Women and weapons: Redressing the gender gap: An Indian response
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Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists 2014 70: 8 originally published online 12 August 2014
DOI: 10.1177/0096340214546831

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>> Version of Record - Sep 1, 2014
OnlineFirst Version of Record - Aug 12, 2014

What is This?
Women and weapons: Redressing the gender gap

An Indian response

Reshmi Kazi

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 (2014), Reshmi Kazi of India, 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
conflict, disarmament, India, nuclear policy, nuclear war, nuclear weapons, Pakistan, peace, stereotypes, women

Nuclear war and nuclear terrorism threaten women just as much as men. Indeed, women may be more susceptible than men to certain nuclear dangers, such as cancers associated with radiation (Nuclear Information and Resource Service, 2011). But women’s influence over nuclear policy is disarmally low. This holds true at both the national and international levels, and in the realms of politics, military affairs, and science and technology.

In countries where women lack equal opportunity—where they are expected to remain submissive to men in all matters—it comes as no surprise that women lack political influence on nuclear questions. In India, women gained full suffrage in 1950. But women’s representation in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of parliament, stands at only 11 percent, and legislation that would guarantee women 33 percent of seats in the Lok Sabha and in state legislatures has been stalled since 1996. In Pakistan, women gained the vote upon national independence in 1947, but women’s voting rights can face stiff opposition even today. Particularly in rural areas, it is often considered “un-Islamic” for women to vote.

Not all societies are quite so male-dominated, but it’s hard to think of a country where women influence nuclear policy, or strategic and military decision
making, in proportion to their numbers. Why? Well, one can argue with some validity that relatively few women possess the scientific background, military education, or experience in politics and diplomacy that are necessary to participate in nuclear weapons policy making. That is, one can argue that women aren’t entitled to representation in nuclear decision making simply on the basis of being women.

But such reasoning only goes so far. In many countries, women’s low influence in the political and security arena is based on gender stereotypes as much as on legitimate questions of women’s experience. In the traditional households of many nations, the man has always been perceived as the chief. He has defined social and economic roles for other family members. He has projected strength, reason, prudence, and protection. Such stereotyping has carried over into modern political settings, where a (usually male) leader controls his followers and delegates roles for them. Women, meanwhile, are portrayed as weak, emotional, irrational, and requiring protection—incapable of making decisions for themselves or others.

This sort of “natural” differentiation between the sexes has permeated all aspects of nuclear policy making. For example, the Indian and Pakistani delegations to the 2013 Oslo and 2014 Nayarit conferences on the humanitarian impacts of nuclear detonations contained no women (Reaching Critical Will, 2013; Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2014). More broadly, if a man describes nuclear death and destruction with a clinical, abstract term such as “collateral damage,” his words convey a strong, confident, masculine message. If a woman uses a term such as “mass murder” to describe the same events, her words can convey an emotional, feminine message. The woman’s words therefore become less worthwhile—even if they are more realistic.

Stereotypes aside, some research indicates that women are indeed less aggressive than men—one recent study (McDonald et al., 2012) concludes that “men are biologically programmed to be warriors.” In 2007, researchers from Brown University and elsewhere published the results of their research into people’s responses to simulated war games. The research indicated that “high-testosterone individuals are more likely to engage in unprovoked attacks against their opponents” (McDermott et al., 2007: 35). But if in fact it’s true that women are more peace-loving than men—less conflict-prone, more humane and diplomatic—the rational response is to accelerate the disarmament process by ensuring women’s participation in nuclear policy making.

Women have already played key roles in developing international instruments such as the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention and the Chemical Weapons Convention. Women could play at least as crucial a role in nuclear disarmament. But it’s hard for them to do so as long as diplomacy, dialogue, and a sense of interdependence among nations—the very things on which disarmament depends—are assigned low value due to their association with femininity. What’s needed, ultimately, is for traditional concepts of power and strength to recede in policy making. Instead, the good of human beings should take center stage. Achieving sustainable peace depends on redressing inequalities of all kinds, including those between women and men.
On a more immediate level, how can women’s influence on nuclear decision making be increased? I propose two sets of actions, one to be carried out by governments and another by women themselves.

Governments must recognize that women are important stakeholders in peace, conflict resolution, and nuclear disarmament. More specifically, governments should encourage women’s direct involvement, at the international level, in nonproliferation and disarmament efforts. Also, when governments perform cost–benefit analysis for military expenditures, they should take into account the gender dimensions of these expenditures—for example, many perceive as irresponsible the Pakistani government’s decision to invest in research, development, and deployment strategies for tactical nuclear weapons. (With Pakistan suffering from poverty, poor public health, high unemployment, and low education levels, it makes little sense for Islamabad to incur huge defense expenditures for “small” nuclear weapons.) Additionally, governments should integrate into their nuclear policy deliberations the views of nongovernmental organizations such as the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, Reaching Critical Will, and Hibakusha Stories. Doing so would introduce into nuclear deliberations the humanitarian impact that a nuclear conflict would have on women and other sectors of the population.

Meanwhile, if women are to empower themselves and contribute meaningfully to nuclear decision making, they can begin by fulfilling their roles—traditional in many societies—as guardians of morals and ethics. That is, by highlighting the unconscionable possibility of nuclear war, women can help their nations avoid grave strategic errors and also advance gender equality. But beyond that, women must become more gender-conscious in their politics, throwing their support to women candidates who share their views on issues such as disarmament. More female students must enter fields such as military planning, physics, arms control, and security. Ultimately, women who favor disarmament must be in a position to create the changes that they wish to see enacted. This means casting aside any inhibitions they feel about acting ambitiously and asserting themselves. It means dispensing with any sense of burden that they experience on account of their sex.

Due to geopolitical complexities, disarmament appears a distant dream today. But realizing the dream will become less far-fetched if women can exert their rightful influence over nuclear weapons policy. Indeed, it sometimes seems that women who reach the highest levels of policy making, far from being dismissed as weak or ignored on account of their gender, are listened to more attentively than their male counterparts. One might argue that these women are accorded respect only because they speak from very authoritative platforms, and that women without so much power are still ignored too often—but isn’t this the very reason that women must seek greater representation in positions of authority?

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.

Funding
This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

References

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