

The Gendered Dimensions of Anti-Nuclear Weapons Policy

Written by Yashna Agarwalla

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YASHNA AGARWALLA, SEP 28 2020

Nuclear weapons are, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the most dangerous invention of mankind, and a fierce resistance to their proliferation remains at the very crux of the international security architecture. Nuclear weapons have also given rise to waves of anti-nuclear activism since their very invention, particularly during the Cold War years. One of the most significant debates surrounding anti-nuclear activism and the disarmament movement contends itself with gender. Nuclear weapons are seen to symbolise strength and the power of a particular state. Nuclear weapons are, thus, embedded in notions of masculinity and this perceived connection between masculinity and weapons of mass destruction serves as a hurdle to their abolishment. For instance, the naming of the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki as 'Little boy' and 'Fat man' respectively opened the door for masculine characteristics to be associated with nuclear proliferation. Furthermore, after India tested its nuclear weapons in 1998, a prominent Indian politician remarked that the tests were necessary to prove 'we are not eunuchs' (Perlik, 2018). This statement aptly captures the high societal value and status awarded to nuclear weapons and brings to light how disarmament is seen as an affront to masculine norms and is hence feminine and weak.

Moreover, although women participated in large numbers in nuclear disarmament demonstrations and protests, they were governed by the conventional ideas and expectations of their gender. The female concern about the use of nuclear weapons and their very existence is seen as emanating from their roles as mothers and not their own individual identity. In addition to that, some scholars have put forth the argument that women advocating for the anti-nuclear weapons movement do so as a result of some special relationship between women and peace. This special relationship between women and peace is envisaged on the basis of the traditional attributes of femininity associated with womanhood.

The following sections will seek to highlight the various linkages between gender roles and anti-nuclear weapons politics or nuclear disarmament activism. It will argue that notions of masculinity have provided a major obstacle to the anti-nuclear weapons movement. The paper will also try to answer the question of whether women involved in the nuclear disarmament activism were relegated to the traditional norms of femininity associated with their gender or not. It will seek to understand whether the political activism of women was undermined because of assumptions related to their gender. Therefore, expectations about gender and how norms related to gender shape our understanding of the discourse against nuclear weapons will be examined.

Understanding Gender

Gender, in spite of being a contested term, has come to be widely accepted as a social construction by the feminist scholarship. Gender is increasingly being differentiated from sex, which is understood as the biological difference between a male and a female. Feminists in the contemporary period have put forward the argument that gender is not just an individual identity but also a way of structuring relations of power (Cohn, Hill, & Ruddick, 2005). While feminists disagree about how gendered power functions in society, they collectively believe that when gender is analysed as a way of structuring relations of power, it brings to light the hierarchical relation between males and females in a society. Men and women are assumed to have distinctive attributes, capacities and traits. Gender tends to privilege masculine norms and men while relegating women and femininity to the periphery (Eschle, 2012).

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According to Carol Cohn, gender may also be considered to operate as a 'symbolic system'. This means that gender is understood to function through a series of conceptual dichotomies (Eschle, 2012). Masculinity or femininity, public sphere or private sphere, rational or emotional, strength or weakness, active or passive and objective or subjective are just some of the conceptual dichotomies through which gender operates in society. These concepts derive their meaning in relation to the other. In other words, masculinity gains its meaning when it is placed in contrast to femininity (Cohn et al., 2005). One important point to note here is that characteristics connected to masculinity like rationality, strength, etc. are viewed to be superior while characteristics associated with femininity such as emotional, passive and so on are seen as inferior.

According to feminist scholars, our ideas and expectations regarding gender go beyond merely shaping the relations between males and females. Ideas about gender also inform our understanding of various aspects of society such as politics, weapons and war (Cohn et al., 2005).

Nuclear Weapons and the Masculinity Debate

Nuclear weapons and their association with power as well as masculinity comprises one of the strongest challenges to their elimination. As these weapons capable of immense destruction are seen as securing the security of the state possessing them and are considered to provide a deterrent to an external threat, they are seen as embodiment of a state's power and strength and therefore, culturally linked to notions of masculinity. To this effect, states that possess nuclear weapons have been given the name of the 'Big boys' and the whole grouping of states possessing nuclear weapons is also known as the 'Big boys club'.

The link between the value accorded to nuclear weapons and masculinity has been explored in depth by the feminist tradition. According to Catherine Eschle, one 'politico-institutional' argument that examines the relationship between masculinity and nuclear weapons is based on the dominance of men on the defence and political establishments, which has led to a narrow militarized conception of security (Eschle, 2012).

Secondly, Carol Cohn put forth another argument that focused on the link between masculinity and nuclear weapons. Cohn sought to analyse the 'techno-strategic' discourse that is employed by the male dominated defence establishments. Cohn expands on this argument with an example of a conversation she had with a nuclear strategist, wherein the strategist expresses concern over the number of human fatalities when working on models of counter-force nuclear attack. As he narrates this instance to Cohn, he also conveys his embarrassment and says he felt like a woman for expressing his concern. Using this example, she highlights how certain concerns or ideas are devalued and rendered 'feminine' in the national security discourse.

Moreover, another set of arguments which explores the role of gender in awarding value to nuclear weapons can be framed under the heading of security-sovereignty critique, according to Eschle. This set of arguments begins with a criticism about how mainstream approaches of security highlight a heroic kind of masculinity. In such a discourse, women are imagined as the one protected section of society, with the male being celebrated as the protectors. Consequently, nuclear weapons derive their value from their role as a deterrent; believed to be protecting a state from external threats.

The external threats against whom security is sought may also be looked at from a gendered dimension. For instance, the enemy state or leader of the state may be characterised in a feminine way to justify a masculine response. On the other hand, the enemy state or leader can also be depicted in a light of deficient masculinity which will be countered by rational masculinity (Eschle, 2012). Therefore, such gendered values may provide the justification for a state to possess nuclear weapons as a deterrent.

With such notions of masculinity pervading our understanding of nuclear weapons, it seems highly unlikely for movements advocating for nuclear disarmament to succeed. In this context, it is crucial to note that the male campaigners against nuclear weapons found that their masculinity was brought into question. Therefore, it may be stated that the language used in the discourse concerning nuclear weapons is quite gendered with the 'rationality' exercised by men considered to be superior to the assumed sensitivity of women.

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One former director of the International Atomic Energy Agency has also remarked on the relationship between masculine characteristics and the valuing of nuclear weapons. He has acknowledged the adverse impact that 'misguided ideas of masculinity and strength' have had on the nuclear weapons proliferation discourse or armament policies followed by individual states (Perlik, 2018).

Women and Nuclear Disarmament Activism

Images in popular culture as well as theories posited by social scientists have advanced the view that men and women have a difference in attitude with respect to nuclear weapons. There is an enduring, cross-cultural belief that women are more anti-war and therefore, anti-nuclear weapons as compared to men (Gwartney-Gibbs, & Lach, 1991). It is believed that women are innately more aligned towards peace while men, on the other hand, are seen to have a more aggressive nature.

During the Cold War period, the massive anti-nuclear protests wherein women were well-represented were both praised and criticised. The demonstrations were celebrated for opening the door for women to enter the field of international relations; an area where they are regarded as invisible for the most part. The inclusion of feminist scholars in the realm of international relations paved the way for an alternative perspective with respect to security and politics to emerge. Conversely, the protests and activism portrayed by women was subject to criticism as it was alleged that their anti-nuclear viewpoint was assessed in terms of their role as a mother and their assumed association with peace (Eschle, 2013).

Jean Elshtain, a prominent American political philosopher, in her book *Women, War and Feminism*, explored the concept of 'female consciousness'. Elshtain constructs a philosophical framework and within that framework, she talks about conservative female pacifism, which influences women to remain in the domestic sphere and to provide a critique of militarism (Di Leonardo, 1985). Elshtain's argument is based on Sara Ruddick's concept of 'maternal thinking', wherein she talks about female pacifism grounded in maternal instincts or essence. For both of these theorists, the role of motherhood is not a source of oppression but instead, leads to the development of valuable attributes due to the activities of nurturing and caring. According to them, the maternal experiences of women pave the way for them to transform into a more progressive 'female consciousness'. Consequently, these theorists promoted the imagery of women being intrinsically pacifist and men being inherently aggressive.

The concept of 'moral mothers' as espoused by the first-wave of feminist scholars framed the rhetoric for women being more anti-war and anti-nuclear weapons than men. Feminist scholars exploited the concept of moral mothers in order to mount a greater campaign against war, militarism and nuclear weapons. For instance, the involvement of women in peace camps such as the popular Greenham Commons camp and their participation in organisations like Women's Action for Nuclear Disarmament (WAND) as well as Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) among others seemed to reinstate gender norms. Their campaign against nuclear weapons seemed to be based on their roles as mothers, sisters and wives to the soldiers who went to the frontlines of battles.

In this context, it is important to note that while women played a key role in organisations that advocated for elimination of nuclear weapons, most of these organisations were still headed by men. Furthermore, the women organisations that were formed to advocate against the development and use of nuclear weapons also based their concerns on the maternal urges of women to protect and to love (Wittner, 2000). The Britain's Women Against the Bomb and Women's Strike for Peace (WSP) are just two of the numerous organisations that based their resistance to nuclear weapons on motherhood or the maternal instinct women are considered to possess. For instance, a former leader of the Women's Strike for Peace organisation was quoted as saying that their member's concern regarding nuclear weapons stemmed from 'their understanding of life', which by virtue of nature is better grasped by women. These organisations were seen to be lacking in feminist consciousness. This charge was levied on them because their emphasis on maternalism led to the promotion of a very limited notion of the role of women in society.

This concept of moral mothers thus, led to the conceptualisation of a special relationship between women and peace. The 'natural desire' for peace meant that there was no need to look further into the myriad ways militarism affected women's lives on a daily basis. Moreover, women in those years exploited these concepts to gain some political

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agency of their own and to raise their concerns. Women had to fit in their culturally molded positions as mothers in order to enter the political arena. However, by trying to exploit these binaries associated with femininity and womanhood, they became trapped in those culturally defined roles.

These assumptions and the characteristics culturally associated with women are grounded in essentialism. The emphasis on the supposed moral qualities of women along with expectations about their traditional responsibilities limit the agency of women to act of their accord. In this context, their opposition to nuclear weapons was also understood in relation to their feminine attributes. The humanitarian and environmental risks highlighted by women were also brushed under their concern as mothers. Their opposition to nuclear weapons was viewed purely in light of their traditional identity in society.

As noted by Karen Kahn, the author of *Front-Line Feminism*, when women were relegated to their conventional identities and gender roles in the debate on nuclear weapons, their opinion was not given enough heed. As moral mothers, their concerns were dismissed summarily and they were not acknowledged as competent actors in the political arena. The role played by women was seen as merely symbolic with the males being the ones with scientific information and being the drivers of the movement (Kahn, 1985). For instance, during the height of anti-nuclear weapons protest, although President Kennedy conferred with the male leader of the SANE on numerous occasions, he did not once agree to meet with a female activist from Women's Strike for Peace.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that even though women in the aforementioned organisations didn't rebel against the conventional role seen to be inhabited by women, they did partake in activities that were viewed to be unladylike. By speaking publicly and making pamphlets, they entered the male-dominated arena of national security. Women also organised dramatic blockades as part of the Women's Pentagon Action and thus, subverted the traditional understanding of gender norms. This inclusion of females in the national security debate itself was a major step forward.

Analysis

Gender dynamics play an important role in anti-nuclear weapons politics. The close connection between notions of masculinity and these weapons of mass destruction provides another insight into how gender is implicitly present in the nuclear weapons discourse. In a similar vein, the sustained activism of women against the possession of nuclear weapons by states and their engagement dismissed due to the conventional attributes linked to women is one aspect of how gender norms and ideas affect our understanding of the debate surrounding nuclear weapons.

Nuclear weapons are seen as securing a state's sovereignty and viewed as an instrument of protection against any enemy state. The imagery of nuclear weapons in a protector role is emphasised alongside the imagery of male soldiers protecting the vulnerable female population. The association of masculine attributes of strength, power and even security to some extent with nuclear weapons has become an extreme hurdle to the disarmament movement. As remarked by prominent scholar Carol Cohn, 'when nuclear weapons are seen as symbols of masculinity, why will any state willingly do away with them?'

In addition, the assumptions about the embodied subjectivities related to women meant that they were not seen as competent actors in the political arena. Women who actively participated in anti-nuclear weapons organisations sought to ground their opposition in their role as mothers. Furthermore, when some women organisations raised objections on environmental and humanitarian grounds, they were also brushed aside and not given enough heed.

While feminists such as Sara Ruddick and Jean Elshtain among others sought to mobilise support for anti-nuclear activism on the basis of assumed feminine consciousness, their essentialism driven feminism only resulted in the further subordination of women. The repeated emphasis on women's capacity for caring and nurturing roles constrained women in their culturally defined roles and was used to downplay their role in the anti-nuclear weapons politics. Therefore, it may be stated that much of the existing literature regarding women's role in the anti-nuclear weapons movement furthered the construction of gender identities and subjectivities.

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Written at: Jawaharlal Nehru University

Written for: Dr. J. Madhan Mohan

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