

Beat: News

Rights Chief Bachelet Backs Call for Greater Women's Role in Disarmament Talks

Disarmament Research Agency UNIDIR

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UN News - Disarmament research agency UNIDIR called on Thursday for more women to take their rightful place in international security discussions – a move that's been warmly welcomed by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet.

Ms. Bachelet said that Russia's invasion of Ukraine "had created a new threat to the global peace and security that is the basis for sustainable development and all human rights"; and that the war had compounded negative consequences around the world, particularly for women and girls.

Gender-blind agreements.

The High Commissioner cited research that correlates high levels of military spending with poor women's rights and noted that "none of the ceasefire agreements reached between 2018 and 2020" included any provision for people's gender.

This male-dominated trend has continued in the Ukraine conflict, where only two women have been involved in negotiations between Kyiv and Moscow since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Ms. Bachelet continued.

Cecile Aptel, UNIDIR's Deputy Director, highlighted that on average, only one in five disarmament delegations are headed by women.

"Put simply," she said, "women don't have an equal opportunity to shape international disarmament and security policies, when these very policies affect everyone."

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which Ms. Aptel insisted had "turned back the clock on gender equality", it is now more important than ever to improve women's participation in arms control and disarmament, she said.

Online inequality.

In the specific area of multilateral diplomacy, women have been affected by the coronavirus too, the UNIDIR Deputy chief maintained, as she explained how when meetings shifted online, the number of interventions delivered by women dropped – most likely owing to the fact that registered speakers were often male ambassadors.

"Research shows that women are chronically underrepresented in discussions related to international security," said Renata Dalaqua, UNIDIR Programme Lead for Gender and Disarmament. "The policies being debated affect everyone. But women, people of colour, and minorities don't have an equal opportunity to shape them."

With at least 20 countries at war today – and 14 in Africa alone – South Africa's former Deputy Minister of Defence, Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge, who is now Director of the Quaker UN Office in Geneva, insisted that the participation of more women at all levels of international security policy was "not only as a right but also as a critical component in improving diversity and therefore also improving the chances for more effective and sustainable decisions".

But progress in achieving this right has been slow, said Ms. Madlala-Routledge.

Security Council oversight.

Despite the adoption of four UN Security Council Resolutions on women, peace and security, "we continue to see a marked under-representation of women, especially in international security structures and mechanisms", she added.

Achieving women's effective participation in areas such as the implementation of peace and disarmament treaties and programmes requires achieving a "critical mass", Ms. Madlala-Routledge continued. Women "need to be present in large enough numbers to be able to effect change", she insisted, "considering the deeply patriarchal nature of most institutions of power and structures of decision making, particularly those dealing with international security".

UN chief's priorities.

Gender parity in disarmament discussions is a key priority of Secretary-General António Guterres, who's consistently called for the meaningful participation of women in peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts.

Welcoming this policy, UN rights chief Ms. Bachelet noted that this had resulted in women's participation in three out of four UN (co)-led peace processes in 2020.

"But women represented only 23 per cent of delegates from parties to conflicts in these processes," she added.

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