

# The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and Gender, Feminism, and Intersectionality

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Nuclear weapons are gendered. They have gendered impacts; their existence is predicated on and perpetuated in part due to gendered norms about power, violence, and security; and their abolition is challenged by the lack of gender and other forms of diversity in discussions and negotiations related to nuclear policy.

In recent years, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) has done some work to address these issues, but more is needed to advance gender transformative and intersectional approaches to nuclear weapons, which is an imperative for achieving nuclear abolition.

This briefing paper provides some context for these issues, outlines what is in the TPNW and its current Action Plan, and offers recommendations for states parties and others to consider ahead of the Second Meeting of States Parties (2MSP), to be held in November 2023.

## A quick primer on gender and disarmament

Broadly speaking, gender considerations feature in disarmament in three ways: the harm from specific weapon systems, the diversity among disarmament and arms control policy makers, and the discourse within disarmament discussions.

**Gendered impacts.** Some weapons harm disproportionately or differentially based on sex. When it comes to nuclear weapons, ionizing radiation causes increased risk of cancers in cisgendered women and girls, affecting reproduction and maternal health. Social norms in societies also may lead women to suffer increased exposure to such radiation and subsequent ostracisation.

While understanding the gendered impacts of weapons is important for ensuring the provision of adequate care and assistance, it is also important not to simply focus on this aspect of gender and disarmament, as it risks elevating a perspective of “women as victims,” often erroneously and offensively grouping women with children.

**Gender diversity.** To avoid this, and to reflect women's agency, many governments have focused on promoting women's participation within disarmament forums, including those related to nuclear weapons.

There is a **stark disparity** in the level (seniority or rank) and the number of men as compared to women in disarmament, non-proliferation, and arms control discussions, negotiations, and processes.

Women, non-binary, and LGBTQ+ voices and experiences have been deliberately silenced and their agency in nuclear policy discussions has been marginalised, thus their opposition to nuclear weapons has not been reflected in mainstream debates and decision-making.

This needs to be addressed. But so far, most discourse and action related to this subject have centered on a binary notion of gender and have neglected the intersectionality of identities and oppressions that lead to the marginalisation and exclusion of certain people along the lines of gender, sexual orientation, race, class, and more.

**Gender analysis and norms.** Feminist conceptions of **intersectionality** recognise that, while important, increasing the number of women is insufficient to challenge gender norms or diversify perspectives on weapons and militarism. Real diversity is not just about adding bodies to meeting rooms but also about creating space for non-hegemonic ideas, imaginations, and perspectives to inspire concrete changes in policy and practice. It is not useful to treat women as a monolithic group. Disarmament work needs people of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, races, classes, abilities, backgrounds, and experiences.

Diversity is not just for its own sake. It is essential for challenging socially constructed norms about identity that impact the approach of diplomats, activists, and academics to weapons and militarism. **Gender norms**, for example, perpetuate a binary social construction of men who are violent and powerful and women who are vulnerable and need to be protected.

The term “militarised masculinities” has been used by feminists and LGBTQ+ scholars and activists to describe the normative association of cisgendered, heterosexual masculinity with militarized violence. For instance, the framing of war and violence as “strong” and “masculine” is often coupled with a framing of peace and nonviolence as “weak” and “feminine.” In this context, weapons are typically seen as important for security, power, and control while disarmament is treated as something that makes countries weaker or more vulnerable.

Nuclear weapons are a linchpin of militarised masculinities, signifying the ultimate form of strength and power. In this context, those who amplify the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons and call for their prohibition often are accused of being “emotional” and “irrational,” which are typical **gendered responses** meant to feminise and thus, ridicule. This gendered framing is extremely problematic when it comes to accepting disarmament as a credible approach to security.

The persistence of norms around what is considered rational and serious are further compounded by the lack of diversity. People with feminist, queer, and other non-dominant perspectives can help challenge ideas that are treated as immutable truths and can articulate alternative conceptions of strength and security.

## How are gender and intersectionality reflected in the TPNW?

In its preamble, the TPNW contains several elements related to gender and intersectionality:

**Paragraph 4** recognises that the catastrophic impacts of nuclear weapons “have a disproportionate impact on women and girls, including as a result of ionizing radiation.” This is the first nuclear weapon treaty to acknowledge the gendered impacts of nuclear weapons, which is significant for raising awareness and addressing gendered harms caused by nuclear weapons.

This paragraph also recognises that the consequence of nuclear weapons “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.” This helps frame the issue of nuclear weapons as one that requires an intersectional approach to understanding the myriad harms that can be caused by these weapons.

The TPNW’s preamble also recognises, in **paragraph 7**, “the disproportionate impact of nuclear-weapon activities on indigenous peoples.” This marks the first agreement on nuclear weapons to acknowledge that, in addition to gendered impacts, the development, testing, and use of nuclear weapons also have racialised impacts. The nine nuclear-armed states have primarily carried out nuclear weapon testing on the lands, water, and bodies of Indigenous Peoples. Settler states and colonial governments have mined uranium for nuclear weapons primarily on Indigenous lands. Nuclear weapon development and radioactive waste storage are situated largely within or near poor communities, especially communities of colour.

The other element of the TPNW preamble to explicitly mention gender is **paragraph 22**, which recognises “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.”

This makes the TPNW the first instrument related to nuclear weapons that recognises the lack of diversity in relevant work and commits its states parties to increasing women’s participation in a field dominated by men. Unfortunately, the language in the TPNW reinforces a gender binary by failing to call for people of all genders, or those who are non-binary, genderqueer, or gender non-conforming, or LGBTQ+ people more broadly, to also be included in work on nuclear disarmament. It also does not take an intersectional approach, calling only for the inclusion of “women” as a monolithic group without recognising the different experiences and perspectives women might bring to the work on the basis of their overlapping identities and experiences, such as race, class, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, and more.

Finally, gender is reflected in **Article 6(1)** of the TPNW, which commits each state party to “adequately provide age- and gender-sensitive assistance, without discrimination,” to individuals under its jurisdiction who are affected by the use or testing of nuclear weapons, “including medical care, rehabilitation and psychological support, as well as provide for their social and economic inclusion.”

## How is gender reflected in the Declaration and Action Plan adopted by the TPNW First Meeting of States Parties in June 2022?

At the First Meeting of States Parties held in June 2022 in Vienna, Austria, TPNW states parties adopted an **Action Plan** that commits them to implement the Treaty, including its gender provisions.

In its section on Implementing the Gender Provisions of the TPNW, the Action Plan commits states parties to:

- Emphasise the gender-responsive nature of the TPNW and recommend that gender considerations are taken into account across all TPNW-related national policies, programs and projects (Action 47);
- Establish a Gender Focal Point to work during the intersessional period to support the implementation of the gender provisions of the Treaty and report on progress made to the 2MSP (Action 48);
- Begin work during the intersessional period to develop guidelines for ensuring age- and gender-sensitive Victim Assistance, taking into account relevant approaches in other humanitarian disarmament instruments (Action 49); and
- Begin work during the intersessional period to develop guidelines for the integration of gender perspectives in international cooperation and assistance, taking into account relevant approaches in other humanitarian disarmament instruments (Action 50).

Other aspects of the Action Plan also address gender and other intersectional issues, including the commitments to:

- Engage with relevant stakeholders, including international organizations, civil society, affected communities, Indigenous Peoples, and youth, at all stages of the victim assistance and environmental remediation process (Action 19);
- Conduct all victim assistance, environmental remediation, and international cooperation and assistance activities in accordance, in particular, with the principles of accessibility, inclusivity, non-discrimination, and transparency and in coordination with affected communities, and provide victim assistance in a manner that is age- and gender-sensitive given the disproportionate impact of nuclear weapons use and testing on women and girls and Indigenous Peoples (Action 25);
- Develop guidelines for voluntary reporting on national measures related to victim assistance, environmental remediation, and international cooperation and assistance, drawing on the input of relevant stakeholders, including international organizations, civil society, affected communities, Indigenous Peoples, and youth (Action 27);
- Establish a scientific advisory group that is a “geographically diverse and gender balanced network of experts,” to support implementation of the TPNW (Action 34);
- Integrate gender considerations in across the work of the Treaty’s implementation (Action 39); and

- Facilitate the active participation of relevant stakeholders, and take into account the different needs of people in affected communities and Indigenous Peoples (Action 41).

In the **Declaration**, TPNW states parties reiterate that they “will work with affected communities to provide age and gender sensitive assistance without discrimination to survivors of use or testing of nuclear weapons, and to remediate environmental contamination,” and that they “emphasize the innovative gender provisions of the Treaty and stress the importance of the equal, full and effective participation of both women and men in nuclear disarmament diplomacy.”

## What's needed now?

These words now need to be translated into action. Implementation of each of these commitments is key to ensuring the TPNW's credibility, as well as to advancing the work around gender in relation to victim assistance, international cooperation, and diversifying participation in nuclear disarmament. But TPNW states parties and signatories, and those supporting their work, must go further than what is in these documents in order to create meaningful and lasting change and to achieve nuclear abolition.

The 1MSP Action Plan and Declaration reinforce a gender binary. They do not recognise other gender identities or gender non-conforming people. They also treat women as a monolithic group, without acknowledging the intersectional realities of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, citizenship, and other identities and experiences that impact on the analysis and perspectives people can bring to discussions on nuclear weapons.

In relation to gender norms and analysis, the Action Plan creates space for confronting dominant narratives in Action 47, which resolves states parties to “emphasize the gender-responsive nature of the TPNW” to take “gender considerations into account across all TPNW-related national policies, programs and projects.” In practice, this should be implemented by engaging with and promoting feminist, queer, and antiracist thought on nuclear weapons and the structures of violence that sustain them.

The TPNW has always pushed back against the dominant narrative. Refusing to accept the normative discourse about nuclear deterrence, geostrategic stability, and other status quo theories espoused by nuclear-armed states and their think tanks and focusing instead on the humanitarian realities of nuclear weapons, is how most of the world was able to negotiate and achieve the entry into force of the TPNW.

Feminist analysis helped build these arguments, but feminist, queer, antiracist, and anti-imperialist thinkers and thought have not been given adequate or formal space within the TPNW framework to help advance the TPNW's implementation. In this same context, diversity of participation is still lacking in all its aspects, because the focus simply on women as a monolithic group. The hosting of meetings in the global north (or preferencing global north time zones for online meetings) has not provided for genuine diversity and inclusion in the Treaty's implementation.

At the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference in August 2022, 67 NPT states parties signed a **joint statement** on gender, diversity, and inclusion that recognised that “the intersections of race, gender, economic status, geography, nationality, and other factors must be taken into account as

risk-multiplying factors” in relation to nuclear weapons. It also highlighted that nuclear weapons have different effects on different demographics and recommended various ways to address the impacts of nuclear weapons as well as to diversify participation in work for disarmament and non-proliferation.

Although the statement still largely focuses on increasing a women’s participation in a binary and non-intersectional way, it does acknowledge that “for women and other underrepresented groups, there must not only be a seat at the table, but also real opportunities to shape conversations, policies, and outcomes.”

TPNW states parties can push these demands further. As Ambassador Alexander Kmentt, president of 1MSP, wrote in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* in February 2023, the TPNW is “a relevant prism to look more broadly at the injustice of the nuclear status quo. It is a contribution to the ‘democratization’ of the nuclear debate. It has given voice to the majority of countries disenfranchised in this debate by the nuclear weapon states, which traditionally exert strong substantive and procedural control.”

To uphold this progressive spirit of the TPNW, during the intersessional period and at 2MSP, states parties and civil society should ensure space for different analysis and ideas about nuclear weapons that can support the TPNW’s full and effective implementation. In keeping with the Treaty’s inclusive and democratic spirit, and its commitment to confronting nuclear injustice, critical and non-establishment thought and approaches must be brought to the fore.

## Recommendations for action

### Actions 49 and 50: Victim assistance, environmental remediation, and international cooperation

During the intersessional period ahead of 2MSP, states parties are tasked with developing guidelines both for ensuring age- and gender-sensitive victim assistance and for integrating gender perspectives in international cooperation and assistance. To this end, they should:

- Consult meaningfully with women, LGBTQ+ people, Indigenous Peoples, and other marginalised people from affected communities in the development of both sets of guidelines;
- Engage with researchers focused on diversifying knowledge about impacts of nuclear weapons, including ionizing radiation from explosions but also other harms caused by nuclear weapons production, testing, and use;
- Engage people working on gender- and age- sensitive victim assistance programmes in other contexts, such as cluster munitions, landmines, and small arms and light weapons;
- Consider funding such work, as well as funding the participation of those involved in such work and people from affected communities to attend intersessional meetings and 2MSP; and
- Present a working paper to 2MSP on age- and gender- sensitive guidelines for victim assistance and another paper with guidance for how states parties can integrate gender considerations across all aspects of treaty implementation.



### **Action 41: Diversifying participation**

To diversify participation and broaden perspectives at 2MSP and during the intersessional period, states parties and civil society should promote the active and meaningful participation of women, LGBTQ+ people, Indigenous Peoples, and people from affected communities, including by:

- Creating opportunities for remote/virtual engagement, to ensure that diverse and global perspectives are incorporated into the development of both sets of guidelines related to gender, as well as in relation to the implementation of all other aspects of the TPNW and Action Plan commitments, and for any Declaration and Action Plan to be adopted at 2MSP;
- Establishing a sponsorship fund to bring women and LGBTQ+ diplomats from states parties and signatories to 2MSP, modelling the sponsorship funds established for the Open-Ended Working Group on Nuclear Disarmament in Geneva in 2016 and the TPNW negotiations in New York in 2017;
- Creating space in the formal 2MSP agenda for women, LGBTQ+ people, and Indigenous Peoples from affected communities to assess implementation of the 2022 Action Plan and make recommendations to carry this work forward; and
- Encouraging those who are drafting any Declaration or Action Plan at 2MSP, as well as any relevant working papers, to use the phrase “all genders” to avoid reinforcing a gender binary, and reflect other metrics of diversity and intersectionality when it comes to encouraging participation. Some delegations called for this at the draft outcome document of the NPT Review Conference in August 2022 and TPNW states parties should actualise this.

### **Actions 47 and 48: Expanding perspectives**

To elevate critical perspectives about nuclear weapons in the interests of promoting and implementing the TPNW, the Gender Focal Point and other states parties should:

- Create space in the agenda of 2MSP to discuss insights and experiences that reflect feminist, queer, anti-imperialist, and antiracist analyses of nuclear weapons. These are perspectives that are usually relegated to side events and papers from civil society. Including such perspectives on official panels and events at 2MSP would be a meaningful way to normalise these views and challenge the nuclear orthodoxy that the TPNW is trying to dismantle;
- Collaborate with civil society to produce a joint report providing examples of such analysis; and
- Collaborate with civil society to ensure that in any outputs from 2MSP, there is clear language reflecting an intersectional approach to nuclear disarmament; and
- Initiate a joint statement for sign on by states parties at 2MSP that, among other things,
  - Calls for the intersections of race, gender, economic status, geography, nationality, and other factors to be taken into account when addressing harms and potential harms caused by nuclear weapons;

- Recommends various ways to address the impacts of nuclear weapons in an intersectional way as well as to diversify participation in work for disarmament and non-proliferation;
- Highlights that for women, non-binary, LGBTQ+ people, Indigenous Peoples, people of colour, and other underrepresented groups, there must not only be a seat at the table, but also real opportunities to shape conversations, policies, and outcomes in relation to nuclear weapons; and
- Recognises that gender norms about masculinity and patriarchal practices such as dismissing the views of non-nuclear-armed states should be amplified when opposing nuclear weapon policies and working for nuclear abolition.

Reaching Critical Will (RCW) is the disarmament programme of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), the oldest feminist peace organisation in the world. RCW works for global disarmament and demilitarisation, and for an end to war, militarism, and violence. It also investigates and exposes patriarchal and gendered aspects of weapons and war and provides an intersectional feminist analysis on disarmament issues.

RCW monitors and analyses international processes on disarmament at the United Nations and beyond. RCW provides timely and accurate reporting, analysis, and advocacy on all relevant conferences and initiatives and maintains a comprehensive online archive of all statements, resolutions, and other primary documents on disarmament. RCW also produces research studies, reports, statements, fact sheets, and other publications on key issues relevant to disarmament and militarism. and works in coalitions with other civil society groups to achieve change.

WILPF is an International Steering Group member of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN).

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