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Personal reflections during IPPNW/PSR's "Honoring the Founders, Celebrating New Leaders" Ceremony at the Countway Library, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA

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I graduated from medical school 17 years ago. The future I had envisioned for myself was then very different. Back then I started working for the Ministry of Health, first as a local epidemiological surveillance officer and then as a local and regional health administrator. It was interesting work, I learned many new things that weren't taught in medical school, but something was missing. I thought it was my contact with patients, more scientific rigor and the possibility to apply the clinical knowledge I had suffered so much to obtain. Hence, after 3 years as a public official, I entered the obstetrics and gynecology residency program. Hospital work was indeed very taxing and stressful, yes, but also quite fulfilling. Still, after over 300 deliveries, about 15 C sections, 2 hysterectomies, countless D&Cs and endless nights at the hospital, something was still missing. Other than sleep. And a social life. And mental health. So I suspended my residency, took a break from medicine -almost completely- and started studying fine arts at the University of Costa Rica (UCR). My career was painting; I finished that program, then started on sculpting, but still something was missing.

I was selling paintings at the UCR student fair, back in 2012, not quite successfully, I have to say (I'm perhaps one of those of artists who are ahead of their time) when I was approached by a doctor I had met briefly once before. She was Alexandra Arce, a psychiatry resident who had met some people from IPPNW, International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, and wanted to start a new group in Costa Rica. I found this daunting, not only because I was finding it hard to remember the acronym right off the bat, but also because I didn't think there was an obvious relationship between nuclear weapons and my country. Or any of my training or education for that matter. It didn't take long for me to be moved by the plight of atomic bomb survivors and to realize that the risk of nuclear annihilation is very real and very high. I started imagining how I would feel if a nuclear war did actually break out and I had done nothing to prevent it. What I thought then was Catholic guilt is actually the root of humanitarian disarmament.

Fast forward five years later, I was in the City Hall in Oslo Norway, together with several close friends and colleagues, receiving the Nobel Peace Prize. ICAN, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, had been granted what is, perhaps, the most prestigious award in the world for "its work to draw attention to the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons and for its groundbreaking efforts to achieve a treaty-based prohibition of such weapons."

Since I joined IPPNW, and conversely ICAN, a great part of my life has been about 3 things: promoting awareness on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons, advocating for the treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons, and finding avenues to link and join peace movements and help strengthen them locally and regionally. Thanks to the collective knowledge that has been pooled and provided by the group I have the privilege and honor to belong to, I have presented and talked about the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons many, many times. I have organized conferences, and lobbied and worked directly with government officials.

If there is one thing I learned from being a medical doctor is versatility. Doctors -the good ones at least- learn to adapt to circumstances to the best interest of their patient. By belonging to civil society for nuclear disarmament, I was filling a role that was vacant in my country, and perhaps in my region. If I had the privilege of being inside the UN and talking to a government official, I figured I would make the most of it. With the collective expertise of my colleagues I won the trust of some key diplomats, who found value in including me in their statement-drafting and decision-making process.

We now have a Treaty to Prohibit Nuclear Weapons, and my region, Latin America, was at the forefront of making that happen. I am proud to say I had something to do with that.

So I am here now, at the institution where the first seed was planted, created and fostered, part of the board of IPPNW, and I feel ever so humbled, and ever so grateful to the brilliant minds that have made it happen. Thank you