

# FIRST COMMITTEE MONITOR

Civil society perspectives on the  
UN General Assembly First Committee on  
Disarmament and International Security  
7 October–8 November 2024

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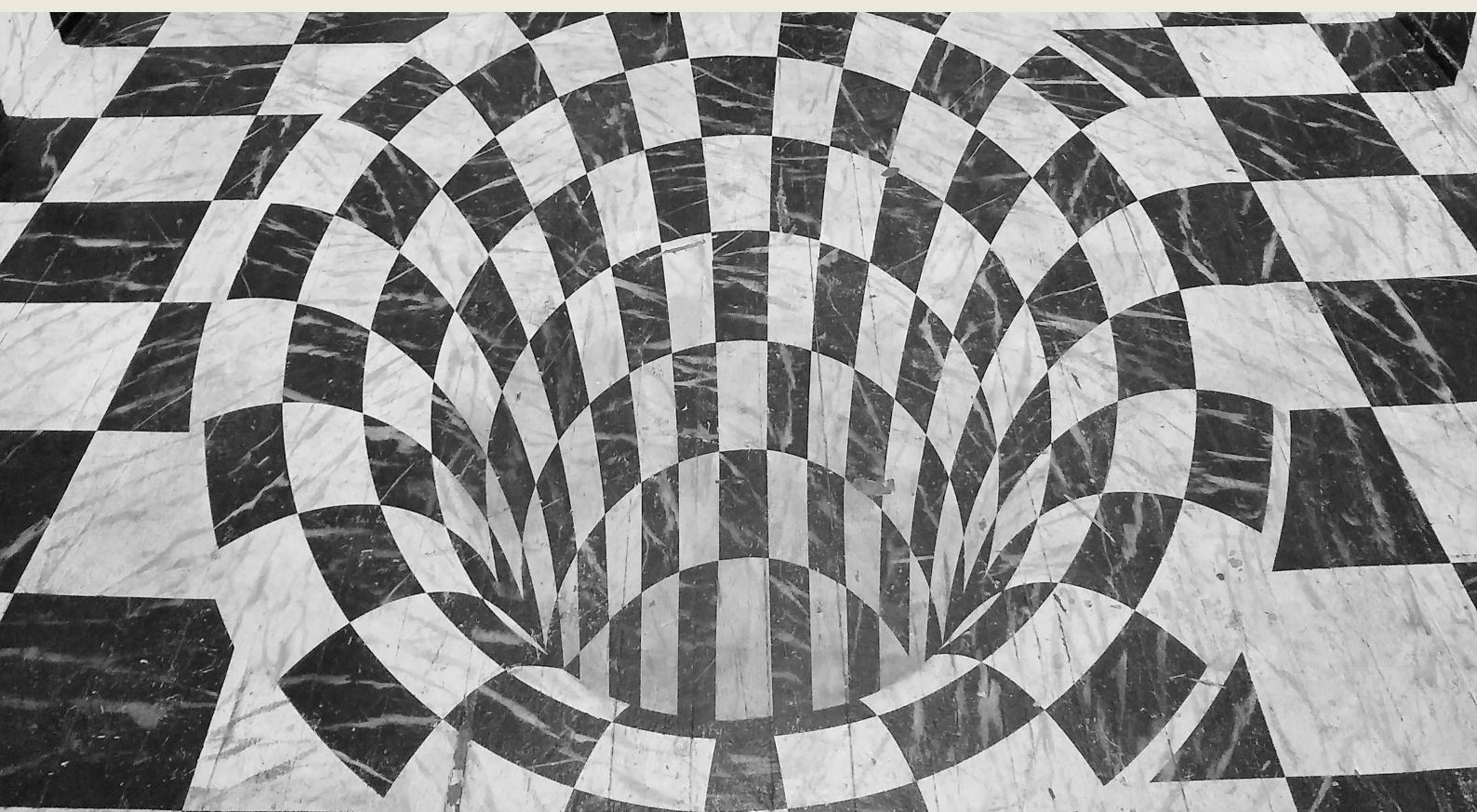


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Reaching Critical Will



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WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL  
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## Side Event Report: Disability and Diplomacy

Matthew Breay Bolton | Pace University International Disarmament Institute

The work of the First Committee would be strengthened by greater attention to disability, urged panelists at a side event on “Disability as a Missing Dimension in Disarmament Diplomacy,” held at the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Delegation to the United Nations, 29 October.

Consideration of disability could be a “bridgebuilder,” said Véronique Christory, chair of the panel and ICRC Senior Arms Adviser. In an increasingly polarised First Committee, addressing the concerns of the many people with disability in areas of armed conflict and beyond could be a positive development.

The event was co-sponsored by Pace University’s International Disarmament Institute, Harvard Law School Project on Disability, Cape Breton University, University of Baltimore Center for International and Comparative Law, the International Peace Research Association, and US International Council on Disabilities.

Christory highlighted Action 45(e) in the recently adopted **Pact for the Future**, in which UN member states committed to “Ensure accessibility for persons with disabilities and disability inclusion at the United Nations to allow their full, meaningful and effective participation and equality in all aspects of the work of the United Nations.” The ICRC’s own **Vision 2030 on Disability** addresses disability inclusion in its operations.

Christory also noted that the International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent was underway in Geneva (28–31 October), where the ICRC has circulated a model pledge on **“International humanitarian law and persons with disabilities,”** listing “an array of potential actions” for states, Red Cross/Red Crescent National Societies, and other members of the international community. Raising the profile of disability in the First Committee, suggested Christory, could be a way for states and National Societies to fulfill elements of the pledge.

Janet Lord of the Harvard Law School Project on Disability called attention to Article 11 of the **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)**, which requires states to take “all necessary measures to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk, including situations of armed conflict, humanitarian emergencies and the occurrence of natural disasters.” While the global disability rights community has prompted many efforts to address the needs of persons with disabilities in natural disasters, there has been less attention to situations of armed violence. Forums on international peace and security, said Lord, are “rather opaque” to many disability rights advocates.

Nevertheless, said Lord, there has been some recent progress. Following the 2019 adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2475 on **Protection of Persons with Disabilities in Conflict**, the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities released a series of three related reports: “The rights of persons with disabilities in the context of armed conflict” (**A/76/146**), “Protection of the rights of persons with disabilities in the context of military operations” (**A/77/203**), and “Peacebuilding and the inclusion of persons with disabilities” (**A/78/174**). The UN has also adopted a **Disability Inclusion Strategy** to “assess progress and accelerate change on disability inclusion” within the UN system, including in the peace and security pillar.

This session of the First Committee heard the first ever **“Joint Civil Society Statement on Disability and Disarmament”** on 16 October, which was summarised by Dr. Tammy Bernasky, Assistant Professor

of Political Science at Cape Breton University. Dr. Bernasky called not just for a humanitarian approach to disability but also a recognition that people with disabilities are rights-holders who can contribute meaningfully to disarmament discussions.

The joint civil society statement called for a twin-track approach in the First Committee: integrating language about disability into existing resolutions, but also introducing a new resolution on “Disability, disarmament and non-proliferation,” modelled on [A/RES/78/31, “Youth, disarmament and non-proliferation,”](#) and [A/RES/77/55, “Women, disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control.”](#) The latter is one of very few First Committee resolutions to mention the word “disability”.

In advocacy so far, even sympathetic member states have noted the many new resolutions that are already straining the work of the First Committee. But Dr. Bernasky noted that “whenever there are competing demands on policymakers, people with disabilities get left behind.” Providing a “home for disability in First Committee” would help counteract such marginalisation.

Addressing issues of disability in First Committee faces two challenges that are “so obvious they are ignored,” said Dr. Matthew Breay Bolton, co-director of Pace University’s International Disarmament Institute. First, “to be able to lobby decisionmakers, one must be able to actually access the lobby.” As a Deaf/hard of hearing person, he related how his own efforts in disarmament advocacy have been limited when conference rooms are not accessible. Second, “weapons are themselves disabling.” Dr. Bolton pointed out how activists have amplified “the disabling impact of Israel’s genocide in Gaza.” But this emotive way of talking about weapons is discouraged in diplomatic forums.

People with disabilities are often depicted as objects of pity, but Dr. Bolton also pointed out that vulnerability could also be a source of strength and agency. He noted the role of Landmine Survivors Network in advocacy for the Antipersonnel Landmine Ban Treaty, as well as affected communities in achieving the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Nevertheless, Dr. Bolton also argued that progress in disarmament is often achieved when the space is made more inclusive: “many people with disabilities have something to offer, even if their disabilities were not caused by weapons.”

The ensuing discussion highlighted the experiences people with war-related disabilities bring to disarmament discussions and the humanitarian imperative to provide victim assistance. Bringing the fields of disarmament and disability rights in conversation with each other will also require efforts to clear up misunderstandings caused by jargon and technical language in both fields.

Participants highlighted examples of how Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration programmes must deal with stigmatisation faced by former combatants, which intersects with other forms of marginalisation, such as those due to gender and class. For example, the [final report](#) of Sierra Leone’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission includes specific recommendations to address the needs of “war-wounded” and “amputees” and others injured and traumatised by the conflict.

Participants speculated that resistance to addressing disability rights in the First Committee might come from a desire to evade the human impact of weapons through dehumanising language like “collateral damage”. There also may be fears of liability for the consequences of violence.

Participants agreed that the upcoming Conference of States Parties to the CRPD, 11–13 June 2024 at the UN in New York, offers an opportunity to develop the conversation further, anticipating a return to the First Committee next year with concrete proposals for elevating disability considerations in disarmament diplomacy.

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Reaching Critical Will (RCW) is the disarmament programme of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), the oldest feminist peace organisation in the world.

RCW works for disarmament and the prohibition of many different weapon systems; confronting militarism and military spending; and exposing gendered aspects of the impact of weapons and disarmament processes with a feminist lens.

RCW also monitors and analyses international disarmament processes, providing primary resources, reporting, and civil society coordination at various UN-related forums.

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The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of RCW or WILPF.

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