

## **Plenary 3: IPRA Conference 2010: A safe and peaceful world means abolishing nuclear weapons**

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Thank you to Lynda Blanchard for inviting me to speak today on this panel. I feel fortunate to share the podium with such esteemed company. I would like to acknowledge that we stand (or sit) on Aboriginal ground here, as everywhere in this country, and to acknowledge those ancestors who cared for this country for millennia.

I was asked to speak about gender and nuclear weapons.

As Lynda has said I work for ICAN<sup>1</sup> – the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons. We have been running for just over 3 years and our network of partners now extends across the world. Our core political ask is that governments negotiate a Nuclear Weapons Convention<sup>2</sup> - and our core work is trying to build a groundswell of public opinion to motivate the political will to do this. Just this May at the UN 189 nations gathered to discuss nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament while reviewing the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. And for the first time we saw widespread demands from a majority of these nations for a Nuclear Weapons Convention, a treaty to ban these weapons once and for all; over 120 groupings and nations called for a Convention. So there is reason to take heart.

ICAN engages with governments here and overseas, bureaucrats, academics, United Nations and Foreign Embassy Ambassadors, military and scientific folk, medicos, school kids, unions, churches, other NGOs...really the full gamut.

So I speak today as an activist and, yes, a feminist woman, who has spent over a decade working on nuke disarmament, and close to another decade before that on broader nuclear and anti-military issues in this country. I am fortunate that I have not experienced the direct impact of the bomb myself; but my whole life, as with many of yours, has been marked by the bomb.

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<sup>1</sup> Website: [icanw.org](http://icanw.org)

<sup>2</sup> Summary of the Convention: [icanw.org/nuclear-weapons-convention](http://icanw.org/nuclear-weapons-convention)

I was born in Australia at the very end of the 1960's, two dozen years after the first use of the bomb. I lived in Fiji as a child, then in both New Zealand and PNG for short times before returning to Australia as a teenager. As a child growing up in the Pacific then, the effects of nuclear testing were always there, bubbling away as part of the Pacific story, though often subliminally. We learned Sadakos story in our school rooms. I had throughout my youth, and still occasionally have, frightening nightmares of nuclear war. I grew up, like many in my generation, terrified that the Cold War would go hot, that either the Russian or the US President would finally hit that mythical red button, that all would be lost.

To many young people today, born after the fall of the Wall, still young when the last big series of nuke tests were done in the Pacific, this all-pervasive fear and nightmarish worry is largely foreign to them. They often look at me like I am something out of a scratchy black and white documentary when I talk of that childhood fear that still motivates my activism today. But when I say all of that is still here now, their focus comes back sharply.

They are often astounded that there are still around 23,000 nukes in world today, that 96% of them are still in the arsenals of Russia and the USA, that thousands remain on hair trigger alert, ready to be launched in just minutes. Many younger people are shocked when I tell them that the last nuke test was just last year in North Korea or when they learn that there have been over 2,000 nuclear tests since the first use of these abominable weapons. But they are also angry – why didn't they know? Why doesn't anyone talk to them about this? Why haven't we got rid of these weapons, 65 years after we first knew their destructive power? Recently in a classroom I was asked by a 15 year old student hearing this all for the first time, "But why are they allowed to get away with it?" Young people get it. In fact in my experience most people, regardless of age, nationality and gender get it. Nukes are frightening.

So what has all this to do with gender and nuclear abolition? Gender politics has become a difficult subject in this supposedly post-post-Feminist world. Perhaps it always has been. I am not an academic, and do not pretend to speak the theory of this, which is complex and deserving of far more than I can offer. But I can speak from my lived experience. As an activist working hard to abolish nuclear weapons, I believe that gender norms and approaches are important to acknowledge, to understand, to address, or we may never get to that world free of nukes.

We have a major problem in this world right now. 'Nuclear weapons are not only physical

objects, they are political objects; their symbolic importance is key in national and international security debates.<sup>3</sup>

To get to a world free of nukes we need to challenge so much that has become entrenched about these weapons, and about our conditioned responses to these weapons. But even more, we need to address and challenge so much about human nature and war, about power, about what is seen as strength.

We must examine and challenge notions of security to encompass more than those defined by military might. Security is usually packaged as military and masculine. But when asked about security in our daily lives, most people define it around things like food, shelter, healthcare...but these things are also often labeled feminine. But there is a growing recognition that we need to give precedence to human security, environmental security, food and water security, and so much more over military security. And to start this we have to challenge some of the assumptions around gendered responses to power and conflict. We also need to examine cultural meanings associated with issues of security, and inter-generational assumptions as well.

Carol Cohen, Felicity Hill and Sara Ruddick wrote an insightful article for the WMD Commission and more recently updated for a new Reaching Critical Will publication on the question of gender and disarmament. Their paper is titled "*The Relevance of Gender for Eliminating Weapons of Mass Destruction*."<sup>4</sup> And I highly recommend it to those interested in investigating these ideas further.

From my experience as a non-government advocate with ICAN and other campaigns, I know that gendered responses are not limited to your biological gender. But this doesn't change the fact that the majority of people I meet with in high-level diplomacy or advocacy are men. Altogether too frequently when calling for more women at the decision-making and negotiation tables we hear the response "Margaret Thatcher was a woman". Yes, apparently. But hardly representative of womankind I would like to think, any more than George Bush is of mankind I would hope. Its not simply a matter of tokenistic gender balance – its making the space to allow for women to speak, to contribute, to offer perspective and advice.

Women's voices and perspectives, women's expertise and skills are desperately needed in

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<sup>3</sup> Cohen, Hill, Ruddick, "*The Relevance of Gender for Eliminating Weapons of Mass Destruction*."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>4</sup> [reachingcriticalwill.org/resources/books/BAC/text.html](http://reachingcriticalwill.org/resources/books/BAC/text.html)

the work towards a world free of nuclear weapons. We in the NGO world need to get better about creating and taking this space too. I often hear even amongst colleagues that there are too few women willing to talk about nuclear weapons issues, as many are too frightened by the technicalities. But its not rocket science, and even for the bits that are you don't have to be able to argue the science of it before you can speak out against these weapons. Take it personally – after all, these weapons are pointed at you and your family.

Polls from around the world show time and again that the majority of those keen to stop the nuclear madness are women. Look for example at the Lowy Poll on public opinion and foreign policy released last year which showed that 75% of Australians 'somewhat' or 'strongly' agreed that 'global nuclear disarmament should be a top priority for the Australian government'<sup>5</sup>. Women were more likely than men to agree - 84% compared with 65%.

A decade ago now the UN Security Council adopted SC Resolution 1325<sup>6</sup> on Women, Peace and Security. This important resolution obliges nations to enhance the role of women in peace and security and to find ways to increase the representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict. This resolution was a landmark change in diplomatic and security circles and in political thinking, and although change may be slow, evolution is inevitable.

In terms of disarmament and non-proliferation politics, so much comes back to diplomacy. However, even though disarmament and non-proliferation diplomacy is often highly ritualized and masculinised, it is rarely accorded the strength attributed to soldiering or warfare. We don't see many Hollywood films out about brawny diplomats going forth to disarm the world, armed only with briefcases and good intent. And despite Winston Churchills assertion that "To jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war", only a fraction of our national budget still is dedicated to diplomacy compared to that dedicated to military and defence.

Because diplomacy means discussion, negotiation, depending on other parties to honour their obligations under treaties or agreements, it is sometimes seen as a feminized way of addressing an issue, culturally marked as lacking masculinity, as "wimpy", and often

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<sup>5</sup> [www.lowyinstitute.org/PublicationPop.asp?pid=1148](http://www.lowyinstitute.org/PublicationPop.asp?pid=1148)

<sup>6</sup> [www.1325australia.org.au/html/nu1325.html](http://www.1325australia.org.au/html/nu1325.html)

labeled as impotent.

This was perhaps most vividly demonstrated when Iraq was invaded in 2003 by our country and others in the Coalition of the Willing, under the premise that Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. UN weapons inspectors insisted, after a decade or longer of systematic inspections, that there were no weapons of mass destruction, but they were portrayed as having failed, as having been being fooled by the regime, and now it was time for them to step aside and let the real men do their work. Nine years on, we know full well that the inspectors were correct.

Do you remember the street marches involving tens of millions of people out on the streets over that Valentines Day weekend before the bombings began? Throughout the world, in over 800 major cities and towns, people took their peaceful protest to the streets saying No to the war on Iraq. Our government and others offered little response to that widespread community concern, attended in most places by many more women than men. Instead our militaries went into Iraq with shock and awe, pushing aside international laws, diplomacy, overriding the concerns of their nations. Now, with well over 100,000 deaths<sup>7</sup> in that country, and not an indigenous weapon of mass destruction to be found, the commentary has come around to military "failure" and nation building and how best to withdraw and save face. And the phantom weapons of mass destruction that gave the original excuse for war are studiously not spoken of.

As I work across diverse sectors of our society, I am daily reminded of the challenge we face to break through the "norm" of masculinised definitions of security to find a better balance. How will we seek to bring this world about? And what do we have to challenge within our thoughts and our cultural and political doctrines to achieve such a world? Nuclear abolition will take a lot of work and a real commitment by all people; men and women, of all ages, all cultures, to bring it about.

This month as we mark the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the invention of these weapons and next month the 65<sup>th</sup> commemoration of their use against Japan, we think it is time we sent them into retirement. We need to get on with finding a better way to security and peace, together.

Thank you.

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<sup>7</sup> [www.iraqbodycount.org/](http://www.iraqbodycount.org/)