



24 May International Women's Day for Peace and Disarmament

This annual commemoration aims to highlight the important and indispensable role of women in building global peace and security. Despite being the most affected by wars and armed conflicts, women continue to be under-represented in peace processes and security decision-making. This creates an imbalance that affects the effectiveness of peace efforts. Their absence limits the diversity of perspectives and solutions, and valuable opportunities to address the root causes of conflicts and their potential resolution are lost. There is therefore an urgent need to promote greater active participation of women in these areas, ensuring their presence and influence to achieve lasting and sustainable peace at the global level.

To highlight their contributions and the difficulties they face, we interviewed three women who are or have been leaders of peace and disarmament campaigns or organisations: Anna MacDonald, executive director of [Brave Movement](#), Melissa Parke, executive director of [ICAN](#), and Maria Villellas, president of [WILPF Espanya](#).



[Anna MacDonald](#) (Great Britain). She is an activist for social justice, human rights, arms control and disarmament. She was co-chair of the [Control Arms](#) campaign which, under her leadership, achieved the approval of the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) by the United Nations, in force since 2014. She is currently the executive director of [Brave Movement](#). She has worked to promote policies to reduce the negative effects of the arms trade, and has played a key role in mobilising civil society and advocating for tighter controls on the sale and transfer of conventional weapons and rights, public health and foreign policy and supported nuclear disarmament.

When and why did you decide to get involved in disarmament issues?

I got involved in disarmament issues at Oxfam in the early 2000s. I had already seen the devastating impact of conflict through my work as a campaigner and programme manager, and our partners around the world were clear in their demands for greater action to prevent the uncontrolled flood of weapons.

I was appointed as Oxfam's Conflict Campaign Manager in 2002, and together with colleagues from Amnesty International, we planned and launch the Control Arms Campaign in 2003 with the aim of achieving the first international treaty to control the



trade in conventional weapons. From there it was an intense decade of research, campaigning, advocacy and media work around the world to get us to final successful negotiations for an Arms Trade Treaty in 2013.

Did you find some specific difficulties in your work for the fact of being a woman?

When I started working in disarmament over 20 years ago, it was a very male dominated field. It was a bit better on the NGO side, but in the diplomatic world I would often find myself as one of very few women in meetings, or even the only woman. Sometimes men in the diplomatic or political world would react with some surprise when I would introduce myself as Head of Arms Control, and sexist jokes were very common. When I would look around a UN disarmament meeting, I would see only a handful of women Ambassadors.

UNIDIR conducted some interesting research a few years ago showing how women are still less represented than men at all levels in disarmament, and particularly at the senior levels. Things are changing, there are a lot more women engaged now, which is excellent. Some of the more macho, sexist environments that I experienced would not be acceptable today. But it is still too slow, and all organisations, governmental and non-governmental, need to move to achieve gender equality and understand the gendered nature of war and conflict.

Why do you think women are traditionally underrepresented in peace negotiations and diplomatic disarmament forums? Why is it so important to increase their presence?

I think historically, disarmament and peace processes were seen as an extension of military or defence sector work, which are very male dominated. If we exclude 50% of the population, then we lose 50% of our peace-building potential. There are countless examples that show that the inclusion of women in peace negotiations significantly improves the sustainability of peace, and the conduct of the negotiations themselves.

From my own experience, I think this extends to negotiations and general diplomacy. When a meeting has a more equal gender balance, you find a greater degree of listening. It sounds like a stereotype, but all male meetings have a tendency to be more aggressive. The greater understanding that we have now of the gendered impacts of war and conflict is an important development in disarmament analysis and policy, and has only come about through the greater involvement of women in disarmament forums.



***How do you assess the current moment of increased polarization and rearmament?
Where does this situation lead us?***

It is a dangerous moment, where too many nationalistic populist leaders are throwing around aggressive rhetoric, and at the most extreme, downplaying the catastrophic potential of nuclear weapons. We risk a normalization of ignoring international law. Even norms that we had thought were well established such as the stigma against the use of cluster bombs or white phosphorous are being ignored. It is never acceptable to violate international humanitarian or human rights law, and this has to be applied to all sides in a conflict. At the same time, I am encouraged by students and many in the younger generation getting involved in peace and disarmament movements, and the potential is there to reassert the importance of disarmament.

Do you have any advice or recommendation to the people or organizations involved in peace and disarmament issues?

The biggest lesson for me is the importance of longevity and implementation. Changing the dynamic of the arms trade, and of military aggression, is an extremely long-term endeavour. We have to keep at it. No campaign, however successful, will be impactful in the long term if it does not keep a focus on implementation. Achieving global agreements, whether the Mine Ban Treaty, the Convention on Cluster Munitions, the Arms Trade Treaty, or the more recent declaration on Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas, are huge achievements involving a lot of work and dedicated effort. And it's an even bigger effort to keep working to ensure that they are actually implemented effectively. To do this, it is essential to work with others in coalitions.

I remember a colleague saying to me many years ago when I was starting out that working in coalition is very, very hard, but it is the only way to really achieve significant change. She was right, coalitions are tough. Organizations have different priorities, different perspectives and understanding, and very different levels of funding. But we have to keep at it to find ways to bring in new members, recognize and encourage the next generation of peace-makers and activists who may have new and different ways of doing things. Above all, we have to keep an eye on the ultimate goal – reducing armed violence and conflict and building peace.



[Melissa Parke](#) (Australia). She is the executive director of the [International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons](#) (Nobel Peace Prize 2017). A fervent advocate of nuclear disarmament, she has dedicated her professional life to fighting against the proliferation of these weapons of mass destruction. She has held different positions in the Australian government and has worked as a lawyer with the United Nations. From 2007 to 2016, she was a member of the Australian Parliament for Fremantle a position from which she promoted human rights, public health and foreign policy and

supported nuclear disarmament.

When and why did you decide to get involved in disarmament issues?

I worked for many years as a lawyer with the United Nations in places like Kosovo, Gaza, Lebanon, Cyprus and Yemen. I saw firsthand the impact of war on innocent women, men and children. I have been fighting injustice my whole life and to my mind there is no greater injustice to humanity and the planet than nuclear weapons. Their very existence is an ever-present ongoing threat that should not be tolerated. ICAN is helping the world's peoples see that nuclear weapons are a problem, not a solution. And of all the global problems out there today, this one is relatively easy to solve. Humans built nuclear weapons. Humans can dismantle them. All it takes is political will and leadership.

Did you find some specific difficulties in your work for the fact of being a woman?

Being ready to use nuclear weapons is seen as masculine and strong, while wanting to disarm is often described as feminine and weak.

This skewed view of what's seen as rational and strong shapes the narrative around nuclear weapons by decision-makers, media, and advocates. As just one example, U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze called U.S. President John F. Kennedy a "pantywaist," for making more cautious decisions about nuclear war.

At any given meeting of international diplomatic meetings on nuclear weapons, only around a quarter of official country delegates are likely to be women, and less than a fifth of statements are likely to be given by a woman.

Almost half of all country delegations at any of these meetings are likely to be composed entirely of men.



So, disarmament is an area that tends to be male-dominated, where self-described, usually male, 'experts' are regarded as more important than those with lived experience such as survivors from affected communities.

This is despite the fact that:

- Women in Hiroshima and Nagasaki had nearly double the risk of developing and dying from solid cancer due to ionizing radiation exposure.
- Research from Chernobyl indicates that girls are considerably more likely than boys to develop thyroid cancer from nuclear fallout.
- Pregnant women exposed to nuclear radiation face a greater likelihood of delivering children with physical malformations and stillbirths, leading to increased maternal mortality.
- And yet, official evaluations have not considered gender –and age– sensitive impacts, meaning that the harm of ionizing radiation has been systematically under-estimated and under-reported.

Why do you think women are traditionally underrepresented in peace negotiations and diplomatic disarmament forums? And why is it so urgent and important to increase their presence?

It is well accepted that peace and disarmament fora urgently need to increase the meaningful participation of women in their processes in order to increase the effectiveness of these fora.

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 “makes the pursuit of gender equality relevant to every single Security Council action, ranging from elections to disarmament efforts.”

United Nations General Assembly Resolution 67/48, adopted in 2012, urges member states and other relevant actors to promote equal opportunities for women in disarmament decision-making processes and to support and strengthen the effective participation of women, including through capacity-building efforts, in the field of disarmament.

Female civil society leaders were particularly prominent in TPNW negotiations & elevating the humanitarian perspective. Women occupied prominent positions in the negotiations: including Beatrice Fihn from ICAN, Veronique Christory from ICRC, the chairperson of the UN meeting was Costa Rican Ambassador Elayne White Gomez, and women were among the heads of delegation of some of the most active States in the deliberations (e.g. Ireland, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland and Thailand). The negotiations were influenced by the powerful advocacy of survivors of nuclear weapons testing and bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, many of them women.



The result is that the TPNW features strongly a gender perspective:

The preamble to the treaty (i) acknowledges that nuclear weapons have a disproportionate impact on women and girls, including as a result of ionizing radiation; and (ii) *recognizes* that the equal, full and effective participation of both women and men is an essential factor for the promotion and attainment of sustainable peace and security, and committed to supporting and strengthening the effective participation of women in nuclear disarmament,

The TPNW also calls on States parties to provide gender-sensitive victim assistance (Article 6)

The two meetings of states parties (MSPs) that have taken place on the new UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) have specifically centred the voices of affected communities; have established a scientific advisory group that examines evidence of the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons; and appointed a gender focal point for the treaty.

So, the TPNW is a game changer in the nuclear weapons policy debate.

How do you assess the current moment of increased polarization and rearmament? Where does this situation lead us?

The threat of nuclear war is widely recognized to be at its highest level since the Cold War. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine using nuclear threats to prevent other countries intervening to stop it brought the nuclear threat back into the headlines and public consciousness, particularly in Europe and North America. With the conflict in Gaza that is threatening to spread into a wider conflict between Israel and Iran, we have another major war involving a nuclear-armed state, Israel, in which threats to use nuclear weapons have been made. Added to this, the existing nuclear tensions on the Korean peninsula have escalated even further since the beginning of the year.

In addition, in the past few months, a very worrying public debate has started in some European countries –particularly Germany– about whether the EU or more European countries, apart from France and Britain, should acquire nuclear weapons because they think that Donald Trump could come back to power in the US and then the US could no longer be relied on to help protect Europe from nuclear-armed Russia.

This debate is wrong-headed in so many ways, especially given it would deal a potentially fatal blow to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) which, although it has not been effective in delivering disarmament, has been effective in limiting the spread of nuclear weapons.

The best way for Europe to ensure its security in the face of nuclear weapons is not to cling to the unproven and flawed dogma of deterrence, but instead to support the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons that came into force in 2021 that almost half of all states have now either signed, ratified or acceded to.



Do you have any advice or recommendation to the people or organizations involved in peace and disarmament issues?

Despite the current instability and violence across the world, international law remains central to restricting conflict and bringing greater stability. The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) is a new addition to international law and outlaws nuclear weapons in the same way as chemical and biological weapons, anti-personnel landmines and cluster munitions have been banned. The treaty is gaining strength and almost half of all countries have already signed, ratified or acceded to it.

So it is important for all of us campaigning to eliminate nuclear weapons and prevent the catastrophe of nuclear war to remain optimistic and keep pushing our governments –by for example writing or talking to our elected representatives, including our local governments (since cities are the primary targets of nuclear weapons), writing to the media, challenging our pension funds to divest from weapons manufacturers, or by raising public awareness through protest or other actions– to join the TPNW, because it is the only legal route for all countries to get rid of their weapons in a fair and verifiable way.

As part of this, we must continually challenge the flawed and naïve argument that nuclear deterrence prevents the use of nuclear weapons. This dogma, based as it is on flawed assumptions that are not supported by any empirical evidence, is a threat to all of us and an obstacle to disarmament.



[Maria Vilellas](#) (Catalunya) is the president of the [Spanish section of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom](#) (WILPF). She is a researcher at the [School for the Culture of Peace](#) at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and her field of research is the gender, peace and security agenda, especially women's participation in peace processes. She also researches on armed conflicts and peace processes in the Southeast Asia region. Among others, she holds a postgraduate diploma in Gender and Equality from the UAB, and a diploma in Mental

Health in Situations of Political Violence and Catastrophes from the Complutense University of Madrid. She is a member of the [Network of Women Mediators of the Mediterranean](#).

When and why did you decide to get involved in peace and disarmament issues?

Since I was very young, I participated with my family in the peace movement, in all the mobilizations around the NATO referendum. With my parents, we participated in the Aragon Peace Marches, in the human chains around the US base in Zaragoza. As a teenager, I participated in the demonstrations and marches in support of conscientious objectors who were in prison. I am lucky to have grown up feeling part of the peace and antimilitarist movement. It was at the university, as a student of political studies, that I met the School of Culture of Peace (Escola de Cultura de Pau) and I decided to study the postgraduate course in Peace Culture, and I had the opportunity to join the team of the School. Later I met the women with whom we created the state section of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Living in a world without wars and weapons has always been one of my wishes.

Have you encountered any difficulties or setbacks in your work because of being a woman?

Personally, on an individual level, I have not had any difficulties in my work because of being a woman, but that does not make me less aware of all the inequalities and structural obstacles that women have to face in a patriarchal society like ours. Civil society organizations for peace and global justice, although at a discursive level we have been able to advance in some important reflections, and we are also on the way to transform dynamics and relationships, we are also traversed by inequalities, which not only affect women, but also affect racialized people, people with disabilities, etc. We still have a long way to go.



Why have women traditionally been underrepresented in peace negotiations and diplomatic disarmament forums? And why is it so urgent and important to increase their presence?

Inequalities between women and men, as well as other areas of inequality, are reproduced in the field of peace building. Both peace negotiations and diplomatic disarmament forums are traditionally very masculinized spaces to which normally only certain men have had access, those in positions of political or military power, and therefore, it has been very difficult for the majority of women to gain access to them. It is essential to increase the participation of women to guarantee the right to participation, but it is also very important to transform the spaces and dynamics of negotiation themselves, so that they are more democratic and representative, to be able to accommodate a multiplicity of views and proposals that allow a more inclusive and sustainable peace building. It is not possible to build a truly transformative peace without the participation of women, in all their diversity.

How do you value the current moment of increasing polarization and tensions and rearmament? Where can this situation lead us? And what should be done to reverse it?

We are in a very worrying moment in terms of armament, warmongering and the growth of hate speeches. Instead of prioritizing dialogue, international law, multilateralism and conflict prevention, many governments are prioritizing increasing military spending and militaristic responses to conflicts, and the strengthening of the extreme right is also very worrying. I have no answers, the complexity of the current situation requires the sum of many initiatives in many different areas: a change in the economic model that prioritizes the welfare of the population and the care of the planet, a change in international relations by returning to multilateralism, conflict prevention and global justice, the dismantling of neocolonialism, a change in the practices and ways of doing politics, which places relations and care at the centre.

Any advice or recommendations for people and organizations involved in peace and disarmament issues?

Despite all the obstacles and difficulties, we must maintain hope, peace is possible and requires our perseverance. As the road is long and difficult, we have a box of prepared tools: critical spirit, care, mutual support, creativity, and sense of humour are some of the things we cannot miss.



Origins of the International Women's Day for Peace and Disarmament

This day was established in 1982 in the context of the [Women's Peace Camp on Greenham Common](#) protesting against the deployment of US nuclear weapons at the Royal Air Force Greenham Common in Berkshire. Its aim is to make visible the historical and current efforts of women in peace building and disarmament, rejecting violence as a solution to the world's challenges.