

Gender and Nuclear Weapons

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In the 25 years since the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action was adopted, the relationship between women and disarmament has been recognised in a series of resolutions at the United Nations.

[United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325](#) established the Women, Peace and Security Agenda and “makes the pursuit of gender equality relevant to every single Security Council action, ranging from elections to disarmament efforts.”¹ [United Nations General Assembly Resolution 65/69](#) on “Women, disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation” was adopted in 2010.² [United Nations General Assembly Resolution 67/48](#), adopted in 2012, 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, including through capacity-building efforts, in the field of disarmament.³ Given the clear relationship between nuclear weapons and gender, nuclear disarmament must be raised in conversations about gender, women’s rights and equality.

Bringing a gender perspective on nuclear weapons is important for three key reasons.

The use or testing of nuclear weapons disproportionately harm women and girls.

Women in Hiroshima and Nagasaki had [nearly double the risk](#) of developing and dying from solid cancer due to ionizing radiation exposure. Research from Chernobyl indicates that girls are [considerably more likely](#) than boys to develop thyroid cancer from nuclear fallout.⁴ Pregnant women exposed to nuclear radiation face a [greater likelihood](#) of delivering children with physical malformations and stillbirths, leading to increased maternal mortality.⁵ And yet, official evaluations have not considered gender- and age- sensitive impacts, meaning that the harm of ionizing radiation has been systematically [under-estimated and under-reported](#).⁶

Despite the disproportionate effects, women are under-represented in decision-making regarding nuclear weapons.

At any given meeting of international diplomatic meetings on nuclear weapons, only around a quarter of official country delegates [are likely to be women](#), and less than a fifth of statements are likely to be given by a woman.⁷ Almost half of all country delegations at any of these meetings are likely to be composed entirely of men.

¹ United Nations Security Council. 2000. Resolution 1325 (2000). S/RES/1325.

² United Nations General Assembly. 2010. 65/69. Women, disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control. A/RES/65/69.

³ United Nations General Assembly. 2012. Women, disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control. A/C.1/67/L.35/Rev.1.

⁴ Dimmen, Anne Guro. “Gendered Impacts: The humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons from a gender perspective,” UNIDIR, 2014.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Olsen, Mary. “Human consequences of radiation: a gender factor in atomic harm,” Civil Society Engagement in the Disarmament Processes, UN Office of Disarmament Office, 2016.

⁷ Article 36, “Women and multilateral disarmament forums: patterns of under-representations,” October 2015.

The discourse around nuclear weapons is highly gendered.

Being ready to use nuclear weapons [is seen as](#) masculine and strong, while wanting to disarm is often described as feminine and weak.⁸ This skewed view of what's seen as rational and strong shapes the narrative around nuclear weapons by decision-makers, media, and advocates. As just one example, U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze [called](#) U.S. President John F. Kennedy a “pantywaist,” for making more cautious decisions about nuclear war.⁹

[The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#) is the first international treaty on nuclear weapons to address gender and nuclear weapons. Its references to the role of women and disproportionate impact of women [are unprecedented](#) in international weapons treaties.¹⁰

Preamble:

Cognizant that the catastrophic consequences of nuclear weapons cannot be adequately addressed, transcend national borders, pose grave implications for human survival, the environment, socioeconomic development, the global economy, food security and the health of current and future generations, **and have a disproportionate impact on women and girls, including as a result of ionizing radiation,**

Recognizing 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,**

Article 6

1. Each State Party shall, with respect to individuals under its jurisdiction who are affected by the use or testing of nuclear weapons, in accordance with applicable international humanitarian and human rights law, adequately provide age- and **gender-sensitive assistance**, without discrimination, including medical care, rehabilitation and psychological support, as well as provide for their social and economic inclusion

The negotiations of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons featured female leaders. Many of the most active delegations were [led by women](#), including Ireland, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland and Thailand, and Elayne Whyte Gomez of Costa Rica was the negotiating conference president.¹¹ The negotiations included civil society and international organisations led by women, who provided substantive input throughout. [The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom](#), the oldest international women's peace organisation, was one of the leading civil society organisations in the negotiations.¹²

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons is a landmark disarmament treaty addressing the gendered impacts and [challenging the dominant gendered narrative](#) about nuclear weapons.

⁸ Cohn, Carol. “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals.” *Signs*, vol. 12, no. 4, 1987, pp. 687–718.

⁹ Cohn, Carol, “The Perils of Mixing Masculinity and Missiles,” *New York Times*, January 5, 2018.

¹⁰ Jenkins, Bonnie. “How a U.N. treaty on nuclear weapons makes international security policy more inclusive,” *The Brookings Institution*, July 12, 2017.

¹¹ Dalaqua, Renata, Egeland, Kjølv, and Hugo, Torbjørn Graff. “Still Behind the Curve: Gender Balance in Arms Control, Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Diplomacy,” UNIDIR, 2019.

¹² Read more about the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom's work on gender and weapons here: <http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/resources/publications-and-research/research-projects/10637-bringing-feminist-perspectives-to-disarmament>

¹³ Joining the TPNW indicates clear support for the role of women in nuclear disarmament, effective steps to address the disproportionate harm of nuclear weapons on women and girls and an embrace of feminist and human-based approaches to security.

In order to fully implement the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, states must address the specific impact of nuclear weapons on women and girls, work to ensure full representation of women in weapons negotiations and sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

¹³ Ray Acheson (2019) *The nuclear ban and the patriarchy: a feminist analysis of opposition to prohibiting nuclear weapons*, *Critical Studies on Security*, 7:1, 78–82, DOI: [10.1080/21624887.2018.1468127](https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2018.1468127).