reaching Critical Will of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, February 2014.