

Gender Perspectives on WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

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briefing
note

What are the linkages between gender perspectives and weapons of mass destruction?

Weapons of mass destruction include nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. Member States of the United Nations have sought to ban or limit the use of these weapons through international conventions and treaties. Activities in this area involve complex and politically sensitive processes of national, regional and international politico-military security. They also impinge upon the fields of diplomacy and international law; the manufacture, stockpiling, deployment and policies for the use of such weapons; weapons testing; advocacy by individuals, campaigns and organizations; technical verification and political assessments of compliance.

What gender perspectives are important when looking at weapons of mass destruction?

The idea of identifying gender issues when dealing with weapons of mass destruction may initially seem irrelevant. After all, an essential quality of weapons of mass destruction is the indiscriminate nature of their destruction. Nuclear holocaust or an attack by chemical or biological weapons are equally overwhelming for women and men. Yet there are issues that could be considered for further investigation.

Gender perspectives on weapons of mass destruction draw attention to issues of power, inequalities, cultural expectations, divisions of labour and family reproduction, as well as biological differences. These perspectives are the concern of men and women. They raise issues about how people (and which people) mobilize and organize for change.

- **Advocates for change:** Women have played an important role in the nuclear disarmament movement, as individuals and within women-specific organizations. Many women have found it more effective to mobilize within such women-specific organizations. The views of women tend to be less visible and less a part of mainstream discussions. This has forced women to mobilize in women-specific organizations in some cases.

Women, for example, played an important role in the anti-nuclear movements of the 1980s. A global women's Peace Movement spread across Europe, the US, Canada and Australia, with women's peace camps, modelled on the Greenham Common experience, in at least 11 countries (Roseneil, 1995 and 2000). Although women's peace organizations in Europe and North America received most of the publicity, there have been strong women's movements in other parts of the world. For example, in the Pacific women organized against nuclear testing and Japanese women set up a peace camp at the base of Mount Fuji.

Although statistics do indicate that women are less likely to be combatants or to engage in military planning, research and development than men, the statistics do not provide reasons for this difference between women and men. Women's roles and socialization in different societies often lead them to have different priorities, needs and interests than those of men. Many women peace and disarmament activists have drawn on their experience as mothers as both the justification and the motivation behind their activism. There is no consensus that women are more innately non-belligerent than men.

Women's Forum 2000: Away with Nuclear Weapons

On opening the door of the 21st century, we the women of Japan make a sincere appeal for women and peoples around the world to unite in efforts to abolish nuclear weapons to save the human race from destruction.

On 5 August 2000 more than 1800 women met in Hiroshima to call for the abolition of nuclear weapons. They heard testimonies from women around the world on the implications of the use and testing of nuclear weapons.

The Campaign has called for all member States of the United Nations to take the courageous decision to eliminate nuclear weapons.

- **Women's and men's access to political decision-making:** Diplomacy between and among states is marked by the under-representation of women. To a large extent, women are seriously underrepresented in many key forums where decisions on disarmament and weapons proliferation are made.
- **Women's and men's access to technical decision-making and technical expertise:** Given educational patterns and social attitudes in many societies, women are not equitably represented among arms control experts.
- **Reproductive health issues:** Given biological differences, women and men are often affected differently by weapons testing and fallout.

Concrete implications

In developing a mainstreaming strategy in disarmament the following issues could be investigated:

- **Developing expertise among women.** Men have long dominated security studies and the technical field of arms control. More women could be encouraged to develop professional expertise in the technical areas related to nuclear weapons and the political skills involved in arms negotiations.
There tends to be more women experts in the developed than in the developing world, as a result of differences in social, economic, educational and political opportunities. In order to improve women's expertise in the developing world, the constraints to their involvement need to be identified and addressed.
- **Establishing better contact with women researchers and those working on the gender dimensions of nuclear weapons.** In recent years, different professional specializations have begun to look at gender perspectives in weapons of mass destruction, peace studies and disarmament. Some of these researchers may not be part of the traditional network drawn on by UN agencies. Special efforts may be required to reach out to them and tap their expertise. Development of a roster could facilitate efforts.
- **Involving women as technical experts more equitably in discussions and technical events.** Gender balance on bodies working on these issues should be a priority. Ensuring that women's voices are heard in a wide range of discussions can require specific efforts. The value-added of

Although a gender analysis tends to focus on social, economic and political differences and inequalities between women and men, this is one case where the biological differences are relevant. In the 1950s, traces of strontium 90 were not only found in cow's milk, but also in breast milk. This became an important issue for women anti-nuclear testing protesters at that time.

- **War, weapons and masculinity:** Activists and researchers are attempting to understand how gender roles (in particular masculinity) contribute to the development of conflict and arms proliferation. This may be a useful avenue to explore when attempting to understand the complex causes of arms development and military expenditures.

increased involvement of women need to be identified. Men, for example, may benefit through exposure to ways of working that may not be familiar to them.

- **Building links with women's NGOs.** There are numerous international and national women's organizations that focus explicitly on building support for peace and nuclear disarmament. Ways and means need to be sought to increase the links between NGOs and researchers working on gender and weapons of mass destruction and the United Nations. (See the Briefing Note in this series on *Women's Advocacy for Peace and Disarmament*)
- **Reaching out to women.** There are often significant divisions on issues such as nuclear disarmament along gender lines. These general divisions among the population could be documented and analyzed to determine if there are strategic opportunities to build greater public support for concrete measures to eliminate weapons of mass destruction. Outreach materials and publicity campaigns should take into consideration the need to reach all groups in society, particularly those positively disposed to the elimination of weapons of mass destruction.

A 1993 study on differences in attitudes towards foreign policy and defense issues between Swedish women and men showed considerable gender differences. Women tended to support foreign aid and cuts to defense budgets at a greater rate than men. (Brienes, 1999)

- **Researching the links between masculinity, violent conflict, weapons and nuclear proliferation.** Can a gender analysis help us understand the politics of nuclear weapons? Some researchers are drawing links between the structure and formation of masculine identities and militarism (See, for

example, Cockburn, 1999, Enloe, 1993 and Roseneil, 2000 and 1995). They argue that a better understanding of this element of militarism could contribute to the development of alternative visions of security and a more peaceful coexistence of states.

Resources

Books and articles

Breines, I. (1999). "A Gender Perspective on a Culture of Peace" in Breines et al. (eds.) *Towards a Women's Agenda for a Culture of Peace*. Paris: UNESCO.

Cockburn, Cynthia (1999). *Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence*. Background paper for Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence. World Bank Conference.

de Ishtar, Zohl (1997). "A Broken Rainbow: Pacific Women and Nuclear Testing" in: R. Lentin (ed.) **Gender & Catastrophe**. London: Zed Books Ltd.

Enloe, Cynthia (1993). **The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War**. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Jacobson, Ruth *et al.* (2000). "Introduction" in Jacobs, Susie *et al.* (eds.) **States of Conflict: Gender, Violence and Resistance**. London: Zed Books Ltd.

Roseneil, Sasha. (2000). **Common Women, Uncommon Practices: The Queer Feminisms of Greenham**, London: Cassell.

Roseneil, Sasha. (1995). **Disarming Patriarchy: Feminism and Political Action at Greenham**. London: Open University Press.

Vickers, J. (1993). **Women and War**. London: Zed Books Ltd.

International Commitments that highlight the gender dimensions of weapons of mass destruction

Strategic Objective E.2 (Reduce excessive military expenditures and control the availability of armaments) of the **Beijing Platform for Action** (1995) outlines numerous agreed actions for governments including:

Para 143: (a) *Increase and hasten, as appropriate, subject to national security considerations, the*

conversion of military resources and related industries to development and peaceful purposes;

(b) *Undertake to explore new ways of generating new public and private financial resources, inter alia, through the appropriate reduction of excessive military expenditures, including global military expenditures, trade in arms and investment for arms production and acquisition, taking into consideration national security requirements, so as to permit the possible allocation of additional funds for social and economic development, in particular for the advancement of women.*

This theme received additional attention in the discussions at the **twenty-third special session of the General Assembly on follow-up to the Platform for Action** (June 2000). The outcome document (A/S-23/10/Rev.1) outlines the achievements and obstacles encountered by governments and international organizations in moving to implement the Beijing Platform for Action. One obstacle identified in the discussion of women and armed conflict was:

Excessive military expenditures, including global military expenditures, trade in arms and investment for arms production, taking into consideration national security requirements, direct the possible allocation of funds away from social and economic development, in particular for the advancement of women. (Para 17)

The document also identified "actions to be taken at the national and international levels, by Governments, regional and international organizations, including the United Nations system, and international financial institutions and other actors as appropriate" including:

98 (k) *Strengthen efforts toward general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control, based on the priorities established by the United Nations in the field of disarmament, so that the released resources could be used for, inter alia, social and economic programmes which benefit women and girls.*

98 (1) *Explore new ways of generating new public and private financial resources, inter alia, through the appropriate reduction of excessive military expenditures and the arms trade and investment for arms production and acquisition, including global military expenditures, taking into consideration national security requirements, so as to permit the possible allocation of additional funds for social and economic development, inter alia, for the advancement of women.*

Finally, the Commission on the Status of Women: Agreed Conclusions on the Critical Areas of Concern of the Beijing Platform for Action (UN Sales No. E.00.IV.6) mentions weapons of mass destruction. Under actions to be taken by governments there is:

Encourage as appropriate the role of women in the peace movement, working towards general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control including disarmament of all types of weapons of mass destruction.

Campaigns and Organizations

International Alert has launched a campaign entitled *From the Village Council to the Negotiating Table*. “The aim of the campaign is to engage as many women’s groups and organizations as possible in a process aimed at enhancing their voices, sharing experiences and promoting more effective dialogue between women and governments.”

Website: <http://www.international-alert.org/women/default.html>

May 24: International Women’s Day for Peace and Disarmament - Spearheaded by the International

Fellowship of Reconciliation and the International Peace Bureau, this day focuses attention on peace and disarmament. Recent actions include radio broadcasts about women’s contributions to peace, fundraising for landmine victims, petitions for the abolition of nuclear weapons and street action against militarism.

Website: <http://www.ifor.org/wpp/index.htm#>

Organizing Committee of the Women’s Forum 2000 - Away with Nuclear Weapons - In mid-2000, this forum, with headquarters in Japan, called for the total elimination of nuclear weapons. They launched a campaign to “urge the United Nations, the nuclear-weapons states and national governments to work for the abolition of nuclear weapons”.

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WILPF - Founded in 1915 to protest the war then raging in Europe, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom aims to bring together women of different political and philosophical convictions, united in their determination to study, and make known and help abolish the political, social, economic and psychological causes of war and to work for a constructive peace. WILPF is a coordinator of the *Reaching Critical Will* campaign.

Website: <http://www.wilpf.int.ch/~wilpf/>

Women Lead the Way to Peace Initiative. Linked to the Hague Agenda for Peace, this initiative released a statement, *Women's Global Actions for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence*, on the occasion of the Hague Appeal for Peace Conference, 11-15 May 1999.

Website: <http://www.ifor.org/wpp/hague.htm>