
Meeting of the States Parties to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction

19 November 2021

English only

2020 Meeting

Geneva, 22-25 November 2021

Item 6 of the provisional agenda

Consideration of the factual reports of the Meetings of Experts reflecting their deliberations, including possible outcomes

Enhancing Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment as an Integral Part of the Institutional Strengthening of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC)

Submitted by Panama

I. Introduction

1. The Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) is the first multilateral disarmament treaty banning an entire category of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), which was negotiated from 1969 until 1971 and does not have any gender-related provision.
2. Since 2019, there has been an increased attention to gender considerations within the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), including statements at the Meetings of Experts, the Meeting of States Parties, research on potential sex-specific effects and gendered impacts of biological weapons¹, side events and informal exchanges exploring the relevance of gender perspectives in the BWC. Gender is becoming a topical issue for the BWC regime.
3. For the first time, the two latest UNGA Resolutions on the BWC adopted in 2019² and 2020³, as well as the draft resolution recently adopted at the UNGA First Committee⁴ have incorporated a preambular paragraph (PP9) encouraging the equitable participation of women and men in the framework of the Convention.
4. While these developments are welcomed by Panama, BWC States Parties could consider further supporting gender equality and women's empowerment. So far, none of the outcome documents of the Meetings of States Parties or the Review Conferences had referred to gender considerations. Nor did the abovementioned UNGA resolutions reflect on the gendered impacts of biological weapons.
5. Gender perspectives deepens insight into the human element of the BWC, as well as supports diversity and inclusiveness as important elements that further advances discussions within the BWC. The present working paper seeks to develop a common understanding of

¹ See, for example, Dalaqua, Renata Hessmann, James Reville, Alastair Hay, and Nancy Connell. 2019. "Missing Links: Understanding Sex- and Gender-Related Impacts of Chemical and Biological Weapons." UNIDIR, Geneva. <https://doi.org/10.37559/WMD/19/gen1>.

² See UNGA Resolution 74/79.

³ See UNGA Resolution 75/88.

⁴ See document A/C.1/76/L.35.



the ways that gender equality and women's empowerment is relevant for the institutional strengthening of the BWC.

II. Women's Participation and Leadership in BWC

6. Despite the long history of women's advocacy for the total disarmament of weapons of mass destruction, non-proliferation, disarmament and arms control fora, including the BWC, have long been characterized by a chronic and systemic gender imbalance. As consequence, knowledge and experiences of a large segment of the population were not receiving the attention it deserved.

7. As a field which has traditionally been male-dominated, women are significantly underrepresented, particularly in leadership positions, compared to other areas of diplomacy, i.e., human rights, humanitarian and social affairs, environment and climate change.

8. In terms of participation and leadership at the BWC-related meetings and activities, there have been slight improvements during this review cycle, but the figures are still discouraging:

- While between 2015 and 2019 there has been an increased participation of women in the Meeting of States Parties and the last BWC Review Conference (2016), women comprise, on average, a third of the diplomats.⁵
- At the 2019 Meeting of States Parties, 36% of the delegates and 20% of the Heads of Delegations were women, and only 22% of the national statements were delivered by women.⁶
- Throughout the 46 years since the BWC entered into force, the majority of the office-holders have been men. For example, only one Meeting of States Parties (2013) was chaired by a woman. In 2018 and 2019, only one Meeting of Experts was chaired by a woman (MX1 and MX3, respectively), whereas in 2020 two Meeting of Experts (MX4 and MX5) are chaired by women. Up to today, all the Review Conferences have been presided over by men.⁷

9. The equal, full and meaningful participation and leadership of men and women in all decision-making processes will ensure that the BWC is an open and inclusive forum, and thus enhancing the effectiveness of its processes and outcomes would certainly have a positive impact in its institutional strengthening. In other words, it's not about "counting women", but to "make women count".

10. Efforts towards this end will contribute to the implementation of international obligations and commitments, including but not limited to the UNSC Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, especially the SDG 5 on gender equality and the SDG 16 on peaceful and inclusive societies and institutions, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, among others.

III. Sex-specific effects and gendered impacts of biological weapons

11 Weapons of mass destruction, including biological weapons, are by nature indiscriminate. However, their effects can be felt differently by women, men, girls and boys depending on their biological sex, as well as social norms which are often informed by structural inequalities, cultural and social roles, responsibilities or stereotypes based on gender.

⁵ See International Gender Champions Disarmament Impact Group. 2021. *Factsheet: Gender and Biological Weapons*. <https://undir.org/Gender-biological-weapons>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

12. The gender dynamics influences the exposure to pathogens and infection, the likelihood of becoming a survivor, the vulnerability to discrimination and social stigma, the level of knowledge and education, access to information and decision-making opportunities, the ability to seek medical assistance, treatment and reporting cases, and the long-lasting physical and psychological impacts of these weapons on women, men, girls and boys, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

13. Knowledge of sex-specific effects and gendered impacts are fundamental in informing targeted responses, health protocols, including medical screening and treatment, subsequent to the use of biological or toxin weapons.⁸ However, those variables have scarcely been studied. Despite this challenge, there are some lessons learned that can be drawn from historical examples of biological warfare and natural outbreaks of diseases, such as the Ebola outbreak, Zika virus and the COVID-19 pandemic:

- The biological differences between males and females are complex, and may confer advantages either to males or females depending on the pathogens or infectious agent. Studies suggest variation in levels of mortality and vulnerability between men and women, to some diseases or biological agents, as well as reproductive health issues and obstetric complications, including miscarriages, birth defects and male infertility.⁹
- In the case of battlefield use of biological weapons, men are more likely to be exposed as men comprise the majority of combatants. In the event of an attack on a civilian population, women, and in many cases girls, would likely face an increased risk of exposure, given their predominant roles as caregivers within families and communities, and as front-line health-care workers. According to available data, they account for more than 80% of the nursing workforce.¹⁰
- Also, women have not been fully incorporated into global health surveillance, detection, prevention and response mechanisms, and their needs have been largely unmet. An analysis of 115 national task forces established to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic showed that 85% of those were comprised mostly by men and 81% were headed by men.¹¹
- The lack of gender perspective and analysis can reinforce and perpetuate existing biases in scientific research and prevent prospects for discovery and innovation in the field of science and technology. For example, many clinical trials, including the development of vaccines, have encompassed only male subjects, or when both sexes were included, no distinction was made between them in such studies.
- In many societies, women face greater obstacles, including economic and social barriers, to health care-services and recovery. Numerous stereotypes and gender norms that discriminate against women have become embedded in their social systems, which affect the access to and control over resources, education, information.

14. Evidence shows that more data and research are needed to better understand the sex-specific effects and gendered impacts of biological weapons and help States to build more effective and inclusive public health interventions and responses. The BWC must address these differentiated impacts, and ensure that its existing structure enables the international community to deliver greater results.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See Dalaqua, Renata Hessmann, James Revill, Alastair Hay, and Nancy Connell. 2019. “*Missing Links: Understanding Sex- and Gender-Related Impacts of Chemical and Biological Weapons.*” UNIDIR, Geneva. <https://doi.org/10.37559/WMD/19/gen1>.

¹⁰ See International Gender Champions Disarmament Impact Group. 2021. *Factsheet: Gender and Biological Weapons.* <https://unidir.org/Gender-biological-weapons>.

¹¹ Ibid.

IV. Applying a Gender Lens to the BWC: Bridging the Gap at the Ninth Review Conference

15. In order to promote a real change, States Parties need to integrate gender perspectives into BWC meeting discussions and promote gender equality in the BWC's machinery and processes in a sustainable manner.

16. The Review Conference constitutes the only authority to make substantive and procedural decisions, and the upcoming Ninth Review Conference will provide the opportunity for States Parties to make recommendations in this regard.

17. This working paper presents, in a non-exhaustive manner, some practical proposals to enhance gender equality, as well as full and meaningful participation of men and women in all BWC-related activities, and also stresses the importance of addressing the differentiated impacts of biological agents among women, men, girls and boys. It draws on the experiences and knowledge of other disarmament fora, as well as the efforts undertaken by the BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU), the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) and the International Gender Champions Disarmament Impact Group in these areas.¹² States Parties could consider to:

(a) Adopt a new mandate to mainstream a gender perspective in all BWC machinery, including the ISU, the intersessional programme, the Meetings of States Parties, the Meetings of Experts, the Review Conferences and in any subsidiary body that could be established in the future. This mandate should be reflected in the outcome document of the Ninth Review Conference: *"The Conference decides to ensure that the different needs and perspectives of women, girls, boys and men are considered and inform all areas of the Convention's implementation in order to deliver an inclusive approach and to strive to remove barriers to full, equal and gender balanced participation in the field of science and technology and in BWC meetings"*.

(b) Include a standing agenda item on gender mainstreaming in the Meeting of States Parties and the Review Conferences. The main objective will be to consider gender perspectives in the implementation of the BWC in order to facilitate a more focused discussion on the following topics: review the current state of play of initiatives and measures implemented to achieve this goal; discuss the progress made, the existing challenges and gaps; as well as analyse the gendered impact of biological incidents.

(c) Appoint gender focal point(s) who should work in close collaboration with the Chair and other members of the Bureau to provide advice on gender mainstreaming in the work and activities of the BWC, and who will report back to States Parties on the progress made in this context under the above-mentioned agenda item. The appointment of gender focal points or coordinators has proved to be an innovative approach in other disarmament fora, but it has to be seen which mechanism would be suitable in the framework of the BWC. There are three options that States Parties could explore:

- Create a new office-holder who will act as a gender focal point. This vacancy will rotate among the three regional groups, namely the Eastern European Group (EEG), the Group of the Non-Aligned Movement and Other States (NAM), and the Western Group (WG); or
- Entrust this task to one of the existing office-holders, i.e., one of the Vice-Chairs of the Meetings of States Parties; or
- Assign three gender focal points, one from each regional group to ensure equitable geographical representation.
- Adapt the ISU's mandate to allow it to support gender-related activities.

(d) Advocate for a gender-balanced Bureau and subsidiary bodies in subsequent review cycles.

¹² See International Gender Champions Disarmament Impact Group. 2021. *Gender & Disarmament Resource Pack*. <https://unidir.org/publication/gender-disarmament-resource-pack>.

- (e) Request future Chairs of the Meetings of States Parties and Review Conferences that their communications with States Parties and other stakeholders should encourage gender-balanced delegations.
- (f) Support the leadership and meaningful participation of women in BWC meetings, activities and decision-making processes by giving them the power and tools to engage and influence those processes.
- (g) Continue to track participation of men and women in BWC formal and informal meetings, including as speakers, and make the data available.
- (h) Include gender criteria in the sponsorship programme to ensure equal gender participation in BWC meetings, especially women from developing countries.
- (i) Promote and fund capacity-building programmes under Article X, including traineeships, fellowships and mentorship programmes, to develop expertise among women in areas relevant to the BWC and the political skills involved in disarmament negotiations.
- (j) Fund and support research on the differentiated impacts of biological agents among women, men, girls and boys.
- (k) Encourage delegations to set targets to strive towards gender-equal delegations and the full and effective participation of women and men in current and future BWC meetings.
- (l) Engage in initiatives that combat harmful gender stereotypes and promote gender equality in the field of science and technology.
- (m) Mainstream gender perspectives and analysis in public health systems and improve the collection of sex-and age-disaggregated data.
- (n) Adopt an age and gender-responsive approach for preparedness, response and assistance in the event of the use of biological or toxin weapons.
- (o) Invest in technical expertise and allocate resources to address the distinct needs of women and girls to respond to the use of biological or toxin weapons.
- (p) Monitor the advances in the field of science and technology to ensure that those do not reproduce existing gender bias.
- (q) Strengthen the link with other gender equality agendas, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Women, Peace and Security agenda.
- (r) Promote awareness raising activities and initiatives, such as the organization of informal seminars and webinars, focusing exclusively on advancing gender perspective in the BWC.¹³
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¹³ Up to today, only two events exclusively dedicated to Gender and BWC has been ever organized. The first one entitled “Gender-Responsive BWC? Understanding Gender-Related Impacts Of Biological Weapons And Implications For Assistance, Response And Preparedness” took place on 7 August 2019 and was co-hosted by the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) and the Permanent Mission of Norway in Geneva. The second entitled “Advancing Gender Perspectives In The Biological Weapons Convention” was held on 30 June 2021 and was co-hosted by The International Gender Champions Disarmament Impact Group and the BWC Implementation Support Unit.