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# 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

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English only

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## 2020 Meeting

Geneva, 22-25 November 2021

## Meeting of Experts on Institutional strengthening of the Convention

Geneva, 8 September 2021

Item 4 of the provisional agenda

**Consideration of the full range of approaches and options to further strengthen the Convention and its functioning through possible additional legal measures or other measures in the framework of the Convention**

# 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. 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 weapons<sup>1</sup>, side events and informal exchanges exploring the relevance of gender perspectives in the BWC. Gender is becoming a topical issue for the BWC regime.

2. For the first time, the two latest UNGA Resolutions on the BWC adopted in 2019<sup>2</sup> and 2020<sup>3</sup> have incorporated a preambular paragraph (PP9) encouraging the equitable participation of women and men in the framework of the Convention.

3. 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.

4. Furthermore, non-proliferation, disarmament and arms control fora, including the BWC, have long been characterized by a chronic and systemic gender imbalance. As a field which has traditionally been male-dominated, women are significantly underrepresented,

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<sup>1</sup> 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>.

<sup>2</sup> See UNGA Resolution 74/79.

<sup>3</sup> See UNGA Resolution 75/88.



particularly in leadership positions, compared to other areas of diplomacy, i.e., human rights, humanitarian and social affairs, environment and climate change.

5. 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.<sup>4</sup>
- 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.<sup>5</sup>
- 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 Meetings of Experts (MX4 and MX5) are chaired by women. Up to today, all the Review Conferences have been presided over by men.<sup>6</sup>

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

6. 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.

7. 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.

8. 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. 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.<sup>7</sup> 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

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<sup>4</sup> See International Gender Champions Disarmament Impact Group. 2021. *Factsheet: Gender and Biological Weapons*. <https://unidir.org/Gender-biological-weapons>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See International Gender Champions Disarmament Impact Group. 2021. *Gender & Disarmament Resource Pack*. <https://unidir.org/publication/gender-disarmament-resource-pack>.

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.

(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) Strengthen the link with other gender equality agendas, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Women, Peace and Security agenda.