Remarks by High representative for Disarmament Affairs
Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu

At the “Women in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty”
event hosted by the Permanent Missions in Geneva of Australia, Canada, the Netherlands and Sweden

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... In the field of disarmament, women have been particularly powerful agents for peace and progress.

During the Cold War, women peace activists were instrumental in making negotiations of a partial nuclear test ban treaty a reality in 1963.

More recently, political pressure from women’s groups helped establish an international ban on landmines in 1997, and women activists advocated for the inclusion of measures against gender-based violence in the first international arms trade treaty, which entered into force in 2014.

Women are leaders at every level of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, which received last year’s Nobel Peace Prize for its ground-breaking campaign that led to a treaty prohibiting nuclear weapons.

In each of these campaigns, women challenged established patterns of power, defied the entrenched associations of weapons with men, and offered critical contributions to the debate on how to advance the disarmament agenda.

Yet, when it comes to negotiations between governments, women have been consistently absent.

At any given intergovernmental meeting on disarmament, only one quarter of the participants are likely to be women and half of all delegations are likely to include no women at all.

During the negotiations of the NPT from 1965-1968 only a handful of women participated in delegations to the Eighteen-Nation Disarmament Committee.

Ms. Inga Thorsson of Sweden presided over the First Review Conference of the NPT in 1975, and only one other woman has served as president since: Ms. Taos Feroukhi of Algeria in 2015.

At the first session of this NPT Prep Com last year, 33% of participants were women, while 30% of the 125 delegations were exclusively male. There were 22 women heads of delegation, or 18% of all delegation leaders.

Initial figures for the current second session suggest a slight improvement, with fewer exclusively male delegations and more women participating.1

The lack of women in inter-governmental disarmament efforts is particularly concerning considering the gendered impacts of weapons—whether they be the biological effects of ionizing radiation from nuclear weapons, or the social, economic and psychological impacts of all types of weapons from weapons of mass destruction to small arms and light weapons.
However, it is encouraging to note increasing interest in recent years on the part of Member States in incorporating gender considerations in disarmament discussions, especially with regard to weapons of mass destruction. This has been evident both at the first session of the NPT Prep Com last year and during First Committee, where an increasing number of States referenced gender considerations in their interventions, including addressing the gender impacts of weapons and calling for greater efforts to improve women’s engagement and participation in multilateral disarmament fora.

This trend has continued; several working papers for this year’s Prep Com have also referenced the importance of gender parity.

For its part, ODA has sought to promote the inclusion of gender considerations and improve the gender balance of the international disarmament community. In 2017, ODA adopted a Gender Parity Strategy Implementation Plan, in line with the UN System-wide strategy, to complement its Gender Mainstreaming Action Plan, which aims to strengthen disarmament efforts through effectively incorporating gender considerations as well as ensure the equal and meaningful participation of women and men in all areas of its work.

ODA’s Regional Centres and Vienna Office promote the participation of women in all their disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation initiatives. For example, the Vienna Office has provided scholarships to 170 early career women professionals from the global South to participate in training courses on disarmament and non-proliferation.

ODA has also strongly encouraged the nomination of female diplomats for its flagship disarmament fellowship programme. Although historically fellows have been predominantly male, in 2017, 72% (18 out of 25 fellows) were women.

Tackling the peril of nuclear weapons will require the best contributions of everyone—not just men. Breaking the diplomatic deadlock demands creativity and passion. With women’s proven potential to upend the status quo, their continued marginalization in nuclear negotiations is a loss for the entire world. Involving more women will revitalize these talks and advance our collective effort to create a safer and more secure future.