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Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Gender Implications

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The world is constantly under the real or perceived threat of weapons of mass destruction. Nuclear weapons, in particular, are touted as the ultimate guarantee of a nation's security even though the majority of people regard them as being morally indefensible. [1]

What does gender have to do with WMD?

At first glance, the relationship between gender and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) may not be obvious. After all, the eruption of a nuclear bomb is likely to annihilate women men, children, animals and plants alike. [2] However once the symbolic value of WMD is examined, the gender dimension becomes apparent. Weapons in general tend to be associated with masculinity, which is socially constructed. Most of the buyers, owners and users of weapons are men. Armament and disarmament policies and practices are influenced by ideas about masculinity. [3] Weapons are considered to be symbols of masculinity and sexual potency. In 1998, when India detonated five nuclear devices, Hindu nationalist leader Balasaheb Thackeray is reported to have said 'we had to prove that we are not eunuchs.' [4]

According to Dr Carol Cohn of the Boston Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights, 'After early policy failures, it is... becoming increasingly recognised that the symbolic associations of [small arms and light weapons] with masculinity have political effects. Specifically, in relation to disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes, real barriers to effective [small arms and light weapons] disarmament are created by the ways in which masculine identities and roles have become conjoined with weapons possession for many (male) combatants.' [5]

It is difficult to carry out small arms disarmament; it is much more difficult to carry out disarmament where, as is the case with WMD, the weapons are the ultimate symbol of might and potency. Political masculinity is linked to preparedness to wage war. Cohn cites the United States election campaigns as illustrative of this tendency. She says:

'There is often... an anxious preoccupation with affirming manhood on the part of candidates for political office, for whom it is dangerous to be seen as "soft" or "wimpish".' [6]

In this context, a tacit understanding emerges that it is difficult for a political leader not to go to war when 'goaded' or 'provoked.' Diplomacy or negotiation are seen as 'effeminate' security strategies. Indeed, 'US culture has never accorded diplomacy the strong, muscular attributes that are heaped on soldiering. US movies are not filled with brawny movie stars playing heroes in the diplomatic corps.' [7]

It is not only political discussions about WMD that are gendered; professional discussions also follow the strict masculinity code. Cohn relates the story of a male physicist involved in nuclear strategy. The physicist reported having 'felt like

a woman' when his observation about the potential millions of human beings killed instantly in a nuclear attack was met with an uncomfortable silence. He said that since then he was careful never to 'blurt' out anything like that again. According to Cohn, even worse than expressing concern for human bodies, the scientist 'evinced some of the characteristics on the "female" side of the dichotomies - in his "blurting" he was being impulsive, uncontrolled, emotional, concrete, upset and attentive to fragile human bodies. Thus, the hegemonic discourse of gender positioned him as feminine, which he found doubly threatening.

It was not only a threat to his own sense of self as masculine, his gender identity; it also positioned him in the devalued or subordinate position in the discourse.' [8]

Proliferation of WMD

Even the question of who can and who cannot have WMD is gendered. Some nations consider themselves to be entitled to develop and possess WMD and to have the duty to disarm certain other nations of their WMD. According to Cohn,

'In drawing a distinction between "the Self" and the (generally non-Western) "Unruly Other", the prevailing arguments against proliferation appear patronising, ethno-racist and contemptuous. Not only does non-proliferation discourse draw on Occidentalist portrayals of third world actors; it does so through the medium of gender-laden terminology. For example, the nuclear possessors' Self is responsible, prudent, rational, advanced, mature, restrained, technologically and bureaucratically competent (and thus "hegemonically masculine"). By contrast, the Unruly Others are irrational, unpredictable, emotional, uncontrolled, immature, primitive, undisciplined, incompetent, technologically backward (marks of an inferior or "subordinated" masculinity).' [9]

Where are women?

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security makes it clear that security is women's business. It is dangerous to accept that it is alright for discussions about WMD to be confined to the political and scientific spaces that they currently primarily inhabit, or to overlook the gendered nature of these discussions. They are based on flawed notions of masculinity and they have fundamental implications for the survival of humanity. Women's rights advocates must increase their presence and impact within national and global security discourse if peace is to become a reality.

Notes:

1. . Cohn et al. (2005) 'The Relevance of Gender for Eliminating Weapons of Mass Destruction.' Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission.
2. This is not to discount the fact that in many ways, men and women are affected differently by conflict or by the effects of the testing of nuclear, chemical or biological weapons. For instance nuclear testing has worse repercussions on women's reproductive health than it has on men's, and women are more likely than men to develop fatal cancer when exposed to radiation. However this article

focuses on the prevalent gendered approaches to discourse on weapons of mass destruction.

3. See note 1.

4. Ibid. p. 3.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid. p. 5.

7. Ibid. p. 6.

8. Ibid p. 8.

9. Ibid.

Additional article referred to: Myrtinnen, Henri (2003) 'Disarming Masculinities.'