

## **Feminism and disarmament: The gender perspective as a necessity to achieve a world without nuclear weapons**

**By Ursula Gelis**

*With the end of the Bush era, disarmament again became a serious issue. Expectations were high as the new US President Barak Obama took office. He was even awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his vision of a world free of nuclear weapons.*

*In October 2010 I had the pleasure of talking with Dr. Rebecca Johnson, a scientist from the [Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy](#) in London/UK, when she was in Oslo to launch the Norwegian [ICAN campaign](#) to free the world of all nuclear weapons.*

*The following interview is not about the behavior and debates of politicians but about grassroots activism, especially that of women who realise their visions through determined commitment and actions.*



*A 'Peace boat' traveler shows pictures of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima. Bergen, Norway 2010.  
Photo: Ursula Gelis*

**UG:** *Dr. Johnson, you have been a political activist for many years and currently head the prestigious Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy in London. Where did it all start?*

RJ: I trained as a physicist, but did not want to work on weapons. Early in the 1970s, I realized that nuclear physics was not the right home for me. My work was tied to the nuclear industry and to the nuclear establishment.

In 1981 I returned from Japan where I had lived for a while and did my masters degree in Far Eastern Studies. Roughly a year later, I went to [Greenham Common](#), a women's peace camp beside a military base where women came together to resist non-violently preparations for nuclear war.

After a couple of days, I realized that I had to commit myself to the non-violent, living and working women's peace camp. I made Greenham my permanent home from 1982 to 1987.

I was sent to prison on charges of breaching the peace, because we were non-violently claiming (cruise missile) silos of the military facility. Another charge was criminal damage, due to trafficking of the control tower. We exposed contingency plans for nuclear, chemical and biological weapons on the base. These included no provisions to protect the local population at Newbury!

*UG: What lessons did you learn from your grassroots activism?*

RJ: One lesson learned is the fact that with the right, inspiring and achievable message we can win. For example the simple message of the 1980s: get rid of the Pershings, new nukes and the first use doctrine! We won the INFT treaty! The 'Intermediate-Range Nuclear-Forces' treaty is an elimination treaty.

When we got rid of a class of nuclear weapons we could made the connections to the abolition of all nuclear weapons. Our efforts in fighting for democracy, freedom of dissent and freedom of movement actually contributed to ending the cold war.

In 1988 we started a second campaign. We called for banning nuclear testing and for putting the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) into force. This demand had been on the agenda since 1945. What did we do? We stigmatized the health and environmental effects of nuclear testing. We visited the French nuclear testing sites in the South Pacific, went to Russia and Kazakhstan, and did not leave out the US/UK test sites in Nevada.

We brought the media on board by blocking a test site together with indigenous people. We had direct encounters with politicians, pressing for a moratorium which actually meant: to pause. In relation to the CTBT our demands were taken seriously by Russia, France and the US.

Again, the lessons learned are the following ones: You need a widespread public movement, a national campaign which highlights the humanitarian consequences. Needless to say that in order to achieve your feasible goals the right strategy has to be in place.

*UG: How do you see the gender perspective in disarmament efforts?*

RJ: I was a feminist before I became a peace activist. It is natural for me to look for justice and full involvement of women in peace activities. The work of women had been critical in achieving disarmament so far. Women led the campaign in the 1980s.

The peace camp as a place 'for women only' was important for confidence building measures and a specific kind of creativity. We came to understand that we as women have different perspectives on disarmament. Our way of looking at militarism, its consequences and solutions to stop it, differs from male perspectives. Attitudes of hiding behind facts and technical details tend to diminish the humanitarian dimension, which is the crucial one.

The entire disarmament campaign learned from women. Again, I am insisting that 'women only spaces' are important in order to increase the belief in our own perspectives. Feminist analysis of militarization, weapons and war is an area to germinate new ideas. In short, the main campaign needs a feminist perspective.

*UG: What is the ICAN campaign?*

ICAN is a grassroots network that aims to build an irresistible, unstoppable civil society movement to abolish all nuclear weapons globally.

It is about promoting local groups, not only those already active against nuclear weapons. Activists concerned with humanitarian aspects, survivors of disasters have different ways of mobilization. Environmental consequences of the whole nuclear cycle, climate chaos and poverty issues will give new impulses to the campaign. We are heading for building up a civil society movement at all levels to put pressure on elected representatives, parliamentarians and mayors. We want to come together around the specific demand of a treaty-making process to ban nuclear weapons. The goal is to de-legitimize nuclear deterrence from the individual level, up to countries. People have to understand that every potential use of nuclear weapons would constitute a crime against humanity.

*UG: To what extent does civil society play a role in the campaign?*

RJ: The role of civil society in the campaign is crucial. It has the lead position to revive the demand to ban and to update the call for a nuclear weapon treaty. Of course, civil society has to work in partnership with the government, as was done successfully in the landmine campaign and with cluster bombs.

*UG: You are not only an activist but also a highly respected academic. It is well known that sometimes it is hard to bridge the gap between intellectuals and the grassroots. How do we bring the general public on board?*

RJ: We need all kinds of people and engagements. Civil society needs its own experts. It is important that parliamentarians and other officials are not focusing on

their own egos while working with civil society on this issue. We need more activists, analysts, and analytical activists.

*UG: How can we work for a broader engagement of global players to work for the abolition of nuclear weapons?*

RG: All nuclear weapon states and the states covered under nuclear alliances have vested interests. I believe that even if Obama is a nuclear abolitionist at heart, at the moment he is President, and the arms control and the non-proliferation establishment maintain the nuclear business as usual.

If we highlight the humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons, the non-nuclear weapon states have the duty to engage actively to abolish this deadly weaponry. If a political leader is using rhetoric only, we have to turn it around by advocating a practical treaty process. We must demand to move from pure rhetoric to practical actions.

It is about taking nuclear weapons out of doctrines and politics. We definitely support CTBT ratification and we will not stop pushing for the implementation of incremental steps to support the essential connections crucial so that abolition of nuclear weapons will not be derailed.

*UG: Imagine you are talking to someone totally unaware of the dangers of nuclear weapons. What would you say to this person?*

RJ: Nuclear weapons do not make us safe. If they are ever used, whether by governments or terrorists they will cause unimaginable human suffering, extensive environmental harm and massive insecurity throughout the world. In fact if the few countries would abolish all their nuclear weapons and if the world's people and governments would demand the abolition of those weapons, then nuclear weapons could be outlawed more quickly than land mines, or as happened with chemical weapons. Yes, both landmines and chemical weapons are banned by multilateral treaties. We can do the same for nuclear weapons if we are determined and demanding. And if nuclear weapons are outlawed and the use of weapons of mass destruction is recognized as a crime against humanity then our scientists and lawyers can help to eliminate the existing arsenals safely and securely.

*UG: Thank you for sharing your views with us, Dr. Johnson. Let us get together in a year or so to see how widespread the campaign has become...*

Useful websites: [www.ican.org](http://www.ican.org); [www.acronym.org.uk](http://www.acronym.org.uk)



*Demonstration when Nobel peace prize laureate Barak Obama visited Oslo (Dec. 2009). Banner by Ursula Gelis.*

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