Dear Colleagues,

In reference to communication ODA/2024-0034/women, please see below UNIDIR’s input for the upcoming report on “Women, disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control”.

Research carried out by the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) has shown that women are chronically underrepresented in international security processes, with only one in every three diplomats accredited to arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament forums being women. Women’s underrepresentation can reinforce stereotypes that devalue women’s expertise and lead to a vicious cycle where perspectives and knowledge of large segments of the population continue to be excluded.

UNIDIR systematically tracks on gender balance in arms control and disarmament and makes the data available at its Gender and Disarmament Online Hub. The surveying of seven large multilateral meetings in 2022 revealed that women make up an average of 34% of the diplomats accredited to arms control and disarmament forums. This represents a modest increase from 2018, when the proportion of women diplomats in arms control and disarmament forums was 32%. This underscores the need for action to support women’s participation in the field of arms control and disarmament.

UNIDIR has also published a report investigating the state of women’s participation in technical arms control roles. The study Women Managing Weapons found that in technical roles, the gap is even wider, as women represent less than 12% of participants in weapons and ammunition management technical roles. Women continue to face barriers to meaningful participation such as gender stereotyping, discriminatory attitudes and policies, lack of adequate infrastructure, unequal access to training opportunities and conscious and unconscious bias due to prevailing gender norms. Overcoming these challenges involves drawing on expertise in gender and diversity mainstreaming to analyse and then address barriers in each specific context as well as engaging men and boys in supporting gender equality.

In order to have a better understanding about what works to improve women’s participation, UNIDIR designed a survey and distributed it to organizations involved in arms control and disarmament. Drawing on practical experience shared by survey respondents, UNIDIR published the report Best Practices for Promoting Gender Diversity and Women’s Participation in Conventional Arms Control: Survey Results. It is positive to see a good level of interest and awareness on gender equality matters among organizations active in this field. Distinct practices are being implemented to improve gender balance and to transform the working environment to make it more inclusive: equality directives in public administration; flexible work arrangements; SMART goals and indicators; panel parity pledges; and gender-sensitive communication.
In relation to multilateral arms control and disarmament processes, the intervention that has had the most success in increasing women’s participation has been the Women in Cyber Fellowship, which was established by a group of States to support the participation of women diplomats in cybersecurity processes, mainly the UN Open-Ended Working Group on ICTs in international security. In just a couple of years, the level of women’s engagement in that forum significantly increased, with virtually half of official statements being delivered by women. This is unprecedented in multilateral meetings on international security, where, on average, women’s voices account for no more than 30% of the statements delivered.

Inspired by this successful initiative, UNIDIR launched the pilot edition of the Women in AI Fellowship, in 2024. Through an open call for applications, UNIDIR selected 31 women diplomats to participate in a one-week training programme in Geneva. The programme aims to equip participants with the essential knowledge, skills and resources needed to actively engage in multilateral discussions on artificial intelligence (AI) within the field of international peace and security.