Remarks by Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu, High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, at the International Gender Champions Disarmament Impact Group Side Event:

Securing Our Common Future:
Promoting Gender-Responsive Disarmament and Security

New York
15 October 2018
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me start by thanking the co-chairs of the international gender champions disarmament impact group – Ireland, Namibia and the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research – for convening this important event. I am honoured to deliver this address and trust this is the first step in a fruitful and impactful partnership.

In joining the international gender champions, I pledged to raise global awareness about the gendered impact of weapons and to ensure that women in my office are able to participate fully in all workshops, events and activities in the field of disarmament.

I didn’t make these pledges only because they are the right thing to do – although of course they are, I made these pledges because I believe that strengthening the role of women in disarmament and ensuring that disarmament discussions take the gendered impacts of weapons into account are effective and underutilized strategies to advance our collective goals in disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control.

It has been said before, but it bears repeating: Taking gender into account will have positive benefits for women, but of equal importance, a gender sensitive approach to disarmament will have positive impacts for the field as a whole. This is reflected in the fact that the overall goal of ODA’s gender mainstreaming action plan is “to facilitate progress on disarmament”.

This firm belief informed the Secretary-General’s new agenda for disarmament and its strong emphasis on issues of gender and women’s empowerment. As stated there, concerns relating to arms have clear gender dimensions.

The ownership and use of arms is closely linked to specific expressions of masculinity related to control, power, domination and strength. Correspondingly, men are overwhelmingly the majority of small arms owners, users and victims. Women, however, are more frequently the victims of gender-based violence facilitated by small arms, including domestic violence and sexual violence.

The focus on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons since 2010 has drawn attention to the importance and utility of integrating cross-cutting issues such as gender, public health and the environment. Research indicates that women and girls exposed to radiation from the bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki were more likely than men and boys to go on to develop cancer. Nuclear weapons have other gendered effects, including with regards to reproductive health and associated social stigmas.

There are other weapon categories that required a gender analysis, including other weapons of mass destruction and various emerging weapons technologies. I welcome the work that has been undertaken in this area by our colleagues in civil society and hope that governments can build upon it.
Understanding the gendered framings and impacts of weapons is important for designing effective policy responses and for challenging traditional security orthodoxies underpinning arguments for the utility of weapons.

Women and women’s groups have been particularly effective at challenging these entrenched narratives and acting as powerful agents for change and peace. During the Cold War, woman peace activists were instrumental to the commencement of negotiations of a partial nuclear test ban treaty. Political pressure from women’s groups helped establish an international ban on land mines and secured a measure for combatting gender-based violence in the Arms Trade Treaty. Women are leaders at every level of the Nobel Peace Prize winning International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, which played a leading role in the movement that led to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

In each of these campaigns, women from across the globe worked together to challenge established patterns of power and offer critical contributions on how to advance peace and disarmament.

Yet, as we all well know, women remain chronically underrepresented at intergovernmental discussions and negotiations on disarmament. At any given international meeting of governments on disarmament, only one in four delegates are women. Among heads of delegations, this figure is even worse. We need to address this disparity urgently.

Women’s empowerment and gender parity within the United Nations has been a key priority for Secretary-General Antonio Guterres since day one of his term. Recognizing that only through equal and meaningful participation of both women and men can we effectively address the formidable challenges facing our planet, he has achieved parity at the senior-most levels within the organization for the first time in its history. He has also set tangible goals for reaching gender parity at every level across the UN system by 2028. In my own office we have made some gains but still have a way to go. You can track our progress on the UN’s dedicated gender parity website. We intend to hold governments accountable on this front and invite you to do the same for us.

Before I close I would like to return to the Secretary-General’s agenda for disarmament. The agenda contains a call for the incorporation of gender perspectives in policies on disarmament and arms control and two key actions on women’s participation. My Office is committed to implementing with full rigor each of these items, including working to ensure the full and equal participation of women in decision-making processes related to disarmament and international security. Likewise, we are committed to reaching gender parity on all panels, boards, expert groups and other bodies established under the auspices of the Secretary-General in the field of disarmament. If this means calling out repeated non-performers and under-performers, then that is what we will do. However, I am hopeful that we will instead be able to focus on celebrating successes and share views and experiences on best practices.

I know you are all as committed as we are. We look forward to working with all of you in this room and beyond, from governments, civil society and other UN agencies, to realize these goals.

Thank you.