

Key Note Address

Gender and Disarmament

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Extraordinary events have been taking place at the United Nations -- events that should be of great interest to all who care about gender equality, disarmament, and the surprisingly close relationship that exists between them.

On 6 September 2000 -- at the opening of the Millennium Assembly, the largest-ever gathering of heads of state and government -- UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan stressed the need to identify the priorities of the United Nations in the coming century, and to ensure that these priorities are reflected in clear and prompt decisions, leading, in his words, "to real change in people's lives." Two days later, the Assembly adopted the Millennium Declaration, which identified freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature, and shared responsibility as the six "fundamental values to be essential to international relations in the twenty-first century."

According to this Declaration, "Men and women have the right to live their lives and raise their children in dignity, free from hunger and from the fear of violence, oppression or injustice."

Adding that "Democratic and participatory governance based on the will of the people best assures these rights," the Declaration went on to stress that "The equal rights and opportunities of women and men must be assured." Such language will help to reinforce and re-focus the "equal rights" themes found in both the Preamble and the Purposes and Principles of the UN Charter itself.

These leaders, however, addressed another issue that appears in the Charter, namely the need for progress on disarmament and, as Article 26 puts it, the duty to promote the "least diversion for armaments of the world's human and economic resources." The Declaration attached "special significance" to the elimination of all weapons of mass destruction -- particularly nuclear weapons -- the ending of the illicit trafficking in small arms and light weapons, and new efforts to achieve the elimination of all anti-personnel landmines. It also called for efforts to strengthen respect for the rule of law in international relations and, specifically, for compliance with arms control and disarmament treaties as well as human rights and humanitarian laws.

So at least in terms of basic priorities, both gender equality and disarmament fared rather well in the Millennium Declaration. Some may ask, however, is there a real connection between these goals? There certainly is, for the right to coexist as equals goes hand in hand with the fundamental right to life -- a right that is jeopardized by the very existence of weapons of mass destruction and by the use of other weaponry known to produce large numbers of civilian casualties. The Millennium Declaration clearly recognized the power of ideas whose times have come -- and it elegantly reaffirmed that the human race has an enormous stake in both gender equality and disarmament.

This alone would mark a historic development at the United Nations. But just a month later, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 -- on women, peace and security. This resolution -- which recognized that women and children account for the vast majority of the victims of armed conflict -- established some important benchmarks for assessing whether women are gaining increased opportunities to serve in decision-making levels at all levels of governance and in all mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict. Some might say it helped to inaugurate a new era of "results-based" gender equality in the UN system and, one hopes, among the individual member states as well.

Resolution 1325 may be a watershed in another respect as well, for it also encouraged all those who are involved in the planning for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration to consider the different needs of female and male ex-combatants and to take into account the needs of their dependents. The adoption of this resolution followed a remarkable statement earlier that year by the President of the Security Council, on the occasion of International Women's Day, indicating that "members of the Security Council recognize that peace is inextricably linked with equality between women and men."¹

Most recently, on 28 October of this year, the Secretary-General presented his report on

Women, Peace and Security to the Security Council, which is also now considering another report prepared on this subject by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). While there have been both progress and setbacks since the adoption of Resolution 1325, the very existence of these reports and the attention they are getting in the Security Council are themselves signs of progress and a foundation for new achievements in the years ahead.

While global norms are not built in a day, they can surely be destroyed in a day, especially a day involving a nuclear war. The return of biological or chemical warfare -- either by nation states or non-state groups -- would mark another retreat for humankind to a darker, less secure era. To avert these nightmares, advocates of disarmament must focus their efforts on expanding their constituencies. I believe that women are without doubt a potentially powerful and effective voice for disarmament. They have demonstrated their power by rallying to defeat atmospheric nuclear testing in the early 1960s -- upon the discovery of strontium-90 and other radioactive materials in mothers' milk. They have created a tidal wave of support to eliminate anti-personnel landmines, a campaign that resulted in yet another woman winning the Nobel Peace Prize. Yet I am convinced that women have only just begun to show the strength of their commitment in the field of disarmament.

What women do is extremely important in the field of international peace and security, and their efforts will in particular have tremendous effects on the future of some of the world's most deadly weaponry. Women vote, they organize, they network even across national borders, they donate, they investigate, they publish, they win elections and they write laws. In short, they have the capacity to do all that is needed to convert the goals of disarmament and arms control into concrete realities.

But women need not support disarmament as an end in itself -- though many do -- in order to advance their own agendas. The success of disarmament helps women in innumerable ways. It frees resources -- totaling over \$850 billion per year today -- that can be used to address chronic social and economic problems. It helps to put a halt to the destructive effects upon our shared natural environment from the production of deadly new weapons. It will reduce the threat of future wars and the dangers they pose to themselves, their husbands, companions, and families. It will, through the various verification and control mechanisms of treaties, even help to reduce significantly the risk of some of the worst imaginable forms of terrorism, in particular the risk that terrorists will acquire weapons of mass destruction.

It is therefore absolutely vital for women everywhere to recognize the common ground that disarmament and gender equality share in the world today. Together, they are global public goods whose benefits are shared by all and monopolized by no one. In the UN system, both are cross-cutting issues, for what office or department of the United Nations does not stand to gain by progress in gender equality or disarmament? When women move forward, and when disarmament moves forward, the world moves forward. Unfortunately, the same applies in reverse: setbacks in these areas impose costs for all.

We who work in the United Nations understand quite well that progress in these fields will take many years. But we are confident that a combination of moral right and political might of dedicated leaders among our member states will ultimately point to brighter days ahead. Though my Department of Disarmament Affairs is the smallest department in the United Nations, I am proud to say that we have done a lot to advance the cause of gender equality in literally all we do. We are not doing this alone -- it is part of an institution-wide effort that is incorporated in our official budget and planning documents. It is a key factor in shaping how we pick speakers for our symposia, who we invite to international conferences, how we select members of expert groups and the Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters, who we seek to recruit, and what we say in our public and private statements. We are working right now on developing a "Gender Action Plan" and have hired two professional consultants to ensure that we are not just, as they say, "talking the talk, but walking the walk."

I encourage you all to watch us progress in this field, and to support our efforts. Visit our web site and you will see a useful set of Briefing Notes we compiled on Gender and Disarmament. Read our statements and you will find we mean what we say -- and we do not intend to fail either in our commitment to gender equality or to disarmament.

Shortly before she died, Nobel Peace Laureate Emily Greene Balch wrote a poem she addressed to the "Dear People of China." The last stanza read as follows:

*Let us be patient with one
another,
And even patient with
ourselves.
We have a long, long way to
go.
So let us hasten along the
road,
The road of human tenderness
and generosity.
Groping, we may find one
another's hands in the dark.*

Today I would like to re-address this message to you and all who understand that genuine human security will not be achieved at the point of a gun. Let us continue our journey together.

¹ SC/6816, 8 March 2002.