



WILPF submission to Alþingi inquiry into resolution 57/149, “Bann við kjarnorkuvopnum”

8 March 2019

The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF)¹ supports the call for Iceland’s government to sign and ratify the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Other supportive submissions on resolution 57/149 may focus on the importance of the Treaty for preventing humanitarian harm from nuclear weapons and the legal and political ramifications of Icelandic ratification—in particular please see the submission from the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN). WILPF would like to focus on some of the important gender and feminist aspects of nuclear weapons and the TPNW, emphasising the relevancy of resolution 57/149 for Iceland’s commitment to gender equality and justice.

1. The use, testing, and development of nuclear weapons have disproportionate physical and social impacts on women and girls. Women and girls’ bodies are more susceptible to ionising radiation and thus are more likely to develop cancers when exposed.² In addition, women and girls who have been harmed by the use or testing of nuclear weapons have experienced social stigma as well as differential psychological and cultural impacts.³
2. Women and non-binary/non-conforming people continue to be vastly under-represented in nuclear weapon policy discussions and decision making. In 2016, roughly 70 percent of delegates to nuclear weapon and other disarmament related meetings at the United Nations were men.⁴

¹ WILPF is the oldest women’s peace organisation in the world, founded in 1915. It has ECOSOC status at the United Nations, National Sections in 40 countries, an International Secretariat in Geneva, and UN Office in New York. More information can be found at www.wilpf.org. WILPF is also a member of the International Steering Group of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate.

² See the Gender and Radiation Impact Project for more details: www.genderandradiation.org.

³ See for example Dr. Barbara Rose Johnston, “Nuclear weapons tests, fallout, and the devastating impact on Marshall Islands environment, health, and human rights,” and Ray Acheson, “Wider consequences—impact on development,” in *Unspeakable suffering: the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons*, WILPF, 2013, <http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Publications/Unspeakable/Unspeakable.pdf>; and *Gender, development, and nuclear weapons*, United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research and International Law and Policy Institute, 2016, <http://www.unidir.org/files/publications/pdfs/gender-development-and-nuclear-weapons-en-659.pdf>.

⁴ See *Gender, development, and nuclear weapons*, *op. cit.*

3. Mainstream nuclear weapon discourse is saturated in imagery and culture dominated by hegemonic heteronormative masculinity. The language and depiction of nuclear weapons as phallic objects⁵ is just one part of the larger understanding of nuclear weapons as affording an aggressiveness as well as an invulnerability, invincibility, and impregnability of states that possess them. The concept of state security being guaranteed through the deployment, use, or threat of use of nuclear weapons is highly gendered; it is based on a hegemonic concept of masculinity in which the state acts as a protector to its feminised, protected civilians. Nuclear weapon possession is the pinnacle of this understanding of the state, and of the need to pursue security through violence and weapons, particularly weapons of mass destruction.
4. Disarmament, in particular the elimination of nuclear weapons, is seen in this context as being “irrational,” “imprudent,” and indeed, “feminine”—the arguments used by representatives of nuclear-armed states against TPNW supporters are that they are being “emotional,” that they do not truly understand security, or do not really have security interests—certainly not of the standards that the “big boys” of the nuclear-armed club have.⁶
5. Nuclear weapons are a tool of patriarchy. The concept of nuclear deterrence is designed to justify spending billions of dollars on weapons that risk the world’s total destruction in order to maintain power and privilege. Those espousing the theory of deterrence have managed to maintain their dominance over the nuclear weapon debate by employing the tools of the patriarchy, such as gaslighting and victim blaming. They argue that other countries make them feel insecure and thus they need nuclear weapons to maintain order and stability. But the order maintained by nuclear weapons is a fundamentally unequal order, ruled by threat of massive violence.⁷

Iceland, as a leader in gender equality and justice and as a country committed to multilateralism and cooperation, should join the majority of states in the world that have supported the TPNW. By signing and ratifying the TPNW, Iceland would be rejecting the masculinised concepts of security and nuclear weapons that have henceforth dominated mainstream discourse and debates on the topic. Joining the Treaty would provide an opportunity for Iceland to articulate a different understanding of how security is manifested, through the pursuit of disarmament, peace, sustainable development, environmental protection, gender justice, and economic equality.

Under the TPNW, Iceland would be committed not to “assist, encourage or induce, in any way, anyone to engage in any activity prohibited to a State Party” under the TPNW. In practice, such a commitment would oblige Iceland not to act in a manner that could be seen to support the possession or use of nuclear weapons. Iceland would thus have to decline to support any

⁵ See for example Carol Cohn, “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 12:4 (Summer 1987).

⁶ See for example Ray Acheson, “The nuclear ban and the patriarchy: a feminist analysis of opposition to prohibiting nuclear weapons,” *Critical Studies on Security*, 30 April 2018.

⁷ See for example Ray Acheson, “A feminist critique of the atomic bomb,” Heinrich Stiftung Boell, 12 October 2018, <https://www.boell.de/en/2018/10/12/feminist-critique-atomic-bomb>.

language in future North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) strategic concepts that endorsed activities prohibited by the TPNW, such as nuclear deterrence, nuclear sharing, or the potential use of nuclear weapons. This would be consistent with a position that security is not based on the slaughter of civilians but on multilateral engagement and peaceful solutions to conflict.

As a party to the TPNW, Iceland would be in a stronger position to work with other members of the international community to advance nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. A refusal to join the TPNW and engage with its processes would cast serious doubt on Iceland's commitment to the goal of a nuclear-weapon-free world and could be seen as tacit support for a new and dangerous nuclear arms race. At a time of great global tension, when nuclear-armed states are modernising their arsenals and threatening to use their nuclear weapons, it is all the more important for countries such as Iceland to declare their unequivocal opposition to nuclear weapons and to help strengthen international norms against them.

Contact: ray.acheson@wilpf.org