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Might Feminism Revive Arms Control?¹

Why greater inclusion of women in
nuclear policy is necessary and how to
achieve it

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Introduction: Women in International Security

The link between gender and security has become a prominent issue in the public debate over the last decades. On the most basic level, it is understood as greater inclusion of women in security policy decision-making processes. The underlying motivation to promote a greater role for women in foreign policy is manifold, ranging from social justice arguments about equal political representation of different societal groups, to the benefits of diversity in fostering creativity and innovation, to the special characteristics of women's leadership styles and their distinct communication skills.

On the international level, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda adopted by the United Nations Security Council (Resolution 1325) twenty years ago has played a central role in raising awareness about the positive impact on peace and security by the increased inclusion of women. More specifically, the WPS Agenda for the first time recognized the disproportionate impact of armed conflict on women and acknowledged the undervalued and underutilized role of women in conflict prevention and peace processes². The European Union adopted its first Gender Action Plan in 2010, renewing it every five years. In 2018, the African Union adopted a ten-year strategy on gender equality and women's empowerment. In 2014, Sweden became the first country in the world to adopt a feminist foreign policy as its official foreign policy, with Canada, France, and Mexico following suit.

Despite these positive developments, a gender approach to security policy has been relatively limited. While Resolution 1325 encouraged states to adopt national action plans to mainstream gender in their foreign and security policies, as of January 2020, only 43% of UN member states have done so.³ A 2018 study on gender diversity in US national security policy found that while awareness about the gender and security nexus has grown among national security professionals, many are still not entirely clear on how to apply it in practice and where to find or what to do with the relevant data⁴.

The international security field is not unified, and the role of women in this area has been researched and acknowledged in some spheres more than in others. For example, it is widely cited that women's participation in peace processes makes the concluded agreements 35% more likely to last at least 15 years⁵. The trade in small arms and light weapons also has a distinct impact on women who more often than men fall victim to gender-based violence. This understanding has been reflected in several international treaties, such as the Arms Trade Treaty and the Mine Ban Treaty. Portraying women not as victims of a conflict but rather as important players leads to instructive findings. For example, women working in the security sector often have access to population groups and areas that men cannot access. This enables them to gather intelligence from different sources about potential security risks⁶. At the same time, women can be ardent supporters of military action. A study conducted in 2017 by Scott Sagan from Stanford University and Benjamin Valentino from Dartmouth College found that American women would equally - or even to a greater extent than men - support a nuclear strike against Iran.⁷

Nonproliferation and disarmament of weapons of mass destruction - and more specifically of nuclear weapons - have been at the core of the international security architecture since the early days of the Cold War. Despite its significance, the discussion on gender and nuclear weapons has thus far been very limited, both in terms of research and practical implementation. This article seeks to explain the reasons why this might be the case, examine where the discussion stands today, and propose solutions on what could be done to move it forward.

Current trends in nuclear policy: disarmament or rearmament?

Many observers and academics speak of the start of a nuclear arms race in current times, with the potential erosion of the 'nuclear taboo' as an unofficial practice by nuclear weapons states that had gradually emerged over the second half of the 20th century⁸. The new arms race takes place against the background of the unraveling of the arms control and nonproliferation regime, as many treaties

concluded during or in the aftermath of the Cold War are abandoned, stalled, or rendered dysfunctional. These include the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, negotiations over the Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone, and, increasingly, the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). More recent agreements, such as the nuclear deal with Iran or New START, are being undone or are unlikely to be extended after they expire.

While the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) was adopted in 2017, this was undertaken out of frustration among the non-nuclear weapons states about the lack of progress within the NPT. The collapse of the old treaties on one hand and the adoption of the TPNW on the other clearly highlight the polarization of the nuclear debate⁹. While there are fewer advocates of a gradual step-by-step process, abolitionists as well as nuclear weapons supporters have strengthened their positions. Such polarization creates an even less conducive atmosphere for future cooperation. However, new ideas and new actors might reinvigorate the debate. Women have different experiences throughout life than men, and their potential for ‘adaptive creativity’ is very likely to have been underestimated¹⁰. Involving more women into the nuclear policy might lead to new, not yet accounted for perspectives and possibilities.

Making the case for more women in nuclear policy

There are several lines of argumentation about why it is important to include a gendered approach in the nuclear field.

1) Representation and rights-based arguments

Since women constitute half of the world’s population, they should be equally engaged in nuclear policy discussions as in any other discussion that affects their lives. Currently, on the international level, nuclear disarmament negotiations are predominantly conducted by men. In the First Committee of the United Nations that deals with disarmament, nonproliferation, and arms control issues, women constitute only 32% of all delegates – the smallest proportion among all UN Committees¹¹. As the UN Institute for Disarmament Research found, the proportion of women is negatively correlated with the increase in the importance of the position, moving from diplomatic personnel to ambassadors, posts in the foreign ministry, and heads of governments. This correlation, however, has its own exceptions. For example, as will be discussed later, women leaders played a crucial role in the negotiations of the Nuclear Ban-Treaty as well as the nuclear agreement with Iran. In addition, the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs has been headed by women twice, namely by Izumi Nakamitsu since 2017 and by Angela Kane from 2012 until 2015.

Women in the Iran nuclear deal

The Joint and Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was concluded between EU 3+3 (France, Germany, the UK, China, Russia, and the USA) and Iran in 2015, in large part thanks to the years-long quiet diplomacy by the EU, coupled with increased engagement by the US brought by the Obama administration later on. Several key roles in the discussions were played by women negotiators. The EU, which acted as a neutral facilitator of negotiations, was over the years represented by several female High Representatives for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, including Catherine Ashton (until 2014) and later Federica Mogherini. In addition, the Secretary General of the European External Action Service Helga Schmid negotiated the details of the agreement with Iran. Mogherini’s advisor Nathalie Tocci also supported her in the process. On the American side, Wendy Sherman, the Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs and later the US Deputy Secretary of State in the Obama government, led the negotiations team.

2) Diversity fosters innovation

With the growing tensions in international nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation negotiations and the eroding legal basis of this regime, the field is increasingly in need of new ideas. As studies show, diversity leads to innovation¹² and prevents groupthink. Therefore, greater participation of women in nuclear policy might pave the path for new perspectives and ways to make progress. Overall, diversity means inclusion not only of women but also of other groups such as young people, whose potential for innovation cannot be overestimated, and indigenous communities, who have often been the most significantly affected by nuclear weapons production and testing.

The conclusion of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons sets an example of innovation, perseverance, and conviction by its supporters. The treaty emerged out of three Humanitarian Initiative conferences that aimed to refocus the discussion around nuclear weapons from their perceived military utility towards the catastrophic humanitarian impact of their use. The message of the humanitarian initiative was very appealing to women, civil society organizations, young people, and many states from all parts of the world, who all subsequently engaged in the negotiations of the treaty to ban this class of weapons at the United Nations.

3) Radiation impacts women differently than men

The impact of a nuclear weapon detonation is not the same for women and men. While the immediate consequences of such a detonation would be catastrophic for all, in the long term, women and girls would suffer more from the impact of ionizing radiation on their health. This has been confirmed by different studies¹³. One study that focused in particular on the health impacts in the aftermath of the atomic bombing in Japan has shown that the risk of developing cancer among women and girls was twice as high as among men and boys¹⁴.

In addition, in the areas where nuclear bomb testing occurred, women and men were exposed differently to the detrimental impact of radiation due to their cultural and social roles. For example, in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, women were stigmatized, as it was believed they could not bear healthy children after being exposed to ionizing radiation as a result of nuclear bombing of the cities in 1945¹⁵. In the Bryansk region of Russia, which was affected by the Chernobyl accident, men were more exposed to the ionizing radiation than women, as they were more likely to eat mushrooms from the forest or fish caught in the region's lakes. In the Marshall Islands, where nuclear testing occurred, cultural custom dictates that women eat different parts of meat from men, including bones and organ meat where radioactive isotopes tend to accumulate¹⁶.

4) Feminism offers a shift in thinking about nuclear weapons

As the feminist argument about nuclear weapons goes, one of the biggest obstacles to nuclear disarmament is the association of nuclear weapons with power.¹⁷ These weapons are perceived as an ultimate guarantor of state security, as a deterrent against an external enemy. It is, however, neglected that if a nuclear weapon is detonated, it will be detrimental to all, including those who pushed the button. Thus, a human security that looks primarily at the security of individuals should be the starting point. Potential environmental and human costs of a nuclear weapon detonation would outweigh any perceived value of the weapon as a deterrent. The current global crisis, as argued by advocates of antimilitarism, supports this line of thinking: because the healthcare sector in many countries has been underinvested in, human lives are now lost, while trillions of dollars are still being poured into weapons manufacturing and trade¹⁸. The calls to implement a ceasefire to all conflicts in the time of COVID-19 pandemics, stop weapons production, and invest more in healthcare are the best ways to provide for security today.

The feminist argument that highlights the potential environmental and human risks associated with nuclear weapons prompted critics to label opposition to nuclear weapons as 'feminine,' thereby reinforcing stereotypes about perceived gender roles. Another point made by researchers concerns professional jargon in the nuclear community that is gendered in itself. Thus, top nuclear experts are often referred to as nuclear priests or greybeards, while the concept of 'hard' vs. 'soft' security is

associated with ‚female‘/‚male‘ domains, with ‚hard security‘ being implicitly understood as more important.¹⁹

Feminists argue that it is not enough to simply have more women at the table, and nothing short of a structural reshaping of the entire international system is necessary to meaningfully account for women’s experiences and make the international system more inclusive for them²⁰. While it is hard to imagine what such a structural shift might look like - even assuming that all relevant actors endorse it - the conclusion of the TPNW provides a case for how new thinking can become a practice.

TPNW as an inclusive treaty for all

The TPNW, or Ban Treaty, was adopted at the United Nations Conference in 2017. It emerged from three Humanitarian Initiative conferences held in Norway, Mexico, and Austria in 2013-2014. Until the adoption of the TPNW, there had been no international legal norm prohibiting nuclear weapons, despite similar norms existing for other types of weapons of mass destruction (biological and chemical).

The Ban Treaty came into being thanks to the efforts of diverse actors, including diplomats, civil society organizations, women, and young people. At the UN Conference, 122 states voted in favor of the Treaty. The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017 for its work “to draw attention to the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons” and “ground-breaking efforts to achieve a treaty-based prohibition of such weapons.” Two women received the prize at the ceremony in Oslo: ICAN’s Executive Director Beatrice Fihn and disarmament activist and survivor of atomic bombing of Hiroshima Setsuko Thurlow.

While during the negotiations of the Treaty, women were still underrepresented among the delegates, mirroring the overall trend in the global nuclear policy field, there were more women in leadership positions, including the chairperson of the Assembly and heads of the most active delegations of participating States, including Ireland, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, and Thailand.

The Treaty recognizes the disproportionate impact that nuclear weapons have on women and girls and commits to supporting the effective participation of women in nuclear disarmament.

From ‘Manels’ to ‘Marticles’: What obstacles women in nuclear policy face

To understand the challenges of including more women in international nuclear negotiations, it is worth looking at their standing in this policy area within the states that possess nuclear weapons. The United States provides a good example. It ranks 15th in the world according to the gender inequality index which is, along with the United Kingdom, the most gender-equal society among all states that possess nuclear weapons (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, North Korea, Israel, Pakistan, and India)²¹. Nevertheless, while in the US women constitute roughly half of graduates in political science, among International Relations scholars, they comprise only 30% and are much less cited in news and scholarly publications than their male colleagues²². In addition, as one survey shows, within the International Relations field, women tend to prioritize different issue areas than men. More women opt for studying transnational actors, international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations, while men tend to focus more on U.S. foreign policy and international security²³. Thus, gender differences are visible already at very early career stages.

Female experts feature much more rarely on foreign policy panel discussions, with all-male panels still commonplace. When it comes to nuclear security policy in particular, men also dominate the debate in terms of representation at panel discussions (with all-male panels ironically referred to as ‘manels’) as

well as in media outlets. A short experiment conducted by two nuclear experts serves as a case in point. In a course of one month, they monitored articles on nuclear weapons published by popular media outlets in the US, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and others. It was found that during this month, at least 28 articles on nuclear security policy cited only male nuclear experts, prompting the authors of the report to coin a term for such ‘man-articles’ or ‘marticles’.²⁴

Nuclear security practitioners in the US cite multiple reasons why women are underrepresented in the sector. One is the perceived connection between male-female and hard-soft policy issues and informal institutional practices that perpetuate this division. Within nuclear security, differentiation is also made between nonproliferation, arms control, and what is understood as the core of the policy – the nuclear posture and deterrence policy. The first two are more welcoming to women than the latter, where military experience and technical expertise are highly valued²⁵.

This is not to say that women are less represented in nuclear deterrence policy because they are inherently more peaceful than men and are thus drawn towards more ‘cooperative’ aspects of nuclear security, such as non-proliferation or arms control. Psychological research demonstrates that women generally seem to be less interested in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) professions, despite performing equally with men in the related subjects (see box below). Nuclear posture requires greater knowledge of technical characteristics of nuclear weapons and military planning. With fewer women entering STEM fields and serving in the military, there are also fewer women working on nuclear deterrence. The overemphasis on technical aspects is in fact pointing at the sustained perception of nuclear weapons as an asset for national security. Janne Nolan, who worked for a long time at the Departments of State and Defense, cited the habit of “*putting technical precision above understanding the severe challenges of effective diplomatic strategy. To the degree it has a gender component, I don’t know. But it’s not good training in terms of what I would prefer to see as an approach to understanding nuclear security.*”²⁶

A detailed knowledge of nuclear history is considered a must, while significant experience and insider information are prioritized over new ideas.²⁷ These might also be the reasons why the field is dominated by older white men and appears less attractive for young people. Some young people who work in nuclear security often feel disappointed with their roles and look for opportunities to change their careers²⁸.

Work-life balance is another aspect that prevents many women from seeking a career in the field, specifically given ‘the long hours, the classified nature of the work, the need to be physically present in the office, unpredictable schedules, frequent international travel, and discriminatory attitudes towards women with family obligations’²⁹.

Women and STEM

Within the nuclear security policy field and among nuclear experts, women are dramatically underrepresented. While the evidence was found only for the United States, there are good reasons to assume it is also the case in many other countries. Technical expertise about nuclear technology is cited as one of the barriers that prevents women from entering or advancing in the field. Research on women’s representation in STEM professions might be instructive for gender imbalance in the nuclear field as well.

Women are underrepresented in STEM professions in many countries around the world, ranging from New Zealand to the United Arab Emirates. Surprisingly, the more gender-equal a society is, the fewer women enter the STEM field. While at the high school level boys and girls on average perform equally in math and science, for many girls, these subjects are not their best when it comes to their relative strengths. Even if performing equally well at math as boys, girls are still more likely to perform even better in reading. Scientists suggest that gender-equal societies empower women to do what they like

the most, while in countries with lower gender equality, women oftentimes enter the STEM field as a means to obtain financial independence.³⁰

What can be done and who can do it?

More research on the gender and disarmament nexus is certainly needed. But whoever can already support efforts to include more women in the nuclear field should act now. Below is a list (by far non-exhaustive) of recommendations and best practices drawn from various sources on how women can be included more meaningfully into debates about nuclear disarmament, nonproliferation, and arms control.

- At the national level, careers for women in the nuclear security policy sector should be encouraged. This can be done through introducing work-life balance programs at the relevant departments of relevant ministries. Those programs should take into account the needs of women and men for professional development as well as private life. A human capital strategy, such as the one introduced in the Pentagon by Michele Flournoy when she was the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, serves as a good example. It includes flexible scheduling options, mentoring, and training opportunities and resulted in an improved performance of the organization.³¹
- Reporters and researchers should pay attention to the gender balance among the experts they cite in their work. Public recognition is extremely important. It helps to break gender stereotypes and establish role models for young girls and women who consider careers in the sector. To save time for the search of female experts, there are dedicated expert lists and organizations, with nuclear disarmament being listed as a separate search category. Among them are: [WomenAlsoKnowStuff](#) – a database of women experts in various fields, with search possible according to the country, focus area, institution, etc.; [SheSource](#) – an expert list by the Women Media Center; [the Brussels Binder](#) – a female experts database (mostly from Europe); and [Informed Opinions](#) – a Canadian women expert database.
- Conference organizers should ensure panels have equal participation of women and men. A good practice is to also organize all-female panels that deal with nuclear policy and not only with gender equality in the field. To highlight their efforts to achieve gender parity, NGOs and individuals working in the field can join the International Gender Champions, which has a dedicated [Disarmament Impact Group](#) where they can also make a pledge committing to a specific action to promote gender equality.
- At international nuclear negotiations, such as the NPT review process, side events on gender and disarmament, nonproliferation, and arms control should continue. States should also be encouraged to submit working papers – such as the Republic of Ireland [paper](#) on Gender in the NPT – and consider including more women in their delegations to the conference. Also, to avoid lengthy negotiations, the general statements of the delegations can be posted online and the conference could thus be shortened, enabling greater participation of female and male delegates with family obligations³².
- Educational and mentorship programs for young women considering entering the nuclear policy field should continue and expand. There are already many possibilities such as the OSCE/UNODA sponsored [training](#) program in peace and security with a special focus on women in disarmament or the Robin Copeland Memorial [Fellowship](#). In addition, other

programs and schools on arms control and nuclear history that don't specifically focus on gender or the promotion of women need to include a gender component in their curricula.

- Other practices that have been already introduced in the business sector and other policy fields are also applicable to the nuclear field, such as gender-blind hiring and disaggregation of data by gender (for example in nuclear negotiations delegations).
- More recommendations and pledges that organizations can make can be found in the [Resource Pack](#) for gender and disarmament developed by International Gender Champions.

Conclusions:

Observers and public intellectuals speak of the changing world order, in which the COVID-19 pandemic might be just a sample of what is still to come. For the nuclear field, this inevitable change might be exacerbated by the previously collapsing nuclear arms control regime. New ideas are desperately needed, and new actors have the ability to bring them.

Women have different experiences than men throughout their lives and they represent half of the world's population. Their greater participation in the nuclear discussions on the national and international levels might foster new thinking and innovative ideas. In addition, any potential nuclear weapon detonation would impact women differently than men. It is thus only fair that their perspectives on nuclear weapons policy become more pronounced.

There are many obstacles that prevent more women from entering and advancing in the nuclear field. Some of them are rooted in structural inequalities and personal - often unconscious - biases. While changing structures and beliefs about the relevance of gender to nuclear weapons is a slow process, it will accelerate with the change in practice. The necessary tools are already there waiting for the advocates of gender equality to seize them.

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