

# International Women's Day Statement to the Conference on Disarmament

7 MARCH 2012



Reaching Critical Will

Distinguished delegates,

Thank you for the opportunity to address this body. The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom is honoured to deliver our annual statement on the occasion of International Women's Day for the third time. However, we continue to be disappointed by the lack of progress by the disarmament machinery as a whole, particularly here in the Conference on Disarmament. For over 90 years, WILPF has emphasized the links between military expenditure, the arms trade, violent conflict, and the reduction of available resources for social and economic development and gender equality. The converging crises of climate change, poverty, economic collapse, and environmental degradation have already grown more severe in the 21st century. Continued stalemate on disarmament is not an option. If the machinery cannot adequately address the threats to security, politics, and economics that nuclear weapons pose, we must look elsewhere to make progress.

Yesterday, WILPF organized our annual International Women's Day seminar on disarmament at the United Nations here in Geneva. This year, the seminar focused on convergence of various aspects of international law, with a particular focus on human rights, international humanitarian law, and disarmament. WILPF believes that each disarmament measure must make a contribution to preventing armed conflict, preventing the violation of human rights, and seriously reducing the culture and economy of militarism. Therefore, we argue that nuclear weapons and the arms trade are not just issues for traditional disarmament fora. They are topics that should be considered in the entire range of UN mechanisms and bodies that seek to ensure human security and sustainable development. And at times like this, when the disarmament machinery has been paralyzed for almost 15 years, we must look elsewhere for progress. Because the production, stockpiling, and usage of weapons violate a whole range of human rights, we believe that the human rights mechanisms can be an appropriate forum in which to raise these issues.

The linkages between human rights and disarmament are clear and there are several entry points for making these arguments, such as the well-known humanitarian and environmental concerns. The known and inevitable civilian death toll of a nuclear attack could easily meet the criteria for genocide. The indiscriminate killing of hundreds of thousands of people caused by the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is clear evidence for such arguments. A nuclear attack would also have a catastrophic impact on health and environment. Studies have shown that the environmental consequences of a "regional" nuclear war, fought between for example Pakistan and India, could cause a global famine that could kill over one billion people.

But there are other linkages between human rights and disarmament. For example, the cost of the continued renewal, deployment, and maintenance of nuclear weapons should be put in relation to budgets available to fulfil human rights obligations. Several nuclear weapon possessors are making significant cuts in their social welfare systems, such as health care, education, and childcare, while spending billions on modernizing nuclear and conventional arsenals. Adequate resources are critical to the realization of economic and social rights. Article 2.1 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)

states that “Each State Party to the present Covenant undertakes to take steps, individually and through international assistance and co-operation, especially economic and technical, to the maximum of its available resources, with a view to achieving progressively the full realization of the rights recognized in the present Covenant by all appropriate means, including particularly the adoption of legislative measures.” The Maastricht Guidelines on violations of economic, social and cultural rights clarifies that a state is in violation of the Covenant if it fails to allocate the maximum of its available resources to realizing human rights.

Recent research has shown that at current spending rates, the nuclear-armed states will spend at least one trillion dollars on nuclear weapons over the next decade. It will likely go much higher as modernization programmes across the board kick into high gear. This is at the same time as the world is struggling to recover from a serious financial crisis and as cut-backs on health, education, and social welfare programmes are made in most countries. Continued investment in nuclear arsenals will continue to drain resources, in particularly from the world’s poor. Over 1.2 billion live in what is known as “extreme poverty”, i.e. less than 1.25 USD per day. 70% of these are women. In addition, over 30,000 children die every year because of poverty. All the time, all over the world, women and girls are being discriminated against; they earn less money than men and suffer the worst consequences of poverty, lack of education and lack of political and human rights. The Millennium Development Goals (MDG)’s state that poverty in the world is to be halved by 2015, but not enough effort is being made to reach them. The World Bank estimates that it would take between 35 to 76 billion USD per year until 2015 for the world community to be able to live up to the MDG’s. We must start comparing these amounts to the one trillion USD that will be spent on nuclear weapons over the next decade.

It is also important to look at other human rights doctrines and their relationship to weapons. For example, arms sale to countries where it is reasonably foreseeable that violations of human rights law and international humanitarian law will occur should be related to the doctrine of the responsibility to protect. This doctrine could be invoked to prevent a state’s arms exports to regions where violations of human rights are documented, where conflict is likely, or where it’s reasonably foreseeable that the types of arms being sold would be used against the civilian population, and not at the last possible moment when the crisis is already taking place. Real protection can only be realized through prevention and therefore the arms trade treaty that will be negotiated in New York in July must therefore have human rights and IHL at its heart.

The debate around nuclear weapons and arms trade needs to take these human rights commitments into consideration, and in particular consider its financial costs and therefore its immediate impacts on human security and development. The process of articulating the humanitarian costs of nuclear weapons needs to incorporate this type of analysis and make the case against diverting excessive financial and human resources from realization of human rights to maintenance of a useless, illegal and immoral weapon.

It is urgent that these issues should be incorporated in human rights treaty bodies, addressed by special rapporteurs and special procedures, and eventually tackled by the Human Rights Council in its Universal Periodic Review. By including nuclear weapons, arms trade, and military expenditures in concluding recommendations from these bodies, production, deployment and usage of these weapons would be made more costly politically and ethically for governments.

It is past time for all disarmament processes to promote and protect human rights and international humanitarian law. We have seen that the success of the initiatives to ban anti-personnel landmines and cluster munitions is due in large part to these weapon system's negative humanitarian effects. Nuclear weapons are truly indiscriminate weapons with gross humanitarian consequences on an immeasurable scale. The 2010 NPT final document recognized this, as have many governments and civil society organizations and the International Committee of the Red Cross. It is time to address this issue head-on—nuclear disarmament is an imperative for protecting civilians and their human rights.

Thank you Mr. President.