



Women and weapons: Redressing the gender gap

A Ukrainian response

Polina Sinovets

Abstract

In nuclear war, women would suffer at least as much as men. But women tend to be underrepresented in fields—such as high-level politics, diplomacy, military affairs, and science and technology—that bear on nuclear policy. Authors from four countries—Salma Malik of Pakistan (2014), Polina Sinovets of Ukraine, Reshmi Kazi of India (2014), and Jenny Nielsen of Denmark (2014)—discuss how women might gain greater influence on nuclear weapons policy and how their empowerment might affect disarmament and nonproliferation efforts.

Keywords

Carol Cohn, education, femininity, feminism, international organizations, masculinity, nuclear politics, nuclear weapons, soft power, women

Many feminists view the nuclear state as a gendered phenomenon. Men, they say, associate nuclear technology with sexual potency—and indeed, when India detonated five nuclear devices in May 1998, Hindu nationalist politician Bal Thackeray said, “We have to prove that we are not eunuchs” (Oza, 2012: 113). This sentiment calls to mind a question posed in 1987 by the gender and security scholar Carol Cohn (Cohn, 1987: 693), who asked, “If disarmament is emasculation, how could any real man even consider it?” Feminists also point out that men associate nuclear weapons with their perceived roles as defenders of (female) populations—and

in the world of nuclear policy, men see their own supposed rationality as more appropriate than women’s supposed sensitivity (Duncanson and Eschle, 2008).

What if the gendering of the nuclear state were to break down? According to feminist theory, the logic of nuclear weapons possession would be undermined. The idea that power equates to total capacity to destroy would be shaken. But while it’s certainly true that masculinity has long been synonymous with aggression or protection, and femininity with appeasement or a preference for stability—in other words, masculinity with strength and femininity with weakness—practice shows that women

can be just as tough as men. Female politicians and diplomats including Margaret Thatcher, Madeleine Albright, and Condoleezza Rice have been associated with hard policy measures and quite forceful military actions, making it clear that stereotypes of women as sensitive or pacifist are by no means always accurate.

But gender, as it is understood by feminists such as Cohn and her co-author Sara Ruddick (Cohn and Ruddick, 2003), is a symbolic system (in addition to an individual characteristic). Gender provides metaphors and values that help structure people's thinking about war and security, among other aspects of the world. These metaphors and values constitute ideologies. The ideologies might be described as either feminine or masculine—but a “masculine” ideology can be adopted by a woman, or vice versa. Leaders such as Thatcher, Albright, and Rice, who carried out their careers in a world constructed by men and based on masculine ideals, succeeded in becoming more “masculine” than many men.

All this makes it rather complicated to discuss how women can gain greater influence on nuclear weapons policy, but two approaches stand out. The first approach is to encourage women's representation in state bodies and international organizations in the hope that women, as they gain influence, will gradually alter politics itself, bringing about an evolution in sociopolitical conscience. If the environment surrounding nuclear politics were more feminine, then politics might become less aggressive and the eventual result might be general disarmament. Then again, this reasoning might be faulty. Thatcher, Albright, and Rice—were they “masculine” by nature or did they become so in order

to succeed in politics, which tends to be a men's domain? If the latter is true, how can one be sure that nuclear politics won't change the “feminine” nature of many women who enter it? How can one be sure that women would change nuclear politics, instead of the other way around?

The second approach—the more complicated of the two, but perhaps the more rewarding in the long run—demands that societies make radical changes in their attitudes toward masculinity. In today's world, masculinity prevails. The business of real men is war, aggression, and domination. Among the tools of domination, nuclear weapons are foremost—the highest symbol of masculinity. But if war and aggression were devalued throughout society, beginning at the level of basic childhood education and entertainment (for example, if computer games no longer glorified war), it might be possible over time to establish less male-oriented societies.

In a sense, such a process is already under way. Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, money has begun to displace weaponry as the primary symbol of state power. This transition toward soft power is a fundamental transformation and arguably represents an evolution away from a traditional, masculine-centered world and toward a more nuanced and feminine-influenced world. If this transformation continues, women may gain a greater voice in nuclear politics, not only through direct participation, but also indirectly, by helping society develop a more feminine character. Adlai Stevenson once said, “There is no evil in the atom; only in men's souls.” So bring the soul of women into nuclear politics, making it less aggressive and

more oriented toward stability, and let the atom follow.

Editor's note

In the Development and Disarmament roundtable series, featured at www.thebulletin.org, experts from developing countries debate timely topics related to nuclear disarmament and proliferation, nuclear energy, climate change, biosecurity, and economic development. Each author contributes an essay in each of three rounds, for a total of nine essays in an entire roundtable. This feature was made possible by a three-year grant from the Norwegian Foreign Ministry. Salma Malik, Polina Sinovets, and Reshmi Kazi all contributed to the online roundtable titled "Women and nuclear weapons policy," featured at: <http://thebulletin.org/women-and-nuclear-weapons-policy7165>.

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Author biography

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