Lessons from the ICRC’s Millennials on War Survey for Communication and Advocacy on Nuclear Weapons

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ABSTRACT
The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) 2020 survey Millennials on War showed that while millennials are overwhelmingly opposed to the use of nuclear weapons, their views on the possession, development, and maintenance of these weapons are more nuanced. This carries important lessons for future communication and advocacy efforts on the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons. Notably, the results suggest that a communication and advocacy strategy centered around issues and messages related to the use of nuclear weapons is more likely to generate broad public support than a strategy focused on possession, development, and maintenance of these weapons. The survey findings also suggest that campaigners and organizations working to mobilize public opinion against these weapons have a job to do when it comes to showing how this issue affects people’s lives.

Introduction

Eight out of ten millennials hold that nuclear weapons are a threat to humanity. This was one of the top-line findings from the International Committee of the Red Cross’ (ICRC) survey Millennials on War. The survey, released in January 2020, gathered the views of more than 16,000 young adults people aged 20–35 across 16 countries and territories – roughly half in peace, and half experiencing conflict. In a world facing new and shifting sources of conflict, the survey aimed to provide a snapshot of their perceptions of war and to raise awareness of international humanitarian law.

Nuclear weapons were one of the key topics surveyed in Millennials on War. The ICRC and the International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the “Movement”) have made an effort to raise public awareness of the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons since the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki 75 years ago (Schroeder 2018). In 2017, most recently, the Movement committed to intensify its efforts towards the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons, including by promoting a better

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1See ICRC (2020). The ICRC commissioned Ipsos to carry out and manage the research. Between 1 June and 7 October 2019, Ipsos conducted the survey using a mixed-method design. 16,288 interviews were completed among adults aged 20 to 35 living in the following 16 countries: Afghanistan, Colombia, Israel, Nigeria, Syria, Ukraine, France, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, Switzerland, United Kingdom and United States. Quotas were set on age, gender, region and type of settlement in order to ensure that the sample represents the millennials population structures well by these variables in respective countries.

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understanding, in particular among young people, of the experiences of survivors of past atomic bombings (hibakusha) and nuclear testing, and of the humanitarian, environmental, and developmental implications of any use of nuclear weapons (Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement 2017).

The Millennials on War survey provide further guidance to the ICRC’s and the Movement’s advocacy and communication efforts on nuclear weapons. Given the long-term perspective of the ICRC’s and the Movement’s awareness-raising efforts on nuclear weapons, obtaining a good understanding of the perceptions of these weapons amongst the next generation of leaders is in many respects as important as understanding how these weapons are perceived by current leaders. As shown below, however, the results of the Millennials on War survey also provide important guidance as to how to build public support for the prohibition and elimination in general, and the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), in particular.

**The Survey Results**

The Millennials on War survey showed that millennials are overwhelmingly opposed to the use of nuclear weapons. This finding is in line with other opinion polls seeking to measure the public’s perception of nuclear weapons (Soka Gakkai International 2013). When asked whether they thought use of nuclear weapons in wars or armed conflict is acceptable under some circumstances or never acceptable, more than eight out of ten answered “never acceptable.” As noted above, an equally large majority of respondents said they found nuclear weapons to be a “threat to humanity.”

Millennials appear to be more conflicted, however, about the urgency and manageability of this threat. Although a majority of the survey respondents answered that they found it likely that nuclear weapons will be used in wars or armed conflict within the next 10 years, they ranked nuclear weapons at the very bottom of a list of 12 global concerns – well below issues such as corruption, unemployment, increasing poverty, terrorism, and wars and armed conflict more generally. Moreover, nearly half of millennials believe that nuclear weapons are an effective instrument of deterrence; only 6 out of 10 agree with the need to eliminate and not develop or obtain nuclear weapons; and a full third of respondents answered that possession of nuclear weapons make or would make their country safer.

Also notable in this respect were the findings related to the TPNW, which was adopted in 2017 and is due to enter into force on 22 January 2021 after the 50th instrument of ratification or accession was deposited with the United Nations Secretary General on 24 October 2020 (IFRC 2020). Almost three in five millennials answered that they have never heard about the TPNW. After having been explained that countries that join the TPNW are committed to not using, possessing or developing nuclear weapons, only a slight majority said that they would support their country in joining this agreement, while 4 out of 10 answered that they would oppose or neither support nor oppose their country in joining the Treaty. The level of support for the TPNW registered in Millennials on War is lower than the level of support registered in other polls.²

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²Opinion polls conducted in eight European countries plus Japan and Australia have found that between 64 and 84% of the general population believe that their government should sign and/or ratify the TPNW. See International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (n.d.) for more information.
Discussion of Findings

While there are different ways to interpret these findings, the survey clearly indicates that, on balance, millennials do not like nuclear weapons. A majority of respondents are opposed to the use, possession, development and maintenance of nuclear weapons and in favor of their prohibition and elimination.

However, the findings also reveal a certain tension in the respondents’ perception of these weapons. While an overwhelming majority of millennials finds the use of nuclear weapons unacceptable, their views on the possession, development and maintenance of these weapons are more conflicted. In fact, while 80% agreed that the existence of nuclear weapons is a threat to humanity, many of these respondents also said that nuclear weapons are an effective instrument of deterrence. Similarly: While 84% of the respondents said that use of nuclear weapons would never be unacceptable (Figure 1), many of these also answered that possession of nuclear weapons would make their own country safer.

The findings suggest that there exist two partially conflicting “mental images” of nuclear weapons in the minds of millennials, to borrow a term from the American journalist Walter Lippmann. Many millennials seem to hold that nuclear weapons are highly problematic and somehow useful at the same time. On the one hand, when framed as a weapon that can be – and indeed has been – used as a means of warfare, the opposition to nuclear weapons is nearly unanimous. On the other hand, when framed as a tool to protect a country and prevent war and armed conflict from breaking out more generally, the opposition to these weapons seems to wane considerably. In fact, when framed as a means of deterrence, a majority of millennials in conflict countries appear to find nuclear weapons useful, if not acceptable.

It should be noted that this framing conflict also characterizes the current multilateral nuclear weapons debate. In 2010, the President of the ICRC called for a new debate on nuclear weapons, one “conducted not only on the basis of military doctrines and power politics”, but also on the basis of “the fundamental rules of international humanitarian law, and [considerations of] the collective future of humanity” (Kellenberger 2010). This led to the organization in 2013 and 2014 of three intergovernmental conferences on the humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons, which built the case for the negotiations, ultimately, the adoption of the TPNW in 2017 (Borrie, Spies, and Wan 2018).

The shift in the nuclear weapons debate towards a greater focus on the catastrophic humanitarian of the use of these weapons have led some nuclear-armed and nuclear-allied States to re-emphasize the “security dimension” of this debate (Kmentt 2015). According to this narrative, the possession of nuclear weapons may contribute positively to national, regional and/or international security. Perhaps not surprisingly, therefore, those emphasizing the “security dimension” of the nuclear weapons debate tend also to be critical of the TPNW.

This framing conflict has been particularly noticeable in the meetings of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) – a treaty which regulates the manufacturing, acquisition, control, transfer, and reduction of nuclear weapons, but notably not their use in armed conflict (Nystuen and Hugo 2014). Nevertheless, the TPNW and the humanitarian

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3See Lippmann (2015). For further discussion about the framing of nuclear weapons, see Løvold (2020).
consequences of nuclear weapons continue to be discussed in the context of the NPT. In these discussions, opponents of the TPNW have claimed that the latter treaty undermines the NPT, while proponents of the TPNW have argued the opposite, *viz.* that the negotiation and adoption of the TPNW constitute implementation of the disarmament obligation in the NPT’s Article VI. While this controversy may be partially resolved by the entry into force of the TPNW and the institution of the Treaty’s implementation architecture, discussions about the relationship between the TPNW and the NPT may, as observed by Considine, have reinforced “the latter’s centrality and legitimacy and situate[ed] the [TPNW], not within the institutions of IHL, but within the institutions of disarmament and non-proliferation that can be used to contest the consolidation of the prohibition norm” (Considine 2019).
Lessons for Future Advocacy and Communication

Assuming, in line with the theoretical framework elaborated by Krebs and Jackson (2007), that how an issue is “framed” may influence political process and outcomes and that the public plays a crucial role in this respect, important lessons for public communication and advocacy on nuclear weapons can be drawn from the Millennials on War survey:

First, a communication and advocacy strategy centered around issues and messages related to the use of nuclear weapons is more likely to generate broad public support than a strategy focused on possession, development, and maintenance of these weapons. Facts stories and testimonies about the consequences and possible drivers of nuclear weapons use – conceivably including instances of near-use, threats of use and the impact of past use – are more likely to tilt public opinion against these weapons. Arguments focused on the possession, development, and maintenance of nuclear weapons, on the other hand, possibly including stories about nuclear weapons modernization, spending, and proliferation as well as discussions about nuclear deterrence, is likely to generate a less unfavorable view of these weapons amongst the public.

Secondly, proponents of the TPNW could benefit from highlighting the Treaty’s prohibition on the use of nuclear weapons in their advocacy for the Treaty (TPNW, Article 1.1(d)). Public debate about the TPNW has in several contexts revolved around the Treaty’s possible contribution to nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, notably the extent to which the Treaty will help reduce the number of nuclear weapons in the world and its relationship with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) While there are good reasons to hold that the TPNW contributes to nuclear disarmament and, as such, constitute implementation of Article VI of the NPT, the results of the Millennials on War survey suggest that this debate may not be the most effective way of generating public support for the Treaty. Instead, a debate about the circumstances in which nuclear weapons may be considered used and whether such use should be prohibited or not, is more likely to swing public opinion in favor of the Treaty.

Thirdly, informing people about the existence of the TPNW may be as much of a challenge for the proponents of the TPNW as advocating the Treaty’s merits. Although the negotiations, adoption, and, most recently, imminent entry force of the TPNW have been widely publicized events, notably through the awarding of the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize to the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) for its contribution to this process, the Millennials on War survey demonstrates that a large number of millennials are still not aware that the TPNW’s existence. As such, there appears to be significant awareness-raising and mobilization potential amongst millennials around this Treaty.

And finally, it may not be surprising that millennials place nuclear weapons at the bottom of the list of 12 “global concern.” The respondents were asked to rank “the most important issues affecting people around the world today,” and nuclear weapons have not been used in armed conflict since 1945. This finding nevertheless seems to suggest that millennials feel a certain detachment from the issue of nuclear weapons. This may in turn suggest that campaigners and organizations working to mobilize public opinion against nuclear weapons may have a job to do when it comes to showing the relevance of this issue for people’s lives.

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2Several States, notably in Europe, have carried out public inquiries into the prospect of signing and ratifying the TPNW.
The Survey Questions

The survey posed the following questions about the use, possession, and development of nuclear weapons: (1) In your opinion, do you think the use of nuclear weapons in wars or armed conflict is acceptable under some circumstances or is it never acceptable? (2) In your opinion does or would the possession of nuclear weapons by your country make your country safer, less safe or equally safe/unsafe? (3) In your opinion, how likely or unlikely is it that nuclear weapons will be used in wars or armed conflict anywhere in the world within the next 10 years? (4) Would you support or oppose your country in developing or keep their nuclear weapons? (5) Have you heard about the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, also known as the Nuclear Weapon Ban?; and (6) Would you support or oppose your country in joining the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, knowing that countries that do commit to not using, possessing or developing nuclear weapons?

The survey also asked about the extent to which the respondents agreed or disagreed with a series of statements related to nuclear weapons. The statements included: (a) Countries which have nuclear weapons should eliminate them; (b) countries which don’t have nuclear weapons should not develop or obtain them; (c) the existence of nuclear weapons is a threat to humanity; and (d) nuclear weapons are an effective instrument of deterrence.

The Survey Answers

- **Millennials are strongly opposed to the use of nuclear weapons**: 84% of millennials answered that the use of nuclear weapons is never acceptable; 12% answered that the use of nuclear weapons is acceptable under some circumstances; while 4% answered that they don’t know.
- **A majority of millennials think nuclear weapons should be eliminated**: 64% of millennials agree that countries which have nuclear weapons should eliminate them, while 19% disagree. 59% agrees that countries which don’t have nuclear weapons should not obtain them, while 22% disagrees.
- **Almost half of millennials believe nuclear weapons are an effective instrument of deterrence**: 49% of millennials answered that nuclear weapons are an effective instrument of deterrence, while 31 per answered that they are not.
- **Their opinions are divided on whether the possession of nuclear weapons would make their country safer or less safe**: 33% answered that that possession of nuclear weapons would make their country safer; 30% answered that it would make their country less safe; while 31% answered that it would make no difference.
- **The majority of millennials see the threat of use of nuclear weapons somewhere in the world in the next 10 years as more likely than not**: 54% answered that they think it is likely that nuclear weapons will be used within the next 10 years; 40% answered that they think it is unlikely.
- **On balance, more millennials would oppose than support their country in developing or keeping nuclear weapons**: 41% would oppose their country in developing or keeping nuclear weapons; 24% would support their country in developing or keeping nuclear weapons; while 29% would neither support nor oppose their country in this respect.
• **Two-thirds of millennials have not heard of the TPNW**: 59% said they have never heard of the TPNW; while 37% said they had.

• **Three times as many would support their country in joining the TPNW than would oppose it**: 54% said they would support their country in joining the TPNW; 20% said they would oppose their country in joining the TPNW; and 21% said they would neither support nor oppose their country in this respect.

**Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Notes on Contributor**

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