Gender and disarmament
Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom

Background
Employing a gender perspective\(^1\) means investigating and analysing the ways in which weapons and war are coded with gender norms. Feminist scholars and activists have shown that 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. The framing of war and violence as “strong” and “masculine” is often coupled with a framing of peace and nonviolence as “weak” and “feminine”.\(^2\) In this context, weapons are typically seen as important for security, power, and control. Disarmament is treated as something that makes people or countries weaker or more susceptible to attack.

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 gender non-conforming people 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.\(^3\)

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.\(^4\) 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.\(^5\) LGBT+ people can also face harm from armed gender-based violence.

Current context
The interest in the topic of “gender and disarmament” continues to grow in international forums. At the Fifth Conference of States Parties to the Arms Trade Treaty in August 2019, states endorsed a set of recommendations related to implementing the Treaty’s gender provisions, including its legally binding criterion to assess the risk of gender-based violence when making arms export decisions. Ahead of the conference WILPF and the Irish mission hosted a training for delegates on the Treaty’s gender provisions and there were numerous related side events throughout the conference.

In October 2019, the Canadian mission worked with governments and civil society to achieve
language in 17 First Committee resolutions advocating for women's equal participation, recognising gendered impacts of weapons, and/or urging consideration of gender perspectives more broadly. This accounts for 25 per cent of all First Committee resolutions in 2018. Six of these resolutions included gendered language for the first time, while three improved the gendered language. The number of First Committee delegations speaking about gender and disarmament in their statements also continued to increase, and Namibia on behalf of 56 states dedicated a whole statement to this topic, urging examination of how “underlying assumptions about how gender shapes [delegations'] own work and the dynamics of joint disarmament efforts.”

Earlier that year, UN Secretary-General António Guterres launched his new disarmament agenda, Securing our Common Future, which makes several references to the gendered impacts of weapons, gender-sensitive arms control, or women's participation in disarmament, including urging states to incorporate gender perspectives in their national legislation and policies on disarmament and arms control.

This builds on recognition in 2017 from the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty about the need for gender diversity in disarmament, and from the Third Review Conference of the UN Programme of Action (UNPoA) on small arms and light weapons (SALW) in 2018, which recognised the need for states to mainstream gender dimensions in their implementation of the UNPoA.

These developments are very welcome and should be continued and enhanced in as many disarmament forums as possible. However, a more robust reflection of the gendered norms associated with weapons, war, and violence, is also crucial for effectively addressing the challenges associated with the proliferation and use of weapons in and out of conflict.

Recommendations

During First Committee, delegations should:
• Welcome the gender perspectives included in recent forums and documents, and commit to advancing the goals contained therein;
• Ensure that gains made on gender in the 2018 First Committee are maintained and expanded;
• 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 and other forms of diversity in disarmament discussions and negotiations; and
• Share their experiences with ensuring gender perspectives in disarmament policies and initiatives.

Beyond First Committee, states and other actors should:
• Avoid gender essentialisms and reinforcement of violent masculinities in resolutions and action plans on disarmament and arms control;
• Effectively implement the Arms Trade Treaty provision against gender-based violence;
• Seek to ensure gender and other forms of diversity in disarmament and arms control.
discussions, negotiations, and peace processes;

- Continue to research and assess the specific impact that weapons, armed conflict, and armed violence have on diverse populations;

- Promote practical linkages between the Sustainable Development Goals and the Women, Peace, and Security agenda and disarmament initiatives; and

- Invest in gender equality and other human rights and sustainable development instead of militarism.

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1 Gender is not about sex but about the socially constructed norms and expectations about how we are supposed to act based on our sex.


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.