

Sex, gender, and nuclear weapons

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Gender issues intersect with nuclear weapon issues in at least three ways:

- **Gendered patterns of harm**
 - **Gendered discourse and approach to nuclear weapons**
 - **Gender diversity in arms control and disarmament negotiations and discussions**
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Gendered patterns of harm

Women face unique devastation from the effects of the use of nuclear weapons, such as the effects of radiation on reproduction and maternal health. Women who have survived nuclear weapon tests or use also face unique social challenges related to how they are treated in societies and communities.

Gendered discourse and approach

Nuclear weapons are loaded with symbolism—of potency, protection, and the power to “deter” through material “strength”. For many, such symbolism obscures the real point of the existence of these arms—to destroy—and their horrendous effects. 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”). After India’s 1998 nuclear weapon tests a Hindu nationalist leader explained, “We had to prove that we are not eunuchs.”



The nuclear weapon discourse is also mired in dichotomies such as hard versus soft security, strong versus weak, active versus passive, and national security versus human security. With remarkable consistency, the masculine-identified sides of these pairs are tacitly attributed more value than the other. Those talking about humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons and calling for their prohibition are accused of being divisive, polarising, ignorant, and even emotional. Opponents say they support “reasonable,” “realistic,” “practical,” or “pragmatic” steps and that anything else is irrational and irresponsible.

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Gender diversity

This discourse undermines the contributions of those promoting a perspective of disarmament and peace, whether those individuals are women or men. It also separates men from women in terms of strong protectors on one hand and passive victims on the other. This further enables exclusion of women and others from authoritative social and political roles, which weakens the effectiveness of those processes. From all male panels of experts, to participation in peace talks, or treaty negotiations, the voices of women must be heard.

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Usefulness of a gender analysis

Understanding the gendered meanings and characterisations embedded in the discourse and politics of nuclear weapons will support that process. Just as the humanitarian discourse undermines the perceived legitimacy of nuclear weapons, a gender discourse undermines their perceived power and currency. It also helps illuminate possible solutions. By challenging the discursive equation of nuclear weapons with masculine strength and power, we confront approaches to nuclear governance that work in favour of the indefinite retention of nuclear weapons by a handful of states.

The dominant arms control and non-proliferation paradigm asserts security through possession of all-destructive arsenals and seeks to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, particular to 'irrational' actors. A gender analysis that highlights the patriarchy and social constructions inherent in this valuation of nuclear weapons helps to multiply, amplify, and deepen arguments for nuclear disarmament and question the role of a certain kind of masculinity of the dominant paradigm. Disarmament, which is sometimes accused by its detractors as weak or passive, can instead be shown for what it is—as rational, just, moral, and necessary for security.



For more information:

'Gender and disarmament' fact sheet

www.reachingcriticalwill.org

Resources> Fact Sheets > Critical Issues

'Why ethics is important to the politics of nuclear weapons,' presentation to 2015 NPT Review Conference, 8 May 2015

www.reachingcriticalwill.org

News> Latest news from RCW

'Gender, war, and weapons: linking gender and disarmament at the Commission on the Status of Women,' presentation to Commission on the Status of Women, 12 March 2015

www.reachingcriticalwill.org

News> Latest news from RCW

Carol Cohn, Felicity Hill and Sara Ruddick, 'The relevance of gender for eliminating weapons of mass destruction, in *Beyond arms control: challenges and choices for nuclear disarmament*

www.reachingcriticalwill.org

Resources> Fact Sheets> Critical Issues> Gender and disarmament> Resources

'Gender and nuclear weapons,' presentation to the 2010 National Model United Nations, New York, 31 March 2010

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Resources> Statements from RCW



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