

# Beatrice Fihn Is Banning Nuclear Weapons, With or Without Us

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The Swedish anti-nuclear activist led the United Nations to adopt the first legally binding global nuclear ban. Now, she's changing the culture.

Beatrice Fihn paused at the lectern, surveyed the well-coiffed crowd in the hotel ballroom, and warned that each and every one of them was now reachable by North Korean missile.

It was a rare dark note for the Swedish anti-nuclear activist, who has built her career—and her organization's Nobel Peace Prize—on a unified front in the face of fear.

"People are beginning to wake up to the reality that we're still living under the threat of these weapons every single day," she said. "They are starting to experience the terror of the Cold War. And it's our job to give them hope."

But Fihn, along with the rest of the world, had indeed woken up to a new threat. Watching the sunrise in Santa Barbara, California, where she was being honored by an anti-nuclear organization, Fihn took in the news that President [Donald Trump](#) had ordered the United States to pull out of its longtime arms control treaty with Russia, a move that experts warned could escalate an arms race of a kind not seen since the 1970s. "We are facing dangerous times," she that morning.

In her speech that evening, Fihn alluded to the news. "It would be all too easy to name Donald Trump as a rogue," she said. "The truth is that a system that one impulsive person or unpredictable person can uproot is not an appropriate security system in the first place."

Weeks later, she told me that the news truly unnerved her. The whole year has, actually. Fihn, now 35, has led the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) through its most successful years yet: working toward the first-ever international ban on nuclear weapons and winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017 for these efforts. Since the United Nations adopted the [Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#), however, tensions have only escalated. The president threatened North Korea with "fire and fury," the Iran deal exploded, and the [Doomsday Clock](#) ticked 30 seconds closer to midnight.

But convincing Trump to give up America's nuclear stockpile is not a part of ICAN's plan. With 69 [signatures](#) on the treaty, and 31 more needed for ratification (the last step before it enters into force), Fihn is fighting to change laws and norms, not hearts and minds. She will save the skeptics, whether they believe her or not.



At the benefit in Santa Barbara, a chairman of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, the group hosting Fihn, pointed her out to me amid a flurry of cocktail dresses and suits. This, of course, was unnecessary—and not just because I'd spent a week watching her press appearances on a loop. Beatrice Fihn is easy to pick out of a crowd. She embodies the American public's favorite Swedish stereotypes: tall, blonde, and perpetually poised, speaking with a musical lilt not heard in these parts since "Dancing Queen" topped the charts.

Also like most of her compatriots, she shares a persistent and unwavering belief that the world should ban nuclear weapons. This message has been well received in Oslo, Norway (the home of the Nobel Prize), but in the U.S., her campaign is often labeled idealistic. The majority of Americans not only support the stockpiling of nuclear weapons, but deploying them. Even those who support disarmament can lose faith. The executive director brushes off this criticism: "That we keep nuclear weapons, continue to threaten to use them, exercise with them, and think that it will never happen—*that's* unrealistic."

Despite the nuclear-armed states that refuse to sign on, ICAN has had some resounding successes lately, and Fihn's stop in Santa Barbara was part of a congratulatory tour in one of the friendliest states in the union to her campaign. Before her speech, she chatted with California Assemblymember Monique Limón, who drafted statewide legislation in support of the nuclear ban, overgold-flecked chocolate mousse ("It's not always so glamorous," Fihn warns. "It's activist work.") In Los Angeles, she met with supporters of the city's local disarmament resolution, the next phase of ICAN's campaign: If organizers can't convince a national government, they'll take their fight local.



(Photo: Tim Wright/International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons)

Though Fihn has always been a firm proponent of disarmament, her ascent to becoming the movement's public face was somewhat unlikely. When Fihn first went to work at the U.N. as an intern, she was surprised to learn she'd be focusing solely on nuclear weapons—but only because she assumed most governments had already given them up. "It sounded like an old-fashioned, outdated issue," she says, recalling her start in the early aughts. "The idea that some people from some countries have the right to end the world if they want—that's crazy. And we've just accepted it."

At the U.N., Fihn met activists who would later collaborate with ICAN and its partners. She learned diplomacy and activist work from a group of all-female organizers and drew inspiration from a women-led campaign to ban land mines in the 1990s. Rick Wayman, an early adopter in the ban treaty campaign, says Fihn has always offered a "hopeful message." But at the time, her own friends doubted her. Even now, when she gets into a taxi, she has the familiar exchange: *What do you do?* "I work for a campaign to prohibit nuclear weapons." *Ah, not gonna happen.*

She has spent 12 years working on this, she says, compiling rational arguments and scientific evidence, yet less informed strangers will still pick a fight. But, she adds, "I prefer to argue with politicians than people on the street."

Since joining ICAN and becoming its executive director in 2013, that's exactly what she's done. In 2017, the group lobbied delegates at the U.N. in New York for three months, alongside experts from more than 100 partner organizations. By September, negotiations were complete. With support of nearly two-thirds of members, the U.N. adopted the first-ever international treaty banning nuclear weapons. Though the ban has yet to go into force, two of the world's biggest pension funds added nuclear weapons to their exclusion list. But you can't fit all of that in on one taxi ride.



Almost as long as there have been nuclear weapons, there have been dissenters. ICAN was born out of another disarmament organization, the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, which won the 1985 Nobel Peace Prize for its non-proliferation work. In his memoir *Perestroika*, former Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev credited the coalition of activist-scientists with a role in ending the Cold War. "It is impossible to ignore what these people are saying," he wrote.

Decades later, these treaties persist, but the old optimism is gone. "Almost 20 years after warnings were published ... about the dangers of 'accidental nuclear war,' nearly 2,000 weapons remain on 'launch-on-warning' hair-trigger alert," wrote the group's founders in the *New England Journal of Medicine* earlier this year. Public opinion proved just as stubborn: One study found that, although fewer Americans approve of nuclear weapons now than in 1945, 60 percent still support the bombs' use in a situation akin to World War II (in the study's example, killing two million Iranians to save a few thousand U.S. soldiers).

In 2007, the physicians launched ICAN, which would take up the same fight and, 10 years later, win the same award. But its efforts have not been met with praise from polarizing heads of state. This is fine with the campaign. "I always measure how effective we're being by how mad the nuclear-armed states get—and they're furious about this treaty," says Wayman, deputy director of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, an ICAN partner, who helped lobby for the ban at the U.N. (After the treaty passed, the U.S., the United Kingdom, and France swore never to "sign, ratify or ever become party to it," citing security concerns.)

Often the issue can seem technical and unapproachable. Historically, political scientists have defended America's nuclear capability as an important deterrent strategy; more recently, others have countered that deterrence doesn't work, citing instead the power of an international norm against the use of these weapons. Fihn prefers to bypass this talk entirely. Instead, she sees nuclear weapons as a human-rights issue, and a feminist one at that. When she talks about norms, it's to advocate for changing them. ICAN brings together activists, researchers, and concerned citizens to push governments to ban the

weapons, even without enforcement, in order to stigmatize them. "I think we're going to see disarmament of nuclear weapons when people no longer associate these weapons with prestige and power—when they are symbols of shame," Fihn says.

Fihn would like the conversation around nuclear weapons to be about survivors: women, children, and indigenous people. After all, she says, they are the ones who suffer the costs, not hawks talking strategic stability in the situation room. When the atomic bombs razed the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing and injuring hundreds of thousands of people, long-term effects such as cancer impacted women at higher rates; those who survived the blast were more likely to miscarry or give birth to stillborn babies and children with birth defects. For this, they were often shunned by their own people. In the Marshall Islands, the U.S. government conducted nuclear tests 1,000 times more powerful than those in Japan, subjecting hundreds of indigenous people to burns, cancers, and birth defects—all without so much as a warning.

It's true that governments have long hidden the nuclear threat from view. In 2013, new documents revealed that the U.S. and U.K. brought the Soviet Union to the brink of nuclear war in a 1983 "war games" exercise called Able Archer, all without public knowledge. Other documents, recently obtained by the *New York Times*, contain ominous warnings from the Central Intelligence Agency to then-President Harry Truman.

By putting survivors at the forefront of the campaign, ICAN is attempting to subvert this practice—starting with the Nobel Peace Prize celebration. Setsuko Thurlow, an 85-year-old Hiroshima survivor, accepted the award alongside Fihn. ICAN said the city shut down a highway for them, and outside, supporters marched in the torch-lit snow. Congratulations poured in from family and friends, the pope, and celebrities (Fihn was especially excited about a shoutout from model and Twitter personality Chrissy Teigen.)

As with survivors, the ban also highlights the voices of women—which is "unusual for a weapons of mass destruction disarmament treaty," wrote Bonnie Jenkins, coordinator for threat reduction programs with the U.S. Department of State, in a 2017 Brookings Institute brief. Part of banning nuclear weapons is changing the culture—and that culture is toxic beyond its literal radioactivity, Fihn argues. She says men created this problem, sacrificing the safety of millions to compare bomb sizes, and there still aren't enough women in government to fix it: "You have an issue that's an existential threat to the entire world, but only half the population is being involved in the decision-making."

For Fihn, this fight is personal. She was the only woman in her class of largely white Nobel laureates. She brings her daughter's pen, adorned with a smiling Elsa from *Frozen*, to panels and posts photos with officials in between family portraits. She's been known to compare nuclear weapons to the patriarchy (the weapons themselves are phallic, after all) and

condemns their use as both racist and sexist. When she employed that argument at one North Atlantic Treaty Organization summit, "The old white dudes of the U.S. Department of Defense and the German defense ministry looked pretty puzzled," she wrote on Instagram.

But Fihn saves her most scathing critiques for the leaders of nuclear-armed states. In one speech, she likened Trump and Kim Jong-un to her three- and six-year-olds. During her official Nobel Peace Prize interview, she was questioned about a tweet from two days prior that read, "Donald Trump is a moron." (She admits that the timing wasn't great, but stands by the sentiment.) She's especially vocal about Trump's stance on weapons negotiation, which he's often condemned as a sign of weakness—another reason the campaign cannot rely on U.S. participation.

Wayman, with the NAPF, told me that ICAN's strategy to move forward with the ban was, at first, "a slap in the face" and an "ego check" for some supporters in America. They knew the U.S. government would never agree. And yet here ICAN was, banning nuclear weapons without it.

I asked Fihn if she ever felt discouraged. After all, in the time between our conversations, North Korea wavered on its promise to disarm. "Sometimes I have moments like, *I should work for something a little less political,*" she says.

In these moments, she draws inspiration from movements whose victories seem inevitable to us now: the civil rights movement, women's suffrage, and other human rights campaigns. These organizers didn't wait for governments to acquiesce. They mustered support. They forced culture shifts. "When it feels tough some days, I like to think: This is what it is to fight for these issues. And one day we'll win," she says. "And then we'll forget all about it, and move on to the next one."