Statement by the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom to the 2018 NPT Preparatory Committee, Geneva, 25 April 2018

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Our statement today will cover two distinct yet equally important issues.

The first is the expansion, development, or “modernisation” of nuclear arsenals. Such programmes are not just about increasing the safety and security of nuclear weapon systems, as is what is often claimed. In many cases, the “upgrades” provide entirely new capabilities to the weapon system. As one state party noted during the general debate, the confluence between new technologies and traditional deterrence approaches presents a potentially “disastrous mix”.

Let’s consider a few examples, taken from the 2018 edition of Assuring destruction forever, published last week and available on our website.¹

China’s modernisation programme is adding significant new capabilities to its nuclear forces. It has recently sped up the modernisation of its sea-based strategic force, replacing its first generation ballistic nuclear missile-carrying submarines. Some analysts have also argued that China is currently modernising its sea-based strategic force in order to secure a second-strike force.

The UK’s extensive modernisation programmes are an indication of the country’s intention to retain nuclear weapons indefinitely, contrary to legal obligations that already exist. The decision of its parliament in July 2016 to renew Trident will come at an anticipated cost of £31 billion.

France is in the middle of a broad modernisation of its nuclear forces involving submarines, aircraft, missiles, warheads, and production facilities. Studies of next-generation weapon systems have begun. There is no indication of plans to reduce its nuclear forces.

The Russian Federation is undertaking a thorough modernisation of its armed forces that is supposed to replace its Soviet-built arsenals with modern weapons. In 2018 Russia revealed publicly a number of programmes that were described as development of strategic systems designed to counter the deployment of US missile defense.

Modernisation is giving US ballistic missile warheads much greater accuracy and dramatically more hard-target kill capability. The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review will also create additional low-yield nuclear weapons based at sea. The NPR points out that “deterring nuclear attack is not the sole purpose of nuclear weapons.” Instead those purposes include “achievement of US objectives if deterrence fails” potentially implying use of nuclear weapons.

As we have heard from other speakers before me, these modernisation policies and plans are incompatible with international law including Article VI of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

This review cycle should seek outcomes that reflect the serious concern expressed by many states parties about modernisation and development of nuclear weapon systems, including as an entrenchment of double standards, and call for the cessation of such programmes.

The second subject that WILPF will speak to is gender. The growing interest that NPT states parties are demonstrating in this subject is very welcome, and past due. It builds clearly on statements made in the 2017 NPT Preparatory Committee about improving women’s participation in nuclear disarmament and also the gendered impacts of nuclear weapons use and testing; points that were further reinforced in the Chair's factual summary. The reflection of these points in the preamble of the recently adopted Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons is unprecedented in a nuclear weapons agreement.

Sometimes we are asked, what is the added value in adopting a gendered approach? As we have learned from other experiences such as peace processes, including a gender perspective will highlight other understandings of war and peace, disarmament and armament, strength and weakness, all of which dictate what is considered “acceptable” by the dominant discourse in such conversations. It can challenge the established pattern of power relations, thereby moving facilitating movement on the disarmament agenda. For the same reason that we strive for diversity in other respects, gender diversity ensures the inclusion of a wider-range of views and newer approaches, particularly when incorporated from the beginning, and not as an after thought.

In an increase since 2017, we have noted that women’s participation has been referenced by over a dozen delegations and the conference Chair; around 10 statements describe the value of gender analysis, and at least one has specifically referenced the gender-based impact of nuclear weapons.

This is most welcome but we encourage states parties, and international organisations, to go beyond statements they deliver in this room and act on their words. One way to do so is improve gender diversity on delegations, in meetings, and panel discussions. This should not be tokenistic however but meaningful and from the bottom up. More broadly, incorporate a gender analysis into programming, policy, and communication on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. WILPF looks forward to being your partner in this work.

Thank you.

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