Gender and disarmament

Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom

Background

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.

The negative impacts on our society of patriarchy are perhaps nowhere more pervasive and pernicious than in the field of weapons, war, and militarism. By consequence, the dominant discourse on these subjects tends to perpetuate 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 must be about exposing and challenging war and violence, not about including more women in the existing systems of structural inequalities and violent masculinities.

Current context

Recently, some disarmament forums have taken forward this charge. The UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, adopted in July 2017, 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.” The Chair’s summary of the 2017 nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Preparatory Committee, reflects that NPT 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 final report of the Third Review Conference of the UN Programme of Action on small arms and light weapons (SALW) recognises the importance of eradicating the illicit trade in SALW for combating gender-based violence, and the need for states to mainstream gender dimensions in their implementation of the Programme of Action, among other things. A growing number of organisations are developing guidance to aid states in assessing the risk of gender-based violence when considering arms transfers, in line with commitments under the Arms Trade Treaty. At the Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW), the government of Canada hosted a side event with several civil society groups to provide an intersectional feminist analysis of autonomous weapon systems.

These developments are very welcome and should be continued and further developed in as many disarmament forums as possible. 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 recent forums and commit to advancing the goals contained therein;
- Collaborate to make First Committee resolutions more gender-sensitive;
- 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
- Share their experiences with ensuring gender perspectives in disarmament policies and initiatives.

_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 diverse populations;
- Promote practical linkages between the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 5, and arms control and disarmament initiatives; and
- Invest in gender equality and other human rights and sustainable development goals instead of militarism.

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Gender is not about sex (i.e. men, women, trans, intersex) but about the socially constructed norms and expectations about how we are supposed to perform based on our embodied sex.


This means looking at the cross-sections of identity and privilege, including sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, ability, etc. These factors should be taken into account when looking at increasing the diversity of participation and the impacts of weapons and conflict.