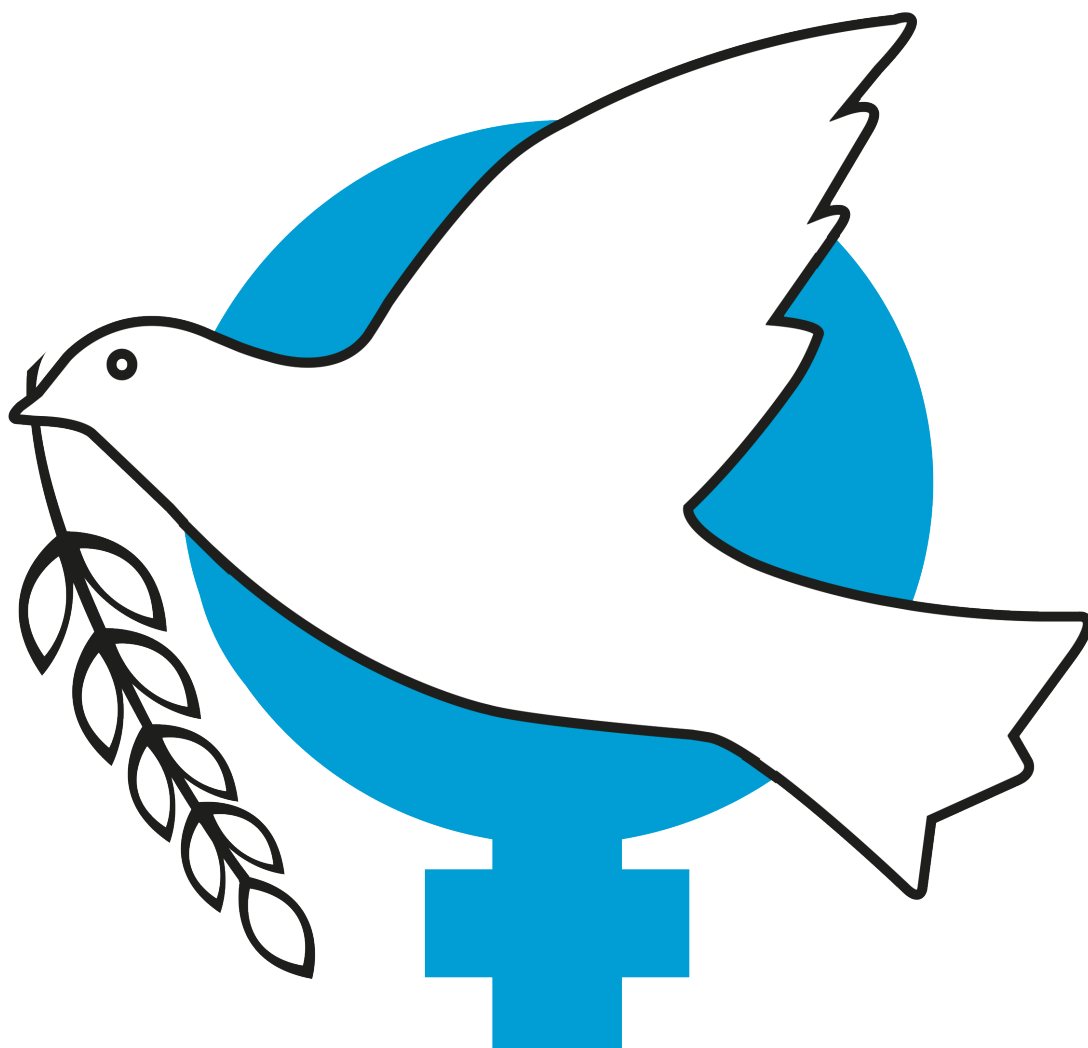


International Women's Day Statement to the Conference on Disarmament



10 March 2015

Thank you, Mr. President.

For the last few years, my organisation, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, has been permitted to deliver a statement to the Conference on Disarmament to mark International Women's Day.

For years before that, our statement was read out to the CD by the sitting president.

This is the only time of year that any voice from civil society is allowed inside the CD chamber.

And this may be the last time our voice is heard here.

The CD has not engaged in substantive work in 17 years. A very small minority of states have managed to block the adoption or implementation of a programme of work for all that time. And yet many of the other members refuse to allow a change in working methods, rules of procedure, enlargement of membership, or engagement of civil society.

Dear colleagues, on this last point, let me explain to you what it is like being the only civil society organisation that still pays attention to the CD.

Last week, for the high-level segment, I had to make a detour on my way to the gallery, because security wouldn't let me through – I would have been too close to the chamber in which about 20 minutes later a high level dignitary would be speaking.

Even after any regular plenary session, I have to wait outside the Council Chamber for someone from the Secretariat to hand me the statements that you delivered, because I am not allowed into the room. This practice, by the way, was never an official decision. In 2004, it was decided that civil society was allowed on the floor, before and after the meeting. That changed without an official decision ever being put on the record.

These are but a few of the indignities that civil society experiences at the CD. We do not experience them at other disarmament forums—not at First Committee, not at meetings of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, not at meetings of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

So, you can imagine our delight when Ambassador Lomónaco tabled the draft decision to increase out access to and engagement with the CD.

And I assume you can imagine our disappointment, to put it mildly, when you started discussing that draft decision.

Aside from the sexist, degrading remark about “topless ladies throwing bottles of mayonnaise,” the level of disrespect to civil society and disconnection from the outside world demonstrated by the debate over this proposal was astounding.

Many of you have expressed your appreciation for our work over and over again. And we do enjoy working with you towards our collective goals. But at the moment that it mattered, some of you put process over progress. Member states that pride themselves to be open, democratic societies said they needed more time, had some more questions, wanted some changes, and in the end could not agree to what from our perspective was smaller than the smallest common denominator.

We in WILPF have thus decided that it's finally time to cease our engagement with this body.

While the debate over the proposal to amend the CD's engagement with civil society was important in terms of timing, it is not the key reason that we have come to this decision.

This is a body that has firmly established that it operates in a vacuum. That it is disconnected from the outside world. That it has lost perspective of the bigger picture of human suffering and global injustice. Maintaining the structures that reinforce deadlock has become more important than fulfilling the objective for which it was created—negotiating disarmament treaties.

We can no longer invest effort into such a body.

Instead we will continue our work elsewhere. There is much work to be done.

Indeed yesterday we held our annual International Women's Day seminar, the focus of which was gender and disarmament. This is a subject receiving increased attention, because—unlike in the CD—some states, international organisations, and civil society groups are becoming more responsive to the realisation that gender shapes the impact of weapons and violence on societies. It shapes the role of weapons in society. And it shapes how we work together to develop and implement the policy and legal responses that violence demands.

We know that women and men are exposed to different patterns of violence. Not as a result of biology, but of socially constructed gender roles.

Gender-based violence is violence that is directed at a person because of their gender. The majority of gender-based violence is violence inflicted by men onto women. However men also face gender-based violence, particularly in armed conflict, where men and adolescent boys tend to be the most frequent direct victims of violence.

While men make up the most direct victims, this is rarely presented as evidence of their weakness. Our social relationship with weapons is linked to a persistent construction of women as the "weaker sex," in need of protection by men.

Weapons are considered to be men's business. Our societies still expect men to be violent. And often men continue to perpetuate this. We can see this

expectation in the reported policy of using maleness as a signifier of militancy in the targeting and casualty analysis of drone strikes.

And so we edge towards the protection of only “innocent civilians”—women, children and the elderly—simultaneously reinforcing expectations that men are violent, undermining the law, and stripping women of their agency.

Women affected by conflict often have less access to health care, services, and reconstruction processes. If heading the household they sometimes face systematic discrimination and can become more susceptible to further physical attack and sexual exploitation.

Framing women as weak and in need of protection continues to enable their exclusion from authoritative social and political roles, and weakens the effectiveness of those processes.

We have seen some progress in recent years, notably UN Security Council resolution 1325, and considerations from 2010 in the General Assembly. The provisions within the Arms Trade Treaty on the prevention of arms transfers that could facilitate gender-based violence are landmark.

But much remains to be done. And it is this work, and many other aspects of disarmament and demilitarization, that is worthy of our efforts.

Dear colleagues, we will now continue to focus our time and energy on other more promising forums and initiatives, but we wish you luck for your future endeavors here in this chamber.

Should the CD begin to work again in the future, we will happily pick up where we left off.

Thank you, Mr. President.