

# **A SOCIAL INJUSTICE—RACE, GENDER AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS**

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## BACKGROUND

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)<sup>1</sup> is the first global, legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons and was adopted on 7 July 2017 at the United Nations by 122 states. The Treaty was negotiated in response to the concern of the international community on the catastrophic humanitarian consequences that would result from any use of nuclear weapons.

Traditionally nuclear weapons have been discussed in terms of “deterrence”, this discourse has enabled nuclear-armed states to justify their possession of them, claiming that nuclear weapons are necessary for “national security” and “strategic stability”. However, in recent years, the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons emerged as a new way of engaging in the topic and became a significant game changer.

Looking at the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons opened up the discussions and gave access to more voices and different groups of people, including those from many Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and, survivors of nuclear weapons use, testing and nuclear waste dumping, were able to share their experiences of the weapons. Faith-based organizations, young people and other civil society groups could also engage in the topic more effectively.

Despite nuclear-armed states taking offence to the humanitarian consequences of their weapons being discussed and gaining traction, it was clear then, as it is now, that this was a powerful approach. Discussing nuclear weapons in terms of their humanitarian consequences cracked open the decades-long stagnation in nuclear disarmament talks and led us to a treaty that prohibits the development, testing, production, stockpiling, stationing, transfer, assistance, use and the threat of use of nuclear weapons.<sup>2</sup>

The TPNW will enter into force once it has been ratified by 50 UN member states. In order to ensure that we reached this number and that the Treaty is universally accepted and becomes a new norm, it is imperative that more people from different walks of life, cultures and communities, are able to connect with the importance of nuclear disarmament and can relate it to their own lives.

As Arundhati Roy writes, “It is such supreme folly to believe that nuclear weapons are deadly only if they’re used. The fact that they exist at all, their very presence in our lives, will wreak more havoc than we can begin to fathom. Nuclear weapons pervade our thinking. Control our behaviour. Administer our societies. Inform our dreams. They bury themselves like meat hooks deep in the base of our brains. They are purveyors of madness. They are the ultimate colonizer.”<sup>3</sup>

One of the ways that we can help universalize the issue is by discussing nuclear weapons through a “social justice” lens, which includes, amongst others, applying a race and gender perspective.

More and more people are looking at the connections and the intersections between race and gender, and the prevalence of nuclear weapons. Looking at nuclear weapons as a social justice issue can bring new opportunities, and crucially more diverse groups of people to discuss the nature of nuclear weapons, and the policies and practices that sustain them. This paper introduces why and how racial and gender perspectives matter when discussing nuclear weapons and how better

awareness and understanding of the structural racist and patriarchal ideologies that underpin and “prop-up” nuclear weapons can help us achieve our goal of nuclear disarmament and sustain it.

## **WHY SOCIAL JUSTICE DISCOURSE MATTERS**

Research has shown that treating different forms of violence separately, in silos, clashes with the reality that the lines between different expressions of violence—from domestic to collective, political and structural violence—are very blurry and interlink. (A. Marc & A. Willman, 2010)<sup>4</sup>

It is within these differing expressions of violence where we can see a correlation between the violence that is prevalent in our societies such as structural discrimination, inequality, oppression, the unwillingness to reconcile colonial history and its legacies, the misuse of power and the violence of nuclear weapons.

Placing a social justice lens on nuclear weapons means identifying what are the factors in our society that act to obstruct peace, and work to exacerbate violence. The concept of a social justice approach, therefore, takes into account the social injustices that the existence, use, testing, dumping and modernizing of nuclear weapons create, and holds to account the historical and social responsibility of countries and corporations who benefit from these injustices.

## **RACISM, COLONIALISM**

Throughout history weapons have been used as a symbol of power, and have functioned to dominate others, allowing the perpetrator to take control of other people’s bodies, labor, property, land and resources in order to increase their own economic and social standing. However, proponents of nuclear weapons often overlook this reality; instead, they view their weapons as a symbol of achievement and superiority.

According to P. Williams, we should be asking ourselves these questions, “how have nuclear weapons been read as representative of the scientific achievement, military superiority and responsibility of white Europeans and their descendants? How have they also been interpreted as manifestations of the destructivity, racism and recklessness of white civilization?”<sup>5</sup>

Another example of taking a racial perspective on nuclear weapons is to look at the genocidal nature of nuclear weapons themselves. The very idea that a group of people or a nation is willing to destroy in whole or in part another group of people or nation, to obliterate their culture, their way of life, their racial, ethnic, religious identities, this is the definition of genocide,<sup>6</sup> and this alone has important racial and xenophobic undertones that require exploration.

For almost 50 years at the UN Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) the majority of governments have urged the minority of governments that have nuclear weapons to keep their promises under Article VI<sup>7</sup> of the NPT to disarm their nuclear arsenals. Despite these obligations, nuclear-armed states and their allies have rejected all efforts that challenge their monopoly on nuclear weapons.

Governments such as Britain, the US, France and others, have claimed that they have a “special right” to possess nuclear weapons and that they are “responsible” nuclear states. Therein lies the problem, leaders of nuclear-armed states see their nations as “morally” and “naturally” superior to others.<sup>8</sup> This is further evidenced every time we hear nuclear-armed states insist that nuclear weapons are essential for their security, but publicly show disdain for any country who they suspect of developing nuclear capacity. On every occasion, they hold them in contempt, threaten and, or execute economic sanctions, war and occupation.

Research by S. Biswas calls this, a “Nuclear Apartheid”<sup>9</sup> where non-proliferation policy maintains a distinction between societies that can and cannot be trusted to make sovereign nuclear decisions. In M. Bolton’s work this is described as “resulting in the contradictory claims that those states that have the largest arsenals of nuclear weapons deserve their place as self-proclaimed guardians of international security, while those that seek nuclear weapons are the greatest risk to that order”.<sup>10</sup>

This sentiment is further elaborated in a statement on nuclear weapons by the Black Alliance for Peace (BAP): “The United States is still the only nation to use an atomic weapon against human beings. Yet it reserves a self-declared right to determine which nations can and cannot develop the same capability. The international community has spoken out in opposition to that arrogant position by demanding the “denuclearization” of all nations that possess these inhumane weapons of mass destruction... The BAP supports this treaty [TPNW], and calls on all peace and anti-war activists to publicize the existence of this treaty”.<sup>11</sup>

The argument that there are “responsible” nuclear weapons states is incompatible with the testimonies and lived experiences of those who have been affected by nuclear weapons. The so-called responsible nuclear weapon states are also the same countries that have unapologetically used, dumped and tested their weapons on non-white populations in Africa, Asia-Pacific, and on native, indigenous and poor people’s land, in the United States and Australia. It is further exacerbated by the fact that they have refused to “adequately” acknowledge and give sufficient (if any) reparations to people that are still today affected by the legacy of their nuclear programs. In Kiribati, Fiji, French Polynesia and the Marshall Islands, there are still inexplicably high levels of cancers, birth defects and uninhabitable spaces.

There is also the issue of uranium mining, David Robinson writes, “nuclear weapons are the product of highly enriched uranium, and the plutonium, that can be processed from it. Most mining and milling of uranium is done on the lands of indigenous peoples. Communities of color bear a disproportionate share of the risks and health effects caused by radiation released during the mining and milling process”.<sup>12</sup> In this regard, Robinson states that nuclear weapons could not be possible without racism and that the whole nuclear industry is founded on it from the uranium fuel plants that are often located in communities of color, to indigenous communities targeted with atomic waste dumps.

Furthermore, today within the confines of the United Nations when it comes to discussions on weapon systems colonial attitudes are apparent. Prior to, and during the negotiations on the TPNW, there was a broad range of countries actively supporting it many of them were from the global south the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa, Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

When they called for nuclear disarmament, the response by nuclear-armed states and their allies

were very often dismissive and disparaging, referring to them as naïve and not understanding the issues. Within these statements they professed themselves as being the “important countries”, and by contrast relegated the views of their opponents (many of them former colonies) as irrelevant.

Perhaps most disturbing is that during the open-ended working group on nuclear disarmament<sup>13</sup> and during the negotiations on the TPNW<sup>14</sup> unofficial reports emerged that some countries from the global south had in fact come under pressure from their former colonizers, and others, to not participate positively in the discussions and the negotiations. With decades having passed since the violent occupation of many of these nations, it is alarming to note that the legacy of empire still plays out and is “alive and well” in our international policymaking.

## **GENDER**

“The negative impacts on our society of patriarchy and male privilege are perhaps nowhere more pervasive and pernicious than in the field of weapons, war, and militarism. By consequence, much of the discussion on disarmament perpetuates the highly problematic gender constructions of men who are violent and powerful and women that are vulnerable and need to be protected. Gender perspectives in disarmament, peace, and security must be about exposing and challenging this state of affairs” (Reaching Critical Will).<sup>15</sup>

There are several aspects to consider when discussing gender and nuclear weapons, for example, we can look at the underrepresentation in nuclear disarmament forums, according to a UN study approximately only 26% of government delegations are women.<sup>16</sup> We can also explore how the impacts of nuclear weapons on the human body are different - more severe for women than they are for men.

For example, initial studies of the impact of nuclear weapons were initially only conducted on the standard height, “male” body, so the effects they have on women’s and children’s bodies were merely assumed to be the same; of course, the initial lack of interest and resources put into studying human bodies that are outside the male-standard height “norm” is problematic in and of itself. However, it was eventually discovered that in part due to the reproductive tissues in women’s bodies, women are more susceptible to the harmful effects of ionizing radiation.<sup>17</sup>

Additionally, research conducted in the Marshall Islands, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, showed that women suffered greater levels of social exclusion.<sup>18</sup> For example, women in the Marshall Islands where the US, conducted years of nuclear tests, talked about giving birth to ‘jellyfish’ babies, babies that are born without any bones. Women who have faced this experience have often described it as traumatic and devastating and have not always received support, but rather endured marginalization and further loss.<sup>19</sup>

Women in Hiroshima and Nagasaki described how they suffered from societal stigmatization because they were viewed as “contaminated” and “infectious” and therefore “unmarriageable”. In a society where women often needed to get married in order to function in daily life, being unmarried came with a plethora of social-economic and psychological consequences.

Research by R. Acheson, notes that the other factor of a gender analysis is, nuclear weapons themselves—they are highly gendered.<sup>20</sup> According to Carol Cohn, consciously or unconsciously nuclear weapons are often spoken about in loaded symbolism—of potency, protection, and the power to deter through material strength.<sup>21</sup> An example of this is when President Trump tweeted, “I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger and more powerful one than his, and my Button works!” We know this is a very unsubtle euphemism for something else that’s often measured and compared. Or when in 1998 after India conducted their nuclear weapon tests, they later stated, that they had to prove to the world that we are not eunuchs.

So, we can see that ideas about masculinity and femininity matter in international politics, and indeed in nuclear strategic thinking. The culturally pervasive associations of masculinity with dispassion, distance, strength, toughness, reason and risk-taking, and of femininity with emotion, empathy, fear, weakness and caution, are embedded in how we think about weapons and security and they function to make some ideas seem self-evidently “realistic,” like deterrence, and others weak and self-evidently “unrealistic,” like disarmament (C. Cohn, 2018).<sup>22</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

Author Reni-Edo in her book on racism<sup>23</sup> reminds us that structures are made out of people. So, when we talk about structural racism or sexism, classism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism or any other form of discrimination, we are talking about the intensification of people’s personal prejudices, coming together. If the intensification of said people also have power and the ability to negatively affect the lives and the life chances of others, such as the leaders of the nuclear-armed states, then exposing and challenging this injustice must be our collective priority.

We should seize this opportunity to move towards collective responsibility for a better society taking into account the internal hierarchies and intersections along the way.

In an address to the UN First Committee, the representative of Haiti commented that it was not acceptable for governments to express their power, strength and influence through their might, brute force and weaponry, but instead, they should measure their strength and power by their ability to use their influence for the pursuit of peace.<sup>24</sup>

Unmasking and addressing discrimination is a vital undertaking, and understanding systemic patterns of oppression will be essential for us to move beyond reproducing and modernizing cycles of violence so that we can achieve a world free from nuclear weapons.

## NOTES

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- 6 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, adopted on 9 December 1948: [https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.1\\_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.1_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf)
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- 14 United Nations Conference to Negotiate a Legally Binding Instrument to Prohibit Nuclear Weapons, Leading Towards their Total Elimination, 16 February, 27 - 31 March, 15 June - 7 July 2017 <https://www.un.org/disarmament/tpnw/index.html>; <http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/disarmament-fora/nuclear-weapon-ban>
- 15 Reaching Critical Will: <http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/>
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- 19 Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner: <http://www.kathyjetnilkijiner.com/blog/>
- 20 Ray Acheson: <http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/resources/publications-and-research/publications>
- 21 Carol Cohn “The Perils of Mixing Masculinity and Missiles”, The New York Times, Op-Ed contributor, 2018
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- 24 Haiti statement to the First Committee of the UN General Assembly, New York, 15 October 2018: [http://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com18/statements/15Oct\\_Haiti.pdf](http://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com18/statements/15Oct_Haiti.pdf)

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