

Prioritise Lives, Not Weapons!

Statement: International Women's Day for Peace and Disarmament 2021

In the early 1980s, a group of pacifist feminists from across Europe united to protest the buildup of arms and nuclear weapons. Together, they established 24 May as International Women's Day for Peace and Disarmament.

On this day, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) honours their legacy and that of women everywhere leading the struggle against militarism.

As feminist peace activists from around the world, we continue to demand that governments take immediate action to end the daily threat and impact of weapons on people and communities everywhere.

No one is immune from the effects of armed violence

Every single day, [more than 500 people](#) around the world die from gun violence. An additional [2,000 are injured](#) by gunshots. At least two million more are living with physical injuries from firearms. And an unquantifiable number are living with the long-term emotional trauma of armed violence.

Conventional weapons and their ammunition do more than kill. They threaten lives and livelihoods, they erode community cohesion, and they perpetuate greed, corruption, poverty, and insecurity. Increasingly, they are also being used by far-right groups in pursuit of a racist, anti-feminist worldview. They make our world less safe, less peaceful, and less just.

While men represent the vast majority of direct victims of armed violence, women and other marginalised populations are differentially and disproportionately impacted by the use and presence of weapons.

When weapons are present, women are at significantly greater risk of experiencing sexual violence. In homes where a gun is accessible, [women are much more likely](#) to be murdered by an intimate partner. Weapons are commonly [used against women](#) as a form of psychological violence, preventing them from accessing safety, education, healthcare, and economic opportunities.

[Explosive weapons](#) – whether used in populated areas or left behind post-conflict – can uniquely affect women, including by damaging or destroying their homes, communities, and the infrastructure on which they rely for progress and survival, forcing displacement and exposing them to further risk of sexual violence. Explosives also account for [72 per cent of all child deaths and injuries](#) in the world's war zones – in part due to the fact that children often mistake unexploded ordnance for toys – and cause long-lasting physical and psychological trauma.

People who are marginalised by patriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism; people with disabilities; refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers; and LGBTQ+ people are also disproportionately impacted by armed violence in every part of the world.

Weapons affect everyone, everywhere. They affect us in our homes, in our communities, and in our schools. They threaten peace, they weaken society, and they steal valuable resources from where they are needed most.

Governments are prioritising armed violence over human security

Yet despite the wide-ranging and devastating impacts of weapons, governments and corporations continue to perpetuate the arms trade at the expense of human lives and security.

States and companies are complicit in perpetuating the patriarchal concepts of power, profit, and gender norms that align masculinity with force and violence. Upholding the misguided notion that peace means protecting ourselves with weapons, they are pouring [nearly \\$3 trillion each year](#) into the development of arms and nearly \$200 billion into the global arms trade. We can only imagine what would be possible if those funds were instead invested in schools, healthcare, community resources, and public infrastructure!

Governments are also [failing to address](#) the connection between the widespread availability of weapons and the differential impacts on women and other marginalised groups – including governments that declare themselves “feminist”. Others are [outright ignoring](#) the mounting human rights abuses piling up before them, enabled by the constant flow of weapons. Still others are compounding the problem by making [massive cuts](#) to international aid, creating devastating consequences for women and marginalised groups.

Another problem relates to the [inadequate representation](#) of the issue of gun violence and disarmament in National Actions Plans (NAPs) on Women, Peace and Security. In cases where it is addressed, civil society is too often left out of the consultation and implementation process.

The governmental failures to address the profound impacts of weapons are just as numerous as the lives lost each day to firearms.

WILPF demands action

Government action is urgently needed to address the vast impacts of weapons on human lives and human security, and to work towards a future of peace, equality, and justice for all.

Together with our global community of feminist peace activists, WILPF demands that governments:

- Work towards ceasing all arms production and arms transfers and immediately cease arms transfers that are non-compliant with international, regional, and national law. In particular, as part of their commitments to eliminating gender-based violence, governments must prevent the sale of weapons to countries with high rates of GBV.
- Take further steps to control the flow and availability of weapons within their countries, including to prevent diversion of weapons, and to demilitarise, disarm, and defund police forces.
- Divest money allocated to the arms trade and militarisation into community infrastructure, including health systems, community resources, schools, green jobs, and climate change mitigation strategies.
- Implement national school- and community-based campaigns that challenge gender norms that equate “manhood” or masculinity with gun ownership, dominance, aggression, and a willingness to use force and violence, which should include, amongst other things, a ban on advertising that exploits and generates harmful ideas about “manhood” to sell weapons.
- Work with civil society groups to implement campaigns to educate people about the impacts of weapons on human lives at every level of society, including the impact of the global arms trade on local communities and populations.
- Ensure that civil society organisations and activists are represented in processes intended to improve human security, making sure local perspectives and voices are represented.

Join us in demanding that governments prioritise lives, not weapons! Share this message and your own thoughts with your friends, family, and on social media using the hashtag #IWDPD.