

Gender and Nuclear Disarmament

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Gender and nuclear weapons—what are the connections?

The first nuclear weapons explosions, called Little Boy and Fat Man, open our story. More recently, when one country tested nuclear weapons, the leader said, “We had to prove that we are not eunuchs.” A newspaper at the time showed a cartoon that had “made with Viagra” stamped across a weapon.

These meanings were not invented out of thin air. These kinds of names, images, and jokes rely on widespread assumptions and associations about gender, in this case, linking political and military power with sexual potency and masculinity.

Note the use of the word masculinity. It’s worth belabouring one point a little in order to eliminate completely the idea that “Margaret Thatcher” or “Indira Gandhi” are counter arguments to what follows. Feminist international relations theorists are very loud and clear about this point—we are *not* talking about biology, we *are* noticing the use of stereotypes in policy processes and thinking, we *are* talking about ideas, pervasive, embedded ideas, but we are *not* saying that there is anything inherently warlike in men or peaceful in women. We are talking about masculinity and femininity and how they are *valued* and *defined* in our cultures today.

People in every culture have biologically male or female bodies, but what it means to be “masculine” or “feminine” is different for different cultures and changes over time. What it means to be a “real man” or a “good woman” changes also, and there are strong ideas communicated about these stereotypes and roles around war and war planning—look at any propaganda poster depicting heroic men protecting good women who keep the home fires burning and take up roles that the fighting men usually occupy.

Gender also functions as a symbolic system: our ideas about gender permeate and shape our ideas about many other aspects of society beyond male-female relations—including politics, weapons, and warfare. Just as the cartoons and ideas cited above communicate attitudes and assumptions, adjectives like strong, rational, prudent, active, and objective are associated with masculinity, whereas words such as weak, irrational, impulsive, passive, subjective, and emotional are associated with femininity.

One example you might have heard before will serve to show how gender stereotypes affect the ways in which nuclear weapons are culturally associated with strength, power, and masculinity. It will also introduce the arguments we will make about how policy debates—the way you diplomats and governmental officials interact, behave, and negotiate—is limited and distorted by these gender stereotypical ways of thinking, which have been normalized and legitimized after decades of practice.

A white male physicist, who is a member of a group of nuclear physicists, told the following to Dr. Carol Cohn:

Several colleagues and I were working on modelling counterforce nuclear attacks, trying to get realistic estimates of the number of immediate fatalities that would result from different

deployments. At one point, we re-modelled a particular attack, using slightly different assumptions, and found that instead of there being 36 million immediate fatalities, there would only be 30 million. And everybody was sitting around nodding, saying, “Oh yeah, that’s great, only 30 million,” when all of a sudden, I *heard* what we were saying. And I blurted out, “Wait, I’ve just heard how we’re talking—*only* 30 million! *Only* 30 million human beings killed instantly?” Silence fell upon the room. Nobody said a word. They didn’t even look at me. It was awful. I felt like a woman.

The physicist added that henceforth he was careful never to blurt out anything like that again.

This story is not simply about one individual, his feelings and actions; it illustrates the role and meaning of gender discourse in the defence community. This example should not be dismissed as just the product of the idiosyncratic personal composition of that particular room; it is replicated many times and in many places.

The impact of gender discourse in that room (and countless others like it) is that some things get left out from professional deliberations.

Certain ideas, concerns, interests, information, feelings, and meanings are marked in national security discourse as feminine, and thus devalued. They are therefore very difficult to speak, as exemplified by the physicist who blurted them out and wished he hadn’t. And if they manage to be said, they are also very difficult to hear, to take in, and work with seriously. For the others in the room, the way in which the physicist’s comments were marked as feminine and devalued served to delegitimize them; it also made it very unlikely that any of his colleagues would find the courage to agree with him.

If at the PrepCom you were to really express concern about human bodies, if you were to express an emotional awareness about the suicidal, genocidal, and ecocidal, desperate human condition that has created and maintained the means to destroy the planet, if you were to discuss the human reality behind the sanitized abstractions of death and destruction in security and strategic deliberations, you would be transgressing a code of professional conduct.

For the majority in this room, that is the male diplomats, your colleagues might look at you like you were a woman, they might question your masculinity, and you might be seen as soft and wimpish. For a minority in this room, that is the female diplomats, your colleagues might look at you AS a woman, and mean it as a put down, and that is something that as intelligent, skilled people, you wish to avoid, because that means you are not being a good diplomat, rather that you are impulsive, uncontrolled, emotional, upset.

The statement, “I felt like a woman,” and the physicist’s subsequent silence in that and other settings, are completely understandable. To find the strength of character and courage to transgress the strictures of both professional and gender codes and to associate yourself with a lower status is very difficult.

But what are the advantages of considering gender issues?

1. Gender analysis provides tools—not all of the tools you need, but some of the tools—to address why nuclear weapons are valued, why additional states seek them, keep them, and why leaders are motivated to resort to dominance and the use of force to obtain policy objectives. Possessing and brandishing an extraordinarily destructive capacity is a form of dominance associated with masculine

warriors (nuclear weapons possessors are sometimes referred to as the “big boys”) and is more highly valued than the feminine-associated disarmament, cooperation, and diplomacy.

2. Ignoring this doesn't make it go away. Instead, by recognising that there is a problem, it becomes possible to confront traditionally constructed meanings and redefine terms such as “strength” and “security” so that they more appropriately reflect the needs of all people. The anxious preoccupation with affirming manhood and masculinity can cease if we recognise and address this problem in politics. The dangerous and illusory idea that security can be achieved through militarized, weaponised strength has not worked, we do not enjoy security, even those armed to the teeth. Humanity is chronically insecure, under developed, under educated, under fed, and over-weaponised. Insecure. Security and strength defined through weapons is not security; this model has failed, terribly.

3. Gender awareness also shows that participating in self-censorship, as the physicist in the example above did, is understandable, but very counter-productive. The effect of such self-censorship is to exclude a whole range of relevant inputs as if they did not belong in discussions of “hard” security issues because they are too “soft” (i.e. feminine).

The role of men and a certain kind of masculinity in dominating the political structures that organise wars and oversee security matters is beginning to be questioned. In 2000, the Security Council adopted resolution 1325.¹ Since the adoption of this resolution, these issues have been newly and more deeply understood. Governments and NGOs have undertaken some laudable work to implement it. We have seen some more highly competent and intelligent women appointed to engage in security and disarmament issues—of course we would like to see more in this room today.

In 2006, the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission chaired by Hans Blix acknowledged gender issues when they stated, “Women have rightly observed that armament policies and the use of armed force have often been influenced by misguided ideas about masculinity and strength. An understanding of and emancipation from this traditional perspective might help to remove some of the hurdles on the road to disarmament and nonproliferation.”

The association of weapons with masculinity, power, prestige, and technical prowess has a direct effect on policy decisions and negotiations and is a hurdle on the road to disarmament and non-proliferation. The concept of “mastering” or “dominating” the nuclear fuel cycle and relying on nuclear energy is likewise associated with the masculine characteristics of prestige and technical prowess, while the arguments to phase out nuclear power and rely on the “benign” power of the sun, wind, tides, and heat from the Earth, are seen as feminine and weak.

Decision-makers and negotiators working within a “radioactively realist” context of power optimization are working in a paradigm which is also gendered. In a “realist” perspective on international relations, all states seek as much power and potential to dominate as possible. This is especially true in the nuclear age, where many governments have come to believe that security requires the ability to militarily dominate and control. Within this security paradigm, weapons are necessary because security can only come through the ability to obliterate the other, and to command control of any relationship through the threat or use of force. In personal interactions, this sort of fearful controlling is called abuse and a crime, but from a realist geopolitical perspective, it is called “hard security” and wise policy.

1 <http://www.peacewomen.org/un/sc/1325.html>

Gender stereotypes that promote the value of weapons of terror are a problem at the heart of international relations and national security policies, obstructing progress towards the goal of the majority of states and citizens: the total elimination of the world's nuclear arsenals.