

A Gender Perspective

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RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE WMD COMMISSION

In particular, women's organizations have often played a vital role—from the Hague peace conferences of the 19th century to the present time. The role of women in the maintenance and promotion of peace and security was recognized by the Security Council in Resolution 1325 (2000). 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. (*Weapons of Terror*, 160)

The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) challenged the WMD Commission to acknowledge the relevance of gender to the science and politics of weapons of terror. In a presentation to the Commission's meeting in Stockholm in June 2004, WILPF members Dr. Carol Cohn and Felicity Hill explained how gender stereotypes affect the ways in which WMD, particularly nuclear weapons, are culturally associated with strength, power, and masculinity. They further argued that policy debate—the way 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. Cohn, Hill, and Sara Ruddick subsequently prepared a background paper for the Commission.¹

The Commission responded by recognizing that, indeed, misguided ideas about masculinity and strength *are* an obstacle to disarmament. This is a fairly novel acknowledgment in discussions of NBC weapons, where gender qualities and related values are frequently unstated and unnoticed while they powerfully affect and direct actions and decision-making. Gender has been recognized as relevant in other peace and security areas, including in small arms deliberations and Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security. Security Council Resolution 1325 is a watershed political framework which recognizes that men and women experience wars differently. It requires these differences be taken into account and recognizes that women's full and equal participation in all aspects and stages of peace processes is essential to building sustainable peace. The NBC weapons arena,

however, has been slower to acknowledge gender's influence. In contrast, the prominent role of women in raising the call for disarmament is regularly recognized, and the Commission also does so.

As the Commission's brief observation suggests, gender analysis provides tools to address why NBC weapons are valued, why additional states seek them, and why leaders resort to dominance and the use of force to obtain policy objectives. With the current non-proliferation/disarmament regime in crisis and the emergence of new threats, it would be irresponsible not to use these tools to understand and improve how we think, talk, and act about weapons, war, and militarism.

The Commission clearly states that a key part of the solution to today's proliferation problem is to ensure that states do not feel they need NBC weapons.² Gender is helpful in understanding some of the motivations of states and the dynamics between them that give rise to defensive or competitive desires for the power of mass destruction. The WILPF paper demonstrated that these dynamics are often spoken of in quasi-psychological terms that draw heavily on gender stereotypes about strength, courage, and virility. The dynamics also often involve asymmetrical power and threat perceptions that are played out through gendered bullying tactics associated with hyper-masculinity and "strong arm" behavior between "good guys" and "bad guys."

A gender analysis can also help explain why nuclear weapon states insist on retaining their arsenals despite their lack of military utility and the significant risk they pose. The Commission criticizes "brandishing nuclear weapons ... in circumstances where there is no obvious military rationale," but does not conduct an in-depth investigation into the motivations for such fruitless posturing.³ Gender is a fundamental part of the symbolic meaning of weapons possession and posturing. 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.

The WILPF paper elaborates on this gender-linked value system in which weapons possession is equated with masculinity. This value system underlies most discussions on how to deal with international conflict and weapons, sometimes obviously so. In one of the more famous examples cited in the paper, Hindu nationalist leader Balasaheb Thackeray explained India's 1998 nuclear weapon tests by saying, "we had to prove that we are not eunuchs."⁴ Here, nuclear weapons possession is directly associated with being a real man; testing them was necessary to prove that Indian men were not emasculated.

In addition to their destructive capacity, nuclear weapons evoke images of a masculine-associated technical prowess. They require highly developed technological research and a massive manufacturing infrastructure. Part of the current support in Iran for a nuclear program comes from the desire to master nuclear technology. Public pride in developing sophisticated nuclear

technology (and not being told what to do by Western powers) is partially driving the quest for the fuel-cycle, whether or not it has anything to do with weapons.

Nuclear weapons possession is also perversely associated with power and prestige in international politics. Nuclear weapons possessors are sometimes referred to as members of “the nuclear club.” The five nuclear weapon states acknowledged under the NPT are also the five permanent, veto-wielding members of the UN Security Council. The Security Council is the most powerful international body dealing with peace and security, and has a direct responsibility for disarmament under Article 26 of the UN Charter, which it has neglected entirely (*see section 1.4*). Moreover, nuclear weapon states have considerable influence in multilateral security and disarmament discussions, and have served to slow down or block nuclear disarmament negotiations for the past ten years. Reflecting this perverse association, as the WMD Commission observes, one motivation for a state’s pursuit of nuclear weapons is “the belief that this would enhance its prestige or standing.”⁵

The association of weapons with masculinity, power, prestige, and technical prowess has a direct effect on policy decisions and negotiations. Further, decision-makers and negotiators work within an overall “realist” context of power optimization, 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 western states and others 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, but from a realist geopolitical perspective, it is called “hard security” and wise policy. By this logic, domination is simply self-defense and is therefore morally justified.

The idea of “dominate or be dominated” justifies policies of forcibly disarming other nations while simultaneously developing new weapons systems. Within this framework, disarmament is viewed as only desirable for the other, creating dichotomies where the “good guys” should be allowed all the weapons in the world while the “bad guys” get none. This is entirely unsustainable and will continue to create arms races, proliferation, confrontation, and brinkmanship leading to increasingly dangerous, destructive, and toxic conflicts.

As long as the logic prevails that nuclear weapons possession brings power, prestige, and the ultimate ability to destroy, policy makers and negotiators will attempt to retain or pursue these weapons, despite their illegality, military uselessness, and genocidal nature. Gender analysis illustrates that our culture absurdly and dangerously has come to value the attainment of destructive power as the highest goal and order of politics.

There is another option: negotiation to eliminate the dangerous threat posed by the very existence of nuclear weapons within an international system

based on cooperation. Indeed, the first resolution of the UN General Assembly recognized nuclear disarmament as a precondition for the successful evolution of multilateralism. The mixed record of the United Nations can be directly tied to the prioritization of resources towards weapons over international development.

When the goal of international relations is peaceful coexistence rather than weaponized power optimization, disarmament becomes feasible, desirable, and politically palatable. Building an international system based on cooperation instead of domination, on the rule of law instead of the rule of force, will facilitate the trust needed for sustained global disarmament. Trust and confidence among states is vital to maintaining security at the lowest level of armaments and military. Global nuclear abolition will not emerge through “reasonable” nuclear militarism—only the rejection of these weapons of terror will lead to the emergence of an international system of relationships free from the specter and “credible threat” of nuclear apocalypse. We must dismantle the reasons and justifications for these horrific weapons and promote a paradigm of international relations that does not rely on them. It will not work to change some practices while simultaneously validating a system that creates the desire for such destructive and dominating technology. It is like celebrating cutting the funds for one weapons system while increasing the military budget and upgrading the overall arsenal.

Associations between nuclear weapons possession and powerful masculinity are getting in the way of disarmament, diplomacy, and cooperative security. We need a gender perspective to dismantle the current arguments in favor of nuclear weapons possession, domination, and militarism. We must use the same tools to create the arguments for abolishing nuclear weapons and for promoting an international order based on cooperation and disarmament. 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.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

- The United States should pursue security through a cooperative, rule-based international order, with emphasis on the achievement of human security over militarized national security. In doing so, it should evaluate existing security policies and practices to identify and eliminate the influence of misguided associations between masculinity and weapons, and masculinity and the threat or use of force.
- The United States should support the full and effective implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security.