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EN-GENDERING NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT

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More than two decades ago, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted Resolution 1325, linking gender to international peace and security. The resolution reaffirmed the role of women in conflict prevention and resolution, peace negotiations, and peacebuilding, among other aspects. Nine additional resolutions later, Women, Peace and Security (WPS) now stands as one of the main thematic pillars of UNSC's work, acknowledging that discussions on peace and security benefit not only from gender equality but also from gender perspectives.

Thanks to the mandates of the landmark UNSCR 1325, larger numbers of women have entered the peace and security space. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have further bridged the divide between the so-called "soft" issue areas of development, traditionally associated with women and civil society organisations, and the "hard" issue areas of security, predominantly inhabited by men.

Despite this landmark resolution, however, the national and international security fields remain male-dominated, with women underrepresented in policy-making and as policy experts within organizations and governments, as shown by the Women in International Security (WIIS) Gender Scorecard for 2020. The fields of multilateral arms control, non-proliferation, and disarmament, with the notable exception of small arms and light weapons, have remained relatively removed from the gender mainstreaming impetus.

A 2019 study by the UN Institute of Disarmament Research (UNIDR) titled “Still Behind the Curve” found that gender inequality persists in disarmament diplomacy, with women comprising only around 32% of participants in disarmament-related meetings over the past 43 years. In some smaller official fora, the proportions drop to 20%. The First Committee (on Disarmament and International Security) has the lowest proportion of women, while the Third Committee, dealing with social, humanitarian, and cultural issues, has the highest proportion of women (49% in 2017).

Even within the official UN disarmament community, identified hierarchies exist, with conversations on nuclear posture and deterrence policy being much more insulated, male-dominated, and unwelcoming to women as compared to those on non-proliferation or non-governmental advocacy.

The issue of nuclear weapons had initially been formally excluded from the WPS agenda’s discursive fields, although there is potential to discuss nuclear weapons through the WPS prevention and participation pillars. The first time the UN General Assembly (UNGA) formally addressed the vital link between women and disarmament following from UNSCR 1325 was in September 2010 when the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, Kamla Persad Bissessar, announced that her government would introduce a resolution on Women, Disarmament, Arms Control and Non-Proliferation. That was the landmark UNGA Resolution 65/69, and from then on, there was no turning back. In many ways, it set the stage for a TPNW-like initiative featuring a large number of female leaders. The past decade has seen a push for the implementation of a gender-sensitive approach to nuclear policymaking.

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) is the first international treaty to explicitly acknowledge in its texts the gendered nature of the impact of nuclear weapons. It mandates gender-sensitive remediation provisions for nuclear harm, specially highlighting the gendered effects of ionized radiation on reproductive health and organs, as well as the debilitating psychological impact on those affected by decades of nuclear testing. The TPNW is ground-breaking in challenging the dominant narrative about nuclear weapons. The use of nuclear weapons is now not just “immoral” but “illegal” under international humanitarian law.

The negotiations of the treaty featured several female leaders. Some of the most active delegations were led by women, including those from Ireland, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, and Thailand. Elayne White Gomez of Costa Rica served as the negotiating conference President. Participation was observed from women at all levels of international organizations, civil society groups, and atomic bomb survivors.

Today, women’s participation has been prioritized by several non-governmental initiatives aimed at enhancing support and facilitating women’s effective engagement in the nuclear policy space. One such initiative is the “Gender, Think-tanks and International Affairs: A Toolkit” developed by the British American Security Information Council (BASIC), Chatham House, and the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy to address ongoing issues of discrimination and underrepresentation of women in the sector. The Disarmament Impact Group in Geneva; Gender Champions in Nuclear

Policy; and EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Consortium Initiative are other notable examples. However, nothing of this scale, support, and commitment is yet available to women in the Global South, particularly South Asia and East Asia – the most nuclearized regions in the world today.

As Renata Dwan has [noted](#), ‘gender mainstreaming is a transformative agenda that seeks to influence not just who speaks but also the substance and tools of arms control and beyond. It is not just an issue for or by women, but represents a much broader reorientation of the agenda.’ As the community grapples with the security implications of dual-use technologies and how to regulate their intangible algorithms, exploring new ways of framing the issue is imperative.

It is crucial not to lose sight of the constant need for “reframing” – the resetting of priorities, highlighting paradoxes and contestations, and keeping the dialectics of dialogue alive in order to focus on the fundamental question: what do nuclear weapons mean for security? Not just the traditional notion of “national security,” but ultimately, human security.

The opinions articulated above represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network or any of its members.

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ABOUT APLN

The **Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (APLN)** is a Seoul-based organisation and network of political, military, diplomatic leaders, and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region, working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks. The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.



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