

Side Event on Gender and Nuclear Weapons

Friday, 23 June 2017

New York

**Panel Contribution of
Ambassador Patricia O'Brien**

Excellencies, dear Colleagues,

It is a real pleasure to be here today and to speak on the very important issue of gender and nuclear disarmament. And I am honoured to share this panel with women who, each in their field, have made remarkable contributions to raising awareness and deepening our understanding of gender aspects in the male-dominated arena of nuclear weapons.

I am particularly pleased that Mary Olson is with us today. It is only two years since I had the honour to join Mary on the panel for the seminal Side Event on Gender and Nuclear Weapons, organized by Ireland during the 2015 NPT Review Conference. The idea that gender could be a factor in nuclear weapons discussions was very new then, despite previous work by academics and WILPF, including by Ray. That side event focused on Mary's research into the disproportionate effects of ionising radiation on women and girls, but it also considered women's participation in nuclear disarmament forums and discourse.

I like to think that with that side event, a movement began within the Nuclear Disarmament community which has helped create the momentum behind the current negotiations to conclude a Convention on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. And, even more to the point for today's discussion, a momentum which has ensured that this new Treaty will, for the first time ever, include in its preamble the question of the gendered impact of nuclear weapons on women, and a commitment to their full and equal participation in the work of the Convention. These are truly historic achievements in which all who have participated can rightly feel proud.

For Ireland, gender considerations have long been at the heart of our engagement in multilateral affairs. A focus on gender equality has been a cross-cutting issue for our foreign policy for many years, in line with UN SC Resolution 1325 (2000). Incorporating a gender perspective in our work on human rights, conflict prevention and post-conflict rehabilitation, as well as on sustainable development, is a well-established horizontal priority for my country.

Disarmament in general, and in particular nuclear disarmament is not an exception to this approach. In fact, there are specific, compelling reasons as to why a gender perspective is not only useful but also, one could argue, indispensable, in the nuclear disarmament debate. These reasons have been thoroughly explained and corroborated by scientific evidence presented in the

context of the Humanitarian Initiative, in particular at the Vienna Conference; in the Chatham House paper on Disarmament as the Missing Link to Multilateralism, and in the recent UNIDIR / ILPI study on Gender, Development and Nuclear Weapons.

This evidence leads to striking conclusions on two aspects that are interlinked:

Firstly, the gendered impact of nuclear weapons. There is overwhelming evidence that the ionizing radiation caused by a nuclear detonation disproportionately affects women and girls –both immediate victims and future generations. But apart from their biological effects, the social, economic and psychological impact of nuclear weapons on women and men, often leading to displacement, discrimination and social stigma, also differ significantly.

Secondly, engagement and participation in nuclear disarmament work and relevant fora, where women are seriously and chronically under-represented. This status quo needs to change, not only in light of the Security Council's call for greater participation of women in discussions and negotiations on peace and security, but also given the heavily gendered impact of nuclear weapons. Because women are disproportionately affected by these weapons, they should be equally engaged in discussions and diplomatic initiatives to address and promote nuclear disarmament.

I have highlighted two key issues, but there are many more aspects to how gender and nuclear disarmament are interlinked. One of them has been very eloquently addressed by Ray in various presentations and publications, and that is the impact on security policies and nuclear discourse of the traditional underpinning notions of masculinity and femininity. As the UNIDIR / ILPI study demonstrated, applying a gender lens gives valuable insight into these dynamics and helps challenge the established pattern of power relations, thus bringing us one step closer to achieving the goal of a nuclear weapon free world.

When raising these issues one is frequently faced with blank stares, or even condescending remarks. Attempts to highlight the gendered aspects of nuclear disarmament are dismissed on their substance as drawing attention away from the core of the matter to marginal issues; as diluting the debate; or simply as irrelevant and misplaced.

What these reactions all have in common is a blatant disregard of the inextricable links between disarmament, including nuclear disarmament, and key global issues such as climate, migration, and sustainable development. They stem from the false premise that nuclear disarmament is an isolated, technical issue, where a particular set of legal, moral and political codes apply.

Ireland has consistently advocated in favour of breaking the silos, and of addressing disarmament as a piece in the broader picture of global issues affecting the planet as a whole. In this context, nuclear weapons and the inherent risks they entail for the survival of humanity are a major obstacle to the achievement of the sustainable development goals. For the reasons I explained earlier, they are equally an obstacle to progress on the women, peace and security agenda.

This year however, we are witnessing two major breakthroughs in our work. One has already happened. The Chairman's Summary of last month's NPT Preparatory Committee, ably chaired by my Dutch colleague Ambassador Henk Cor Van der Kwast, included for the first time in an NPT official document, the need for greater women's participation in the work of the NPT. The gendered impact of nuclear weapons was also included in the Summary.

This month, I truly believe we will also make history here in New York, not only for concluding the text of a Convention to Prohibit Nuclear Weapons, but also on concluding a Convention which will, for the first time, include references to the gendered impact of these weapons and to the need for full and equal participation of women in its work.

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