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## **GENDER EQUALITY, DIVERSITY, AND THE CHEMICAL WEAPONS CONVENTION**

This paper examines gender equality and diversity in the context of the Chemical Weapons Convention (hereinafter “the Convention”) and the work of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). Based on desk research and two rounds of in-person consultations with Technical Secretariat (hereinafter “the Secretariat”) staff and representatives of States Parties, it takes stock of current initiatives, gaps, and challenges. It is a starting point for future dialogue and action to raise the priority of gender equality and diversity in the context of the Convention.

Gender equality is a fundamental human right and a necessary basis for a sustainable and peaceful world. The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) defines gender equality as “equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys”.

The priority of achieving gender equality is being acknowledged in a range of multilateral contexts. Sustainable Development Goal 5 (“achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”) affirms the link between gender equality and sustainable development. Multiple human rights instruments codify gender equality and rights within international law. The United Nations Secretary-General’s proposed action to “place women and girls at the centre” is one of several commitments outlined in the landmark 2021 report “Our Common Agenda”.

There is also a significant increase in support for gender equality in disarmament, non-proliferation, and arms control. Initiatives range from actions to prevent arms-related gender-based violence or to provide gender-sensitive victim assistance, and efforts to increase the full, equal, and meaningful participation and representation of women in technical and diplomatic roles. Such gender mainstreaming efforts have helped to facilitate greater policy coherence between States’ disarmament and non-proliferation commitments and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda as enshrined in United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 (2000).



## THE CHEMICAL WEAPONS CONTEXT

The pursuit of gender equality and diversity is relevant and necessary to the object and purpose of the Convention. Mainstreaming gender considerations across the four pillars of the Convention and work of the OPCW can have benefits for the credibility and effectiveness of the regime as a whole. There are many reasons why gender equality and diversity matter in the context of the Convention, some of which are mentioned below:

**Individuals are affected differently by chemical agents on the basis of their sex and gender.** This continues to be a topic that is understudied and in need of greater attention, but existing research indicates that the health effects of toxic agents affect male and female bodies in unique ways, somewhat similar to learnings about how nuclear radiation affects male and female bodies differently.

Gendered social roles can result in differing risks of exposure and the gendered effect of chemical weapons can be broader than physical effects alone. Individuals face different levels of vulnerability and risk due to the roles they play in society but also in the experiences they face after an incident, whether that be physical, social, psychological, or as a result of indiscriminate gender guidelines for incident response. For example, a lack of female first responders or gender-sensitive response guidelines have meant that women tend to experience delays in receiving medical attention after an incident, which can have harmful long-term effects. Applying a gender lens to activities related to Article X of the Convention (assistance and protection) is therefore crucial.

**Diversity improves the impact of our work.** Gender equality and diversity are key to non-proliferation and to preventing re-emergence. Given the complex nature of chemical threats, the next era of work to safeguard the peaceful uses of chemistry and mitigate threats can only be effective if rooted in different perspectives, interests, and skills. Incorporating a diversity of experience and perspectives will improve the overall impact and effectiveness of any institution. Research shows that diverse teams—whether that be on the basis of gender, geography, language, or race, among other characteristics—tend to be more innovative, creative, and adept at problem solving. This is because diversity introduces new perspectives, and challenges everyone involved to step outside their comfort zone.

**Gender equality and diversity add value to diplomatic efforts relating to Convention implementation.** Multiple studies have established that the inclusion of women in negotiating and peacemaking processes brings more durable and effective results, as well as the likelihood of gender-sensitive provisions and language. Just as women and feminists have often been at the forefront of protesting other weapons of mass destruction, they are also an active voice in advocacy against chemical weapons use and proliferation. In 2018, the United Nations Secretary-General in his Agenda for Disarmament recognised that “the meaningful inclusion of women in decision-making increases effectiveness and productivity, brings new perspectives and solutions to the table, unlocks greater resources, and strengthens efforts...”.

## CURRENT INITIATIVES

Positively, several gender equality and diversity initiatives were launched in recent years at the OPCW, and these constitute an important starting point for future work in this area. Examples of such initiatives—though not exhaustive—are mentioned below:

### **In the Secretariat**

The OPCW Director-General is a member of the leadership network of International Gender Champions, and several senior posts in the Organisation are held by women, including the Deputy Director-General. There is a voluntary network of ten Gender Focal Points who span the various branches of the Secretariat. In terms of programming, the Secretariat has initiated a yearly symposium on women in chemistry. Based on the experience of symposium participants, a “Compendium of Best Practices on the Engagement and Advancement of Women in Chemical Safety and Security” was launched in 2022 by the OPCW and the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) with the support of the European Union. The female first responders capacity-building programme seeks to “close the knowledge gap on assistance activities during chemical emergencies”. A panel is being established to develop gender and diversity guidelines for chemical emergency response, as well as a training module within the broader OPCW training cycle on emergency response.

The OPCW Secretariat conducted its first-ever gender audit in 2020–2021 and recently revised its Code of Conduct to place greater emphasis on gender equality and diversity. Certain administrative directives relating to parental leave and childcare have been updated, and recruitment is under way for a Diversity and Inclusion Officer.

### **Amongst States Parties**

There are various national gender mainstreaming practices that could be applied to or shared within the context of the Convention, such as gender-based analysis, gender “help desks” or monitors within embassies and departments, and feminist-leaning foreign policies.

### **Other actors**

As a few examples, the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) has produced original research and information resources about gender equality in the chemical weapons regime and impacts in regard to biological sex. Women Now for Development, a women-led Syrian civil society organisation is researching the location-specific gendered impact of chemical weapons attacks in Ghouta. This complements earlier research about the gendered impact of chemical weapons use undertaken by the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi).

## GAPS AND CHALLENGES

Despite these important steps forward, challenges remain:

**The chronic lack of women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) has implications for advancing equality and diversity in the technical and scientific work of the OPCW.** Such under-representation is due to a variety of systemic obstacles in education and employment, often stemming from entrenched social and cultural gender norms. Advancing gender equality in the implementation of the Convention will need to account for, and address, the gender gap in STEM.

**There is a need for more education about gender equality, diversity, and gender mainstreaming in the OPCW.** Despite the achievement of gender parity at the leadership level, women are under-represented in professional entry level positions in the Secretariat. Recruitment practices and human resources policies that promote gender equality and diversity, such as the composition of hiring panels or the need for policies and practices that address discrimination and harassment, are therefore critical to address this gap.

There is more scope in the Secretariat to create a corporate workplace culture that promotes and values gender equality and diversity. This would encourage women and individuals from under-represented groups to engage, thus strengthening diversity efforts.

Some gender initiatives face resource constraints or are voluntary in nature, and individuals involved require adequate training regarding gender equality and diversity.

**Amongst State representatives participating in sessions and meetings of the policy-making organs and their subsidiary bodies, there continues to be a gender gap.** Although the proportion of women delegates attending sessions of the Conference of the States Parties to the Convention (hereinafter “the Conference”) has improved since the Convention entered into force, women still tend to make up only one third of governmental participants. At the leadership level the disparity is far greater—at the 2021 session of the Conference, for example, 70 percent of heads of delegation of States Parties were men and 30 percent were women.

**There appears to be a disconnect between OPCW Member States and the Secretariat in reporting** on and sharing information about gender-related initiatives or activities. Many States Parties are unaware of the Secretariat’s efforts to promote gender equality and diversity.

## **GOOD PRACTICES FROM ELSEWHERE**

There are diverse examples of good practice in gender mainstreaming from other related areas of work that may present inspiration. Learning more about these developments—and the practical and political steps that were necessary to get there—can offer insight and guidance for gender champions within the Convention environment.

In 2019, States Parties to the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), adopted a package of decisions on gender and gender-based violence prevention during their annual conference. The decisions included activities to improve the participation and representation of women in ATT meetings, delegations, and relevant funding and implementation projects; activities to increase understanding about the gendered impact of armed violence; and actions that would strengthen implementation of the Treaty’s provision for gender-based violence risk assessment (Article 7.4).

Gender equality is not only a priority for those working on conventional weapons control. Since 2019, the Women in International Security and Cyberspace Fellowship project has facilitated improved participation of women diplomats from all regions in United Nations cyber negotiations.

During the most recent review cycle of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), States Parties and civil society jointly worked to raise understanding about the gendered impacts of nuclear weapons use and testing and to call for improved gender diversity. This occurred through side events at NPT meetings, working papers from States Parties, and civil society research. A first-ever joint statement on “Gender, Diversity, and Inclusion” was delivered to the Tenth Review Conference of the Parties to the NPT in 2022, endorsed by 67 States Parties. Various instruments have integrated gender-sensitive approaches when implementing victim assistance provisions, or they specifically reference such approaches and/or gender equality in their preambular and operative paragraphs.

The International Atomic Energy Agency has undertaken steps to diversify its workforce, including with a focus on young women professionals, to improve recruitment practices, and to explore how its work links not only with gender equality but also with broader issues like climate change. The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) and the CTBTO Youth Group recently launched a mentoring programme for early-career women in STEM coming from geographical regions which are under-represented in CTBTO staff. The cross-cutting approach of the programme will seek to address gaps in regional, gender, and age-related diversity.

## FOUNDATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTION

Despite the challenges identified in this paper, there are multiple opportunities to meaningfully advance gender equality and diversity in the context of the Convention and the OPCW. Below there are several suggested actions, many of which are informed by consultations with representatives of States Parties across all regional groups and Member States of the Secretariat, intended to spur further thought and discussion. Many are complementary to existing initiatives or planned activities, or would have little to no resource implications. Across the board, an inclusive approach to policy formation is encouraged.

At the OPCW, gender equality and other diversity initiatives need to be broader than an “add women and stir” approach. Participation and representation cannot be tokenistic or only about numbers. **In any given context, there are significant, and often long-standing, structural and other barriers that have impeded equality to date and therefore need to be understood and addressed in order to be overcome.** Intersecting characteristics and experiences such as age, race, ability, location or region, and language, among others, must be accounted for as part of gender mainstreaming. Such qualities and characteristics must not be treated as mutually exclusive in how they are addressed, as they are equally important.

### Ideas for States Parties

Engage with National Authorities to explore what a gender lens looks like for the work of domestic Convention implementation.

Identify and suggest concrete ways the new Centre for Chemistry and Technology (ChemTech Centre) can proactively promote women in STEM when considering proposed priority projects.

Consider extrabudgetary funding to support gender equality and diversity initiatives within planned projects, such as the new ChemTech Centre, or for new activities, such as scholarships, to help improve diversity in STEM.

Support field research into the sex- and gender-related impacts of the use of chemical agents and toxins as weapons.

Include gender equality and diversity as a criterion when providing voluntary funding.

Host side events or other informal convenings to build awareness and understanding.

Raise questions or make points about gender equality and diversity in national statements.

Identify if the policy-making organs of the OPCW need to take any actions or decisions in order to facilitate action on gender equality in the Secretariat.

Account for gender equality and diversity within national delegations participating in sessions and meetings of the OPCW policy-making organs, serving on subsidiary bodies, or in the course of nomination processes.

Ensure that panel discussions, side events, and similar activities are diverse in composition.

Share relevant national, regional, and international good practices in the area of gender and diversity.

Connect with colleagues in other governmental departments with expertise on WPS, human rights, sustainable development, or disarmament and non-proliferation to learn about their experiences in other forums and how to build policy coherence.

### **Ideas for the Technical Secretariat**

Develop a more coordinated or centralised approach to gender equality and diversity activities across the Organisation.

Examine and clarify what advancing gender equality and diversity looks like practically across different OPCW divisions, branches, and subsidiary bodies.

Revisit the findings of the gender audit and identify actions that can be taken in response to concerns or challenges identified there.

Identify training, capacity building, or other resource needs.

Incorporate gender and diversity analysis into existing policy, project and budget planning, as well as reporting and evaluation. This could be as straightforward as including a question in an event or meeting report, within staff surveys, or similar. Gender equality can also be included in the context of other support, such as by asking how beneficiaries will incorporate a gender perspective in their work.

Evaluate the impact of current existing gender equality and diversity initiatives with a view to continuing them, or adjusting as needed. More sex- and gender-disaggregated data is also necessary across the board to better understand the status of gender equality and diversity and to measure change.

Empower the Gender Focal Points to better promote gender equality within their respective areas of responsibility, including but not limited to, a clear mandate, training, and recognition for their additional duties and time.

Ensure that the Diversity and Inclusion Officer is empowered and has the necessary resources, access, and authority to promote gender equality and diversity in the Secretariat.

Cultivate a respectful workplace with deliberate policies and actions.

Enable more two-way learning and information exchange between States Parties and the Secretariat, as well as other actors, on relevant initiatives and concerns.

Be mindful of the need to communicate internally and externally. This can be achieved through already existing reporting and communication structures.