Women in International Security and Cyberspace Fellowship

Opening remarks by Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu
High Representative for Disarmament Affairs

New York
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Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Dear colleagues,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here today. I congratulate all of you – the participants in the fellowship and the governments of Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and New Zealand – on this wonderful initiative *Women and International Security in Cyberspace Fellowship*.

We are at an important moment for the global empowerment of women, and 2020 is a milestone year for women’s equal and meaningful participation on the world stage. It is therefore also the perfect opportunity for women professionals to highlight with a collective voice the absolutely vital value that women bring to discussions around peace and security in cyberspace, which have more often than not been dominated by men.

I would like to touch upon three points which I think are useful to keep in mind in the lead up to the UN cyber processes, and in particular, the Open-ended Working Group, which begins its second formal session next week.

First, I would like to briefly provide an overview of the cyber landscape, including cyber threats and the UN processes that have been put in place to address them. Second, I would like to share some thoughts on why the participation of women in UN processes is so central to achieving meaningful results; and finally, I will touch upon future work that needs to be done to achieve gender parity.

First, digital technologies are rapidly transforming our societies. By the end of last year, 51.2 per cent of individuals, approximately 3.9 billion people, were using the Internet.¹ Experts

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also estimate that there will be 28.5 billion networked *devices* connected to the internet by 2022, an increase from the 18 billion in 2017.\(^2\)

From personal devices to entire industrial control systems: hyper connectivity presents tremendous potential for the socio-economic development of our societies. At the same time, our critical infrastructure, products and services have become highly dependent on technologies to function, making us increasingly vulnerable to cyberattacks. It is estimated that one hacker attack takes place every 39 seconds.\(^3\)

The Global Cybersecurity Index (GCI) developed by the International Telecommunication Union, ITU, reports that 87 countries are still only at the early stages of making commitments to cybersecurity.\(^4\) We as international community need to take steps to better address the risks posed by cyber threats. Over the last 16 years at the United Nations, a series of five Groups of Governmental Experts, or GGEs, have studied the existing and emerging threats of ICTs to international security and recommended measures to address them. Currently, we have two processes under way, which were established by the General Assembly to build upon this important work. One is a new Group of Governmental Experts, comprised of 25 members, 10 of whom are women, and the second is the Open-ended Working Group, open to all Member States.

This Open-ended Working Group is the first time that all countries in the world will consider how to take forward global cybersecurity, including through the development of a framework of international law, voluntary norms, confidence-building and capacity-building measures.

I am sure that in the coming days you will discuss these substantive issues in further detail. I want you to know that the work you will undertake at the OEWG next week should not be underestimated, as it will contribute to a more secure and peaceful use of digital technologies for the benefit of the whole world.

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\(^3\) [https://www.cybintsolutions.com/cyber-security-facts-stats/](https://www.cybintsolutions.com/cyber-security-facts-stats/)

This brings me to my second point: the importance of having more women decision-makers in cybersecurity.

The United Nations Secretary-General has said that ensuring the equal, full and effective participation of women in all decision-making processes related to disarmament is essential for the promotion and attainment of sustainable peace and security. He has described this as both a moral duty and operational necessity. Women’s participation is an integral part of initiatives taken under the auspices of the United Nations, such as the Agenda for Sustainable Development and the work related to UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security which celebrates its 20th anniversary this year.

Indeed, research indicates that the meaningful inclusion of women in decision-making makes our work more effective and productive and offers new perspectives and solutions. It also unlocks greater resources and strengthens for efforts across all areas of our work; elements that are essential to making progress in the complex field of international cybersecurity and to ensuring better, more sustainable outcomes for all.

A report by UN Women shows that in cases where women were able to exercise a strong influence on a peace process, the chances of reaching an agreement was much higher. Moreover, women’s participation in negotiations increases the probability of a peace agreement lasting longer than it otherwise would.

However, moving to my third point, more work needs to be done to ensure equal space for men and women in our digital world.

We need to ensure that diversity and inclusion are at the core of our digital future. Our data-driven societies hold inherent gender biases such as in machine-learning models. For instance, Amazon’s Alexa and Apple’s Siri have shown biases in associating stereotypical
roles such as “homemaker” and “nanny” to women. Other systems demonstrate greater error in recognizing female faces or voices than men’s. Unless we pay more attention to these issues we are at risk of locking in these biases in our future tech-based world.

Furthermore, we still face a gender imbalance in the cyber workforce. Our IT systems are still designed, operated and – indeed – secured predominantly by men. How do we prevent girls and young women from being socialized into thinking that cybersecurity is not something for them?

In the world of diplomacy, the participation of women has gradually increased, but unfortunately women still remain underrepresented. This also applies to the discussions related to cyber. A study conducted by the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, UNIDIR, shows that only 32 percent of the 414 participants in the Open-ended Working Group’s first substantive session in September 2019 were women. And women made up only 24 percent of heads of delegations.

In his Agenda for Disarmament, the Secretary-General has therefore made a personal commitment to work to achieve gender parity on all panels, boards, expert groups and other bodies established under his auspices in the field of disarmament.

The women leaders gathered in this room today are evidence that women play an indispensable role in multilateral negotiations. You are, quite literally, leading by example.

I would like to ask you to encourage next generations of diplomats and students to follow in your footsteps through mentoring and the sharing of experiences.

This includes helping to dispel biases in the workplace, as pointed out in the UNIDIR study, such as thinking within the foreign service that delineates “soft” and “hard” portfolios in
diplomacy along gender lines. Or myths that suggest that stereotypically “male” traits such as toughness and risk-taking produce the most success in diplomatic endeavours.

To the men in the room, your support for this endeavour is key, not least in view of the reality that this remains a male-dominated field. The importance of your role in achieving gender parity cannot be underestimated. Inclusion and diversity are shared goals that require common effort.

As an International Gender Champion, I have made a firm commitment to promote the equal, full and effective participation of women in all decision-making processes related to disarmament. I invite you to join in that commitment in your country, but also in multilateral fora like the Open-ended Working Group. It is time for women from all over the world to step forward and take a seat at the table.

Thank you.