

LEARN ABOUT NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Gender and sex

The words “gender” and “sex” are commonly used in our language, but before we move on to discussing what gender has to do with nuclear weapons, let’s have a closer look at the concepts:

Sex	Gender
Biological, congenital similarities and differences between women and men Example: Women and men have different hormone balances (different levels of testosterone and oestrogen). This makes it possible for men, who have higher levels of testosterone, to develop muscular mass and become physically strong.	Socially and culturally defined roles and characteristics associated with men and women. Example: Women are often seen as caring and nurturing by nature, while this rather results from a traditional role of women as responsible for the household and children, and from the upbringing of girl children with mum-dad-kids games, dolls and playing kitchens.

What do we call male and female?

Gender is not only about individual identity or what a society teaches us a man or woman, boy or girl should be like. Gender is also a way of structuring relations of power – whether that is within families, where the man is often considered the head of the household, or in societies writ large, where men tend to be the ones in whose hands political, economic, religious and other forms of cultural power are concentrated.

These two phenomena – individual identity and structures of power – are significantly related to each other. Hence it is the meanings and characteristics culturally associated with masculinity that make it appear “natural” and just for men to have the power to govern their families and their societies. That is, if as a society we come to believe that people with biologically male bodies are the ones most likely to be strong, rational, prudent, responsible, objective, and willing to fight if necessary (also known as “masculine”), we will think it right that they are the ones to rule. Conversely, if as a society we come to believe that people with female bodies are weak, emotional, irrational, passive, nurturing, and in need of protection (also known as “feminine”), we will think it natural and right that most women’s lives should be limited to the private sphere of home and family.

A next crucial step in thinking about gender is to realise that its effects go beyond the meanings ascribed to male and female bodies, and the concomitant ways that power is (unequally) distributed amongst men and women. Gender also functions as a symbolic system: our ideas about gender permeate and shape our ideas about many other aspects of society beyond male-female relations – including politics, weapons, and warfare.¹

If you ask students in high school or college to categorise a list of words either as "masculine" or "feminine", few variations occur between individual lists. Both girls and boys normally hand in a list looking somewhat like this:

Male	Female
Thought	Emotion
Active	Passive
Rational	Irrational
Strength	Weakness
Courage	Fear
Intelligence	Cunning
Self	Other
Primary	Secondary
Serious	Playful
Concrete	Abstract
Science	Humanities
Philosophy	Myth
Order	Disorder
Dominant	Subordinate
Confident	Fearful
Truth	Imagination
Centre	Margin
Master	Slave
Teacher	Student

The easiest way to see this is to look at some of the adjectives associated with masculinity (e.g., strong, rational, prudent, active, objective) and femininity (e.g., weak, irrational, impulsive, passive, subjective). What is immediately apparent is:

- they constitute dichotomous pairs of characteristics which are seen as mutually exclusive (e.g., strong/weak, active/passive, etc.)
- In each case, the "masculine" side of the pair is valued more highly than the "feminine" one.
- The very meaning of masculinity and femininity is defined through its relation to its "opposite". That is, they are dependent upon each other for their meaning: masculinities do not exist except in contrast to femininities and vice versa. This means that a man could not be seen as insufficiently masculine or "wimpy" unless we have an idea of the "feminine" characteristics "real" men must avoid.

War = masculine, peace = feminine???

The final report of the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission concludes " In particular, women's organisations have often played a vital role – from the Hague peace conferences of the

19th century to the present time. The role of women in the maintenance and promotion of peace and security was recognised by the Security Council in Resolution 1325 (2000). Women have rightly observed that armament policies and the use of armed force have often been influenced by misguided ideas about masculinity and strength. An understanding of and emancipation from this traditional perspective might help to remove some of the hurdles on the road to disarmament and non-proliferation.”² Yet, the role of women is often ignored or forgotten.

Some brief examples illustrate this. When India exploded five nuclear devices in May 1998, Hindu nationalist leader Balasaheb Thackeray explained “we had to prove that we are not eunuchs”. An Indian newspaper cartoon depicted Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee propping up his coalition government with a nuclear bomb. “Made with Viagra” the caption read. Images such as these rely on the widespread metaphoric equation of political and military power with sexual potency and masculinity. India, one of the most recent states to acquire nuclear weapons, felt the need to prove it was not a weak country; not a state of snatched masculinity. This is why a gender perspective is important when discussing nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.

Most states want to appear as strong, respectful and with the power of influencing the rest of the world. Possession of nuclear weapons creates a hierarchy of power in the world: the one capable of destroying the world most severely, also is the one with the greatest power. The fact that the US, a state that already has the world’s strongest economy and the world’s largest conventional army, claims to need nuclear weapons to protect its national security sends a clear signal to other states of the power of nuclear weapons. Acquiring one’s own nuclear weapons, then, becomes a way to show that one’s state has the same strength, the same power, the same masculinity. It is in “hard” terms of power, strength and potency that nuclear weapons are discussed.

The international security political debate often ignores “soft” aspects, such as feelings of fear or hopelessness, as well as consequences of nuclear weapons use counted in human lives or physical or psychological health problems. Since weapons in general and nuclear weapons in particular are associated with masculinity and strength, disarmament becomes an expression of the opposite: of femininity and weakness. These are not words any state wants to be associated with – which is one reason disarmament remains an unattractive alternative. We must be aware of, and find ways to address, these gendered assumptions if we are to transform the intellectual and political processes that have so long impeded effective disarmament of nuclear weapons.

We start with a true story, told in the article [The Relevance of Gender for Eliminating Weapons of Mass Destruction](#) by Carol Cohn with Felicity Hill and Sara Ruddick. This is the story of a member of a group of nuclear strategists, a white male physicist: “Several colleagues and I were working on modelling counterforce nuclear attacks, trying to get realistic estimates of the number of immediate fatalities that would result from different deployments. At one point, we re-modelled a particular attack, using slightly different assumptions, and found that instead of there being 36 million immediate fatalities, there would only be 30 million. And everybody was sitting around nodding, saying, ‘Oh yes, that’s great, only 30 million,’ when all of a sudden, I heard what we were saying. And I blurted out, ‘Wait, I’ve just heard how we’re talking – Only 30 million! Only 30 million human beings killed instantly?’ Silence fell upon the room. Nobody said a word. They didn’t even look at me. It was awful. I felt like a woman.” The physicist added that henceforth he was careful never to blurt out anything like that again.

The male physician made the mistake of acting “soft” in a context where military strategies where

the focus and where consequences in terms of suffering and death were avoided. He himself understood his actions as if acting like a woman – and being like a woman was obviously no positive thing in this context. Not only had he been thinking about human suffering. He had also expressed his feelings in an uncontrolled, emotional and spontaneous way – characteristics all associated with femininity.

Another example of use of military force as a means of proving power is the US military invasion of Iraq. Claiming an Iraqi program for weapons of mass destruction the US, the UK and a number of allied states invaded Iraq on 20 March 2003, despite the protests of the UN and most of the world. The UN weapon inspections in Iraq (UNMOVIC) announced in January the same year that no evidence could be found for a weapons of mass destruction program, but added that many questions remained. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported similarly. The US and the UK decided not to wait; weapons inspections simply were not powerful enough measures to counter a rogue state. A military invasion would be a much stronger way of proving who has the power. Weapons inspections were considered soft and feminine. A military invasion with bombers and machine guns, on the other hand, is a hard and masculine message that everyone can interpret as power and strength.

Let's look at another example, from popular culture, to show how weapons and wars are connected with masculinity. We don't really see muscular, sweaty men acting diplomatically to solve crises and conflicts in Hollywood movies. No, the traditionally male, masculine characters pick up their big guns and shoot down the enemy. Talking and negotiations are rather done by women or by skinny men with glasses and parting down the middle (James Bond being an exception who masters both talking and shooting). In other words, consulting, negotiating, acknowledging interdependence and – worst of all – depending on others, are activities that are culturally marked down as weak and lacking in masculinity.

Too few women – resolution 1325

Another important factor when talking about a gender perspective on nuclear weapons and disarmament is the gender balance in decision-making bodies. There is no saying the world would be a more peaceful place if ruled by women, even if that opinion is heard once in a while. There's also nothing saying we would see a faster disarmament process if women made the decisions. But one thing is for sure: we live in a world where half the population is women. But we surely do not live in a world where half of the decision-makers are women.

As we concluded above, nuclear disarmament is traditionally seen as a hard and masculine issue. That few women hold high positions might be explained by a number of reasons. It might be hard for women to get a space in a traditionally male dominated arena of security policy. It could also be that fewer women approach this field, since women often are brought up to be more interested in soft issues such as development and aid.

On 31 October 2000, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) unanimously adopted Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. Resolution 1325 marks the first time the Security Council addressed the disproportionate and unique impact of armed conflict on women, recognised the under-valued and under-utilised contributions women make to conflict prevention, peacekeeping, conflict resolution and peace-building, and stressed the importance of their equal and full participation as active agents in peace and security.

When looking out from the gallery over the gathered state delegations to the Geneva-based Conference on Disarmament, it stands awfully clear that the number of women in the international disarmament machinery is still very small, despite the aims of resolution 1325. Out of 65 member states, only a handful have female heads of delegations. There is still a long way to go until half of the world's population – the women – are represented to the same extent as the other half – the men – in decision-making bodies.

¹ [The Relevance of Gender for Eliminating Weapons of Mass Destruction](http://www.wmdcommission.org/) by Carol Cohn with Felicity Hill and Sara Ruddick <http://www.wmdcommission.org/> (No. 38)

² Weapons of Terror – Freeing the world of Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Weapons (2006) Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission. P. 160.