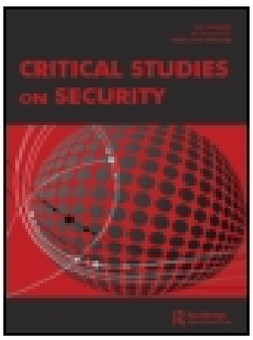

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The nuclear ban and the patriarchy: a feminist analysis of opposition to prohibiting nuclear weapons

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ABSTRACT

Opposed by some of the world's most powerful states, the coalition of actors that promoted the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons encountered rigid international power structures. These structures are in part maintained through the deployment of patriarchal tactics and rhetoric to suppress the perspectives and agency of those who might challenge those in a dominant position. In this way, banning nuclear weapons can be read as an act of challenging patriarchy and building space for alternative approaches to politics, including feminist and human-security-based approaches.

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The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), adopted by 122 states in 2017, mounts a significant challenge to the nuclear status quo. Two aspects of the ban-treaty project posed particular challenges to patriarchy. First, the treaty was brought about through a deliberate discursive shift by concerned activists, academics, and diplomats – from a discourse centred on the alleged security benefits of deterrence to a discourse centred on the urgency of disarmament. Second, the ban was promoted through the empowerment of women, diplomats, and activists of the global south.

Undertaken by a collective partnership of civil society and diplomatic actors in the face of strong opposition by some of the most militarily and economically influential countries in the world, the ban process confronted rigid international power structures. These structures are in part maintained through the deployment of patriarchal tactics and rhetoric to suppress the perspectives and agency of those who might challenge those in a dominant position. In this way, banning nuclear weapons can be read as an act of challenging patriarchy and building space for alternative approaches to politics, including feminist and human-security-based approaches.

Given the length restrictions of this piece, I will not delve into the rich history of gender and militarism scholarship. For decades, feminists have written and spoken about the intersections between militarism and gendered social norms, including in the sphere of nuclear weapons. Carol Cohn's 'close encounter with nuclear strategic analysis,' for example, led to illuminating articles about the gendered coding of nuclear weapons (Cohn 1987a; Cohn 1987b). These articles provided the foundations for a feminist analysis of nuclear war, strategy, and weapons.

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Along with Felicity Ruby and Sara Ruddick, Cohn expanded the inquiry into the sense of masculine strength afforded by nuclear weapons (2006), utilising the work of others examining masculinities and militarism more broadly (e.g. Eichler 2014; Enloe 1990; Hutchings 2008; Morgan 1994).

Building on these efforts, this piece explores the gendered characteristics of the opposition to the nuclear ban treaty. I argue that some of the rhetoric and assertions deployed by the nuclear-armed states in opposition to the ban represent classic patriarchal tactics to deny the realism, rationality, and the lived experience of women and others that threaten the dominant narratives that sustain the nuclear status quo.

Patriarchy and the ban

One tactic deployed to sustain patriarchy is for men in dominant positions to establish and maintain themselves as authorities by denouncing and denigrating the views of others. In the case of the TPNW, those representing nuclear-armed states berated other governments for supporting the ban, ridiculing their perspectives on peace and security, and accusing them of threatening the world order, risking total chaos. Prohibiting and eliminating nuclear weapons is neither practical nor feasible, these 'realist' governments assert. Those who support the prohibition of nuclear weapons are delusional. They are 'radical dreamers' who have 'shot off to some other planet or outer space' (Acheson 2015). They do not understand how to protect their people. Their security interests do not matter – or do not exist at all (Acheson 2016). Initiatives for the prohibition and abolition of nuclear weapons are illegitimate, naïve, destabilising.

The basis upon which these assertions are made is usually unjustified, misinformed, and rooted in a material or political commitment to the status quo. These claims bear some scrutiny. What is 'practical?' What is 'feasible?' How do we measure these concepts and who determines the measurements? Those who are the most negatively affected by nuclear weapons development, testing, stockpiling, use, and threatened use – women, indigenous peoples, the poor, inhabitants of the areas in which the weapons and stored – are not considered reliable sources for these determinations.

Instead, critiques coming from those affected, or from those who want to elevate the voices and perspectives of those affected, are dismissed as 'emotional.' During the active process of changing the nuclear discourse through a careful examination of the humanitarian consequences of these weapons, representatives of the nuclear-armed states argued that even talking about this subject is 'emotional.' They refused to attend the 2013–2014 multilateral conferences in Oslo, Nayarit, and Vienna examining the humanitarian and environmental impacts of nuclear weapons. The Russian delegation to the UN argued that 'even children' know what a nuclear weapon does, and that we should not 'waste time on such useless topics' (Acheson 2013).

This dismissal is highly gendered. When those flexing their 'masculinity' want to demonstrate or reinforce their power and dominance, they try to make others seem small and marginalised by accusing them of being emotional, overwrought, irrational, or impractical. Women and gender-non-conforming people have experienced this technique of dismissal and denigration for as long as gender hierarchies have existed. It is well established in feminist literature that binary comparisons and contrasts such as strength/weakness and reason/

emotion are gendered, with strength and reason associated with masculinity and emotion and weakness with femininity.

The denial of reason in one's interlocutor is destabilising. It is an attempt to take away the ground on which the other stands, projecting illusions about what is real, what makes sense, or what is rational. One actor proclaims, 'I am the only one who understands what the real situation is. Your understanding of the situation is not just incorrect, it is delusional – *it is based upon a reality that does not exist*.' This approach places Self as subject and the Other as object, eliminating the Other's sense of and eventually capacity for agency. In the case of the nuclear ban, it is not just the reason or rationality of those supporting the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons that is denied by the nuclear-armed states. It is also the lived experience of everyone who has ever suffered from a nuclear explosion, or mining of nuclear material, or dumping of nuclear waste.

This tactic is more than just an argument or a difference in interpretation. It is an attempt to undermine, discredit, and ultimately destroy an interlocutor's entire worldview in order to maintain power and privilege. In the terminology of psychological abuse in relationships, this tactic is known as gas lighting. This is a form of manipulation that seeks to make the victims question their own sanity or sense of rationality (Leve 2017). It has effectively been used to silence and oppress people, women in particular, and was deployed in opposition in the ban to suppress those speaking out about the horrors and dangers of nuclear weapons.

Objectification of others and control of 'reality' are integral to patriarchy, as they are to concepts such as 'nuclear deterrence' and 'geostrategic stability' – mechanisms to maintain the current global hierarchy. The nuclear-armed states resisted the counter-hegemonic discourse promoted by the supporters of the ban because the latter's focus on the humanitarian and environmental consequences of nuclearism highlights what nuclear weapons actually do to human bodies, to societies, to the planet. Such evidence undermines the abstraction of nuclear weapons as deterrents or protectors, and refocuses attention on the fact that they are tools of genocide, slaughter, extinction.

The resistance to the humanitarian discourse is reminiscent of a story in Cohn's (1993) article, 'Wars, wimps, and women.' A white male physicist, working on modelling nuclear counterforce attacks, exclaims to a group of other white male physicist about the cavalier way they are talking about civilian casualties. '*Only* thirty million!' he bursts out. '*Only* thirty million human beings killed instantly?' The room went silent. He later confessed to Cohn, 'Nobody said a word. They didn't even look at me. It was awful. I felt like a woman.'

The association of caring about the murder of thirty million people with 'being a woman' is all about seeing that position – and that sex – as being weak, caring about wrong things, letting your 'emotions' get the better of you, and focusing on human beings when you should be focused on 'strategy.' Caring about the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons is feminine, weak, and not relevant to the job that 'real men' have to do to 'protect' their countries. It not only suggests that caring about the use of nuclear weapons is spineless and silly, but also makes the pursuit of disarmament seem unrealistic and irrational.

What can gender analysis and feminism do for disarmament?

Within this patriarchal construct, disarmament seems impossible – like a utopian vision of a world that cannot exist because, the argument goes, there will always be those who want to retain or develop the capacity to wield massive, unfathomable levels of violence over

others, and therefore the 'rational' actors need to retain the weapons for protection against the irrational others. The nuclear-armed governments' refusal to constructively engage with the advocates of the ban stands in stark contrast to the concepts and laws of human rights and poses a serious challenge to global justice. On a deeper level, the nuclear-armed governments' position is premised on the notion that states, as coherent units, must always be at odds with one another, seeking an 'accommodation' of their differences rather than collectively pursuing a world in which mutual interdependence and cooperation could guide behaviour. Policy decisions are still based on conceptions of power imbued with mistrust, threat, fear, and violence. Such policies do not allow for other types of inter-state engagement or relationship between citizens and states; they dismiss such alternatives, characteristic of feminist and human-security-based approaches, as utopian and unrealistic.

Taking a human-focused approach to disarmament, and thereby challenging the dominant state-centred approach to international peace and security, was instrumental to banning nuclear weapons. The humanitarian initiative that promoted the ban, with its purposeful deconstruction of nuclear weapons as weapons of terror and massive violence, led to the majority of states being ready and willing to negotiate and adopt a legal prohibition. An understanding of the gendered meanings and characterisations embedded in the discourse and politics of nuclear weapons will further this process and enable alternative approaches to international relations more broadly. Just as the humanitarian discourse undermines the perceived legitimacy of nuclear weapons, a gender analysis of nuclear discourse helps deconstruct nuclear weapons as symbols of power and tools of empire. It can show that the resonance of nuclear weapons as emblems of masculine power is not inevitable and unchangeable, but a gendered social construction designed to maintain the existing order (Cohn, Ruby, and Ruddick 2006).

It took courage for states drafting and signing the ban treaty to stand up to the nuclear-armed states. The latter handful of governments have thus far controlled the narrative and even much of the scholarship on nuclear weapons for so long that most of the world believes they have the legitimate right to do so. But they don't. The adoption of the treaty prohibiting nuclear weapons makes this very clear. As Ambassador Patricia O'Brien (2017) of Ireland said on the opening day of TPNW negotiations in March 2017: 'We are not just writing a new and complementary treaty here, we are taking the opportunity to write a new history, and in so doing to create a new, more stable, more secure and more equal future for all.' Global civil society and the majority of the world's governments, following in the steps of feminist peace scholars and activists, rejected the dominant narrative to write a new history.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Ray Acheson is the Director of Reaching Critical Will, the disarmament programme of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). Ray's work focuses on stigmatising war and violence, banning weapons, and challenging the patriarchy. She also represents WILPF on the International Steering Group of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), which won the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize.

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