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Abstract

This paper describes the establishment of a new professional network for women in nuclear that represents the interests of professionals in the Black Sea region. The paper examines the benefits of creating and sustaining professional networks for women, and it underlines the role of such networks in strengthening regional security culture during times of crisis using the Black Sea Women in Nuclear Network (BSWN) as a case study. In general, the network provides an interdisciplinary platform for professionals to promote gender equity and increase women's leadership roles, as well as professional exchanges, mentoring, and training opportunities. More specifically, since its inception, the network has spearheaded several unique programs and initiatives. Many BSWN members currently work in challenging environments, which means they are especially adept at rapidly transforming problems into solutions. The network has provided concrete support to its community during the war in Ukraine and the earthquake in Türkiye and facilitated information-sharing on available resources and reliable news.

With its own programs, the network provides a particular regional platform that complements other organizations' efforts.

Keywords: women, DEI, gender equality, nuclear security, nuclear safety, nuclear security culture, professional networks

1. Introduction

The outcome document of the 2022 Conference of the Parties to the Amendment to the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material reaffirms “the importance of diversity and inclusivity, including gender equality, within nuclear security workforces and national physical protection regimes” [1]. Gender equality in the nuclear field is a widely discussed topic that has been addressed as part of various international fora and high-level events in the past few years. Stakeholders have a shared understanding that the nuclear field, and particularly the area of nuclear security, lacks women representation.

With joint goals of striving for diversity, equity, and inclusion and increasing women's prominence in leadership roles, various international organizations and professional associations, such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) [2], World Institute for Nuclear Security (WINS) [3], Women in Nuclear (WiN) Global [4], Institute of Nuclear Materials Management [5], and others, have launched a wide range of programs and initiatives to promote and empower women working in nuclear and radiological sciences, research and development, industry, and other nuclear fields. Some organizations also focus on issues and perspectives related to intersectionality. For example, Women of Color Advancing Peace, Security, and Conflict Transformation (WCAPS) highlights Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities across the world [6].

Of particular importance are emerging professional networks for women in nuclear that represent the interests of women professionals in distinct geographical regions. Examples of such networks include Southeast Asia Women in Nuclear and the Black Sea Women in Nuclear Network (BSWN). The remainder of the article will focus on the latter. The authors will give an overview of the network and its key activities, as well as examine the importance of this network in light of current world events and their effect on nuclear security culture in the Black Sea region. The article will conclude by emphasizing the importance of government–nongovernmental organization (NGO) partnerships in creating and sustaining professional networks for women.

2. Black Sea Women in Nuclear Network: A History

The BSWN was established in December 2021 with a virtual inaugural workshop by the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies (CNS), the Middlebury Institute of International Studies, in collaboration with the Odesa Center for Nonproliferation, and WiN Ukraine. The project was conceptualized by CNS and supported by the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) through the Nuclear Security Women initiative under the US Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA)

Office of International Nuclear Security. Additional funding was provided by the Swedish Radiation Safety Authority (SSM).

The inaugural workshop gathered over 50 regional participants from five Black Sea countries, including Bulgaria, Romania, Georgia, Moldova, Türkiye, and Ukraine, as well as observers from Serbia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Several international organizations participated, such as WiN Global, IAEA, WINS, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, as well as representatives from the SSM, NNSA, LANL, Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Civilian Research and Development Foundation Global, Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, the Centre for Science and Security Studies at King's College London, and the Center for Radiological and Nuclear Security at Purdue University. The key outcomes of this virtual gathering were the establishment of the network, selection of its leadership, and definition of its mission, structure, and activities.

The BSWN's mission is to connect, support, and empower women in nuclear fields. Interdisciplinary by nature, the network brings together women in science, technology, and engineering, as well as policy, from national governments, industry, civil society, and academia from the region and other countries. The network serves as a platform for professionals to promote gender equity and increase women's leadership roles. Additionally, the network offers opportunities for professional exchanges, mentoring, and training.

In October 2022, the BSWN held its first annual meeting in Malta, where over 30 regional and international participants discussed the future of the network, revised its initial structure, and further defined its communication and sustainability strategies [7].¹

3. BSWN and its Key Activities in a Time of Crisis

Undoubtedly, crises can have a profound impact on nuclear safety and security [8]. Although resilient nuclear systems and processes are capable of adapting to shocks, crises inevitably affect government and public confidence in nuclear safety and security culture.

Since its inception, BSWN and its members have been affected—as has the rest of the world—by three major international disasters: the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2022–present war in Ukraine, and the 2023 Kahramanmaraş earthquake in Türkiye and Syria.

Conceptualized and inaugurated during the COVID-19 pandemic, the network has quickly become an important resource for the Black Sea community of nonproliferation, nuclear security and safety professionals who have used the network to continue their interaction and engagement while coping with the second year of the worldwide shutdown. Being unable to travel internationally and having our regular work and domestic routines altered, we embraced the establishment of the network, which helped

¹ The meeting location was in Malta because of the relocation of the Odessa Center for Nonproliferation (the BSWN meeting co-organizer) from Odessa to Malta as a result of the ongoing war in Ukraine.

us cope with the everyday hardships of the pandemic and, at the same time, stay professionally attuned.²

Since February 24, 2022, BSWN has issued two statements on the situation concerning nuclear security and safety in Ukraine after Russia's invasion. BSWN members have also collected donations to purchase power generators and other supplies for Ukrainian colleagues coping with daily power outages as a result of Russia's attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure. The network is a powerful example of impactful activities in support of the United Nations Resolution 1325, which emphasizes the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and the promotion of peace and security.

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the BSWN—and its WhatsApp group, in particular—has become a crucial resource for Black Sea experts, and especially for Ukrainian colleagues, to support each other, exchange reliable news, provide information on resources available to refugees (especially at the offset of the war), learn from Ukrainian colleagues about their everyday life at ground zero, and combat disinformation. The network has also provided a safe and nurturing environment for its community to share their personal experiences and reflections on the war in Ukraine.

On February 6, 2023, devastating earthquakes shook nine provinces around Kahramanmaraş, the epicenter of the earthquake. This affected millions of people and resulted in tens of thousands of deaths. Amid international aid and search and rescue efforts, concerns were also raised surrounding the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant (NPP), which is currently under construction in Akkuyu, in the province of Mersin.. Although no damage was reported to the Akkuyu NPP [9], the earthquake revived policy debates in Türkiye about structural engineering [10–12].

Following the disaster, Turkish BSWN members highlighted specific individuals in need of support, as well as reliable disaster relief organizations. BSWN members from different countries donated to Turkish people in need through credible NGOs. Previous research demonstrated that these personal insights are invaluable in times of crisis, increasing the effectiveness of emergency response [13, 14].

Both in the case of the war in Ukraine and the earthquake in Türkiye, BSWN members were able to connect, help each other, and exchange information not otherwise known from mainstream media. To this end, BSWN has also spearheaded several programs and initiatives, including the Black Sea Experts NucTalk series and the development of a unique mentorship program. These resources not only address deficiencies precipitated by crises but also consider their impacts on human factors in nuclear safety and security culture, as well as how this culture can be strengthened.

The Black Sea Experts NucTalk is a series of virtual webinars featuring Black Sea and other invited speakers on a wide range of technical and nuclear policy topics. Examples

² This statement is based on personal reflections of the authors, who are members of the network and participated in its inauguration.

include a discussion of the outcomes of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Review Conference, the effects of the war on the international nonproliferation regime, and fundamentals of radiation protection.

Another notable activity that took place since the network's inception was a joint virtual event with the Women in International Security and the Embassy of Liechtenstein in the United States, focusing on the safety and security of nuclear facilities in conflict zones. BSWN members were featured speakers on the challenges and opportunities faced by women in the field of nuclear security at an international panel organized by King's College London.

Furthermore, BSWN members also presented their network at events such as the IAEA's International Conference on the Safety and Security of Radioactive Sources, which was held in Vienna in 2022. BSWN hosted an exhibition booth to showcase the network and share its vision. The booth attracted hundreds of conference participants. The exhibition included novel and interactive presentations, emphasizing the flexibility and innovation the network leverages to accomplish its mission. This event also provided the opportunity to begin collaborating with Atomic Reporters, an independent NGO based in Austria, to jointly raise awareness of crucial events in different nuclear fields.

Another notable development includes a memorandum of understanding between BSWN and the European Nuclear Education Network Association, which is a nonprofit international organization in Belgium. Under this newly created memorandum of understanding, BSWN and the European Nuclear Education Network agreed to enhance their bilateral cooperation in research, education, and training in nuclear science and technology.

The BSWN mentorship program is currently evolving and being conceptualized by the network's leadership. Once established, it will connect regional and international experts and promote professional development and technical exchanges. Although mentoring is common across nuclear organizations, few systematic and academic analyses or observations on its effectiveness exist at present [15]. Women continue to make up only a very small part of the nuclear sector, making mentorship arrangements by women for women difficult [16]. Recent years have seen new initiatives in this area, however, that BSWN can learn from.³ With its own program, BSWN will provide a particular regional expertise that will complement other organizations' efforts. Many BSWN mentors currently work in challenging environments, which means they are especially adept at rapidly transforming problems into solutions. Consequently, BSWN intends to develop two lines of mentoring: one centered around instructed group mentorship through seminars and webinars per nuclear stakeholder requests, and another focusing on personalized mentorship developed by BSWN members based on individual needs.

³ For example, the National Academies report on the Science of Effective Mentoring in STEMM (https://nap.nationalacademies.org/resource/25568/ReportHighlights_Mentoring.pdf) or Mentoring Circles initiative of the Atomic Women Resource Group at LANL.

4. BSWN and its Potential Impact on Nuclear Security Culture in the Black Sea Region

The IAEA defines security culture as “the assembly of characteristics, attitudes, and behavior of individuals, organizations, and institutions which serve as a means to support and enhance nuclear security” [17]. Some experts further consider security culture as a “vehicle to improve overall human performance at nuclear facilities and associated activity exposed to both inside and outside threats” [18]. The effectiveness of nuclear security depends on personnel behavior, which manifests as professional conduct, personal accountability, adherence to procedures, teamwork and cooperation, and vigilance [17]. Thus, the focus is on individuals or “human factors” strongly affecting effective nuclear security.

With that said, no research currently exists on the psychological effects of war on nuclear personnel working in peaceful nuclear energy applications, such as NPPs and research laboratories or institutes. As stated by IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi, “It is the first time a military conflict is happening amidst the facilities of a large, established nuclear power programme, which in this case also include the site of the 1986 accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant” [19].

Although the IAEA Nuclear Security Series 7 publication outlines the nuclear security characteristics of personnel behavior in an organizational setting, other environments and platforms, such as professional networks, can be used to help enhance nuclear security culture. As the IAEA guidelines state, a “culture is hard to either impose or cultivate, but it can be fostered through role models, training, positive reinforcement, and systematized processes” [17]. The BSWN is an example of such positive reinforcement where women working in the nuclear field receive encouragement, motivation, opportunities for engagement with their regional and international peers, and share best practices. BSWN Ukraine-based colleagues demonstrated their strong commitment to the concepts of nuclear security culture by continuing to work at NPPs, research institutions, universities, and government agencies despite everyday hardships imposed by the war. They became role models for other experts in the Black Sea region by exemplifying how professionalism, vigilance, and personal responsibility play a decisive role in preventing disruptions to their work routine during extraordinary situations.

The BSWN has further benefited nuclear security culture in the Black Sea region by providing indispensable support to Ukrainian experts in the past year. This support was both tangible and intangible. Tangible support included opportunities for engagements outside of Ukraine under the auspices of BSWN. Five experts from the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, government, academia, research, training institutions, and civil society traveled to Malta for the first annual BSWN meeting. As one Ukrainian participant noted,

BSWN is only at the beginning of its path, but already I see a team of tireless organizers, professionals who will give their experience and time to maintain the safety of the nuclear sector. The BSWN meeting became an opportunity for me to share the experience of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant during and after the occupation, the

threats to nuclear safety and security that arose in connection with this. I think it was useful for all participants to draw conclusions and be ready for new modern challenges. We highly appreciate official BSWN statements on ongoing nuclear security risks created by the military aggression against Ukraine. Undoubtedly, the involvement of women in equal work in the sector is an issue on which the Ukrainian nuclear industry must work hard. BSWN provides training, support, tools, and techniques to do so [7].

The network also supported the participation of several Ukrainian-based experts in the Tbilisi Regional Security Forum in Georgia. For some of experts, it was their first experience participating as speakers at an international event. These professionals reflected that being away from war privations even for a few days encouraged them to work even harder when they returned and that the forum represented a much-welcome opportunity to exchange information and best practices with their colleagues in a peaceful setting.

BSWN members also participated in a webinar on gender parity and nuclear security, demonstrating a concrete example of the network facilitating links between different communities. The event was organized by the Center for Science and Security Studies, based in the School of Security Studies at King's College London. Drawing on their extensive professional experience, BSWN members had the opportunity to discuss challenges that women face in the field of nuclear security and provide recommendations to advance gender parity in organizations.

Through these efforts, the BSWN is creating a strong foundation to enhance nuclear security culture. It is highlighting the importance of human factors not only through official partnerships but also by supporting members outside of their direct professional settings.

5. Network Partnerships

The establishment of the BSWN would not have been possible without fruitful cooperation between various stakeholders—governmental entities and NGOs. The idea of the network was conceived in 2019 during an international conference in Kyiv, Ukraine, on promoting gender awareness. The conference was sponsored by the SSM and organized by the National Technical University's Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute and the Ministry of Energy of Ukraine. The James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies presented a proposal to establish BSWN to a wide range of stakeholders at the Global Partnership Working Group and received financial support from the NNSA Office of International Security/Nuclear Security Women initiative and SSM. CNS and LANL serve as project implementers.

The BSWN united representatives from national governmental bodies, nuclear industry, research and training facilities, academia, and civil society from the Black Sea region and beyond. Gender equality and women empowerment in nuclear fields are the main elements of these diverse partnerships, which connect national, regional, and international stakeholders in their efforts to create a network for nuclear women

professionals in the Black Sea region. Such partnerships are a cornerstone for promoting diversity and inclusion in nuclear security and other related fields.

6. Conclusion

Gender inclusivity is widely recognized as foundational to a strong security culture [20, 21]. In recent years, various national and international programs have been established to promote women in nuclear fields. In seeking to achieve gender parity in the nuclear domain, it is critical to consider the needs and contributions of women from particular regions and their impact on various aspects of nuclear security.

Cultural and regional ties between countries form an effective path to mutual success through joint initiatives. Overcoming the obstacles and, at times, disadvantageous environments for women in the nuclear security industry, as well as making the field more attractive for women students and the workforce, need to be targeted and prioritized. Examples of programs for enhancing women's interest in nuclear security are set by major international organizations, such as the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowship or the newly launched Lise Meitner Programme by the IAEA [22]; a Self-assessment and Evaluation Tool on Gender Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion by WINS [23]; and the Global Forum Working Group 1: Achieving Gender Equity in the Nuclear Engineering and Technology and Academic Workforces by Nuclear Energy Agency (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) [24].

Establishing and increasing access to educational and training programs for women are also considered primary mechanisms for achieving better gender equity [25]. Women's initiatives implemented through regional networks can play a crucial role in supporting women experts in the nuclear industry, provided that the respective governmental authorities share the values set by the international organizations. Through the example of BSWN, regional initiatives prove to be an effective tool in fulfilling these goals.

The BSWN accomplishes these objectives by connecting, supporting, and empowering women in nuclear fields. It serves as an interdisciplinary platform for professionals to promote gender equity and increase the representation of women in leadership roles, as well as offer professional exchanges, mentoring, and training opportunities. Since its inauguration, the network has organized a number of successful efforts, including Black Sea Experts NucTalks, a mentorship program, and joint virtual events. These efforts have brought together professionals to discuss pressing issues and consider future solutions. The network has also promoted the participation of its experts in international events to share their experiences and exchange good practices.

Over the past year, BSWN has provided concrete support to its community in times of crisis and facilitated information sharing on available resources and reliable news sources. BSWN members based in Ukraine have demonstrated a powerful commitment to nuclear security culture, highlighted by the tangible security risks they currently face. The encouragement, motivation, and opportunities for engagement that the BSWN members have received underline the network's contributions to strengthening the nuclear security culture.

Beyond partnerships within the network, BSWN's successes rely on continued cooperation with various stakeholders. International collaborations have also played a key role in BSWN's establishment. The international stakeholders and partnerships represent a powerful example of the continued need and importance of regional collaborations to strengthen nuclear security culture and achieve gender parity in nuclear fields.

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