

GENDER AND NATIONAL SECURITY

By Dr. Carol Cohn



“As a mom, as a daughter, there is nothing I want more for my family than a world with no nuclear weapons. But we have to be realistic.”

– Ambassador Nikki Haley, March 27, 2017¹

Our thinking about national security – and our national security policies themselves – are shaped and limited by *ideas* about gender. These ideas are deeply embedded in national security discourse, where they underlie core assumptions about what makes us more secure, and what counts as “rational,” “self-evident” and “realistic” in security policy. In so doing, they act as a preemptive deterrent to thinking complexly, creatively and truly realistically about security.

Before going further, please note: my focus is on *ideas* about gender, *not* the gender of security analysts or policymakers. I am not saying that the people (historically, mostly men) who theorize and decide on national security policy take the actions they do *because* they are men, or “to prove they are real men”; nor am I suggesting that women in those same positions would necessarily advocate for a different concept of strength and security policy simply because they are women.

Instead, I argue something more disturbing and recalcitrant: that *many of our assumptions and beliefs about which security policies will be effective arise from a series of gendered ideas about how to most*

effectively exercise power, what it means to be “strong” and what “works” to keep us secure. These gendered ideas are built into the professional paradigms and ways of thinking that any of us, male or female, adopt when becoming national security specialists. There, they deter us from cognitive and political engagement with ideas and actions that could result in greater security.

The fact that ideas about gender permeate national security thinking is, in one sense, so obvious as to usually go unnoticed. Most people would probably recognize the striking resonance between dominant cultural ideals of masculinity and precepts of American national security policy. Consider:

- Strength is being able to protect oneself using physical force.
- Avoid penetration of your boundaries, your property; be able to penetrate the defenses of others.
- The other guy only understands the language of force.
- Vulnerability invites attack, so strive to make yourself invulnerable.
- Being afraid of violence, and of risk-taking, is cowardly.

The conflation of manliness and national security occasionally takes a crude form (e.g., Donald Trump’s tweeted comparisons of the size and functionality of his and Kim Jong Un’s nuclear buttons, or Hindu nationalist leader Balasaheb Thackeray’s justification for India’s 1998 nuclear tests – “We had to prove that we are not eunuchs”).² But ideas about gender are more often buried deep in the assumptions and models of mainstream nuclear and national security policy. There, they make some options appear sensible and others so irrational or “unrealistic” as to not merit serious consideration. For example, why in 2003 did it feel obvious to so many people that the most effective way to prevent Iraq from building and deploying weapons of mass destruction (WMD) was to launch a massive military campaign to “smoke `em out of their holes and their WMD with them,” rather than a regime of United Nations (U.N.), and International Atomic Energy Agency monitoring and inspection? Why did aggressive, “muscular,” militarized (masculinized) action *feel* so much more potent than “passive,” (feminized) waiting and watching, that political debate about which course of action would *actually* be most effective was impossible?

Our national security bias toward overestimating the efficacy of armed violence and undercounting its costs (while underestimating the efficacy of nonviolence) stems from the depth and power of our associations of strength with masculinity – and weakness with whatever we code feminine. That is, the assumption that massive military might will make us more secure is often not borne out by experience (e.g., Did massive military superiority enable the U.S. to win the war in Vietnam? Has the U.S. \$5.9 trillion investment in the “War on Terror” reduced the numbers of terrorists?³ Are we made more or less secure by giving a single human the capacity to end life on the planet as we know it, with a reputed “necessity” of making the decision in under 10 minutes?).

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This assumption has a remarkable staying power that derives more from the ways our beliefs about gender make it feel true than from a careful, rational assessment of its effectiveness in making the country – or the people in it – more secure. Yet the strength of that feeling biases U.S. politicians across the political spectrum toward supporting massive military budgets; underwrites claims that the U.S. requires a massive nuclear arsenal to protect itself; and biases presidents toward responding to perceived threats with military action.

However, the effect of gendered assumptions in national security policy goes beyond underwriting certain narrow concepts of strength and of how to achieve security. They also short-circuit and distort both deliberative and political processes, preventing us from thinking genuinely and realistically about security.

Political leaders, for example, are frequently accused of “being a wimp,” i.e., of being insufficiently manly, when they are perceived as not having sufficient appetite for going to war. The impact goes beyond personal insult. When political commentators questioned whether President George H.W. Bush would “beat the wimp factor” by invading Iraq, they reduced the complex and momentous decision to start a war

down to the simplistic question of whether a leader was “man enough” to make the decision; in the face of that question, consideration of the strategic, political, economic, environmental and human consequences of war disappears. The acid test of manliness eradicates other questions and ends meaningful political debate. It makes advocating for nonviolent alternatives – even if they are likely to lead to better outcomes – seem weak, passive, defensive and inadequate.

The overt impugning of masculinity, however, is not the only mechanism

through which ideas about gender act as a preemptive deterrent to thought in national security deliberations. That is because gender is more than a set of ideas about what men and women are or should be like. Gender functions as a culturally-pervasive symbolic system, encoding a wealth of characteristics, activities, stances and ways of thinking as either “masculine” or “feminine.” For instance, our dominant culture encodes rationality, dispassion, objectivity, invulnerability, independence, courage, aggression and risk-taking (to name but a few!) as “masculine,” while encoding emotion, empathy, subjectivity, vulnerability, dependence, passivity, caution, intuition and nature as “feminine.”

These “masculine” and “feminine” coded characteristics are seen as mutually exclusive opposites, with the former more highly valued than the latter. The impact is visible in the premises of national and nuclear security strategic thinking, where, for example, empathic imagining of the suffering of war’s victims is seen as antithetical to the ability to think well about security policy, rather than as being essential to it.

One of the most pernicious and powerful effects of ideas about gender in national security is that the mantle of “realism” is reserved for whatever is coded “masculine,” while policy alternatives associated with anything coded “feminine” can be summarily dismissed as “soft” or “unrealistic” before they are ever thought-through. For instance, it is projected that over \$1 trillion will be spent on nuclear weapons worldwide over the next 10 years.⁴ If you argued that national security would be better served by spending



Artwork reimagining the bomb. Image: ICAN.

that money on health care, schools, clean water, renewable household energy, decent livelihoods and/or sustainable smallholder agriculture in conflict-affected countries, you would immediately be dismissed as “unrealistic.”

But the truth is that even from a national (rather than human) security perspective, we don’t know which path is more “realistic,” i.e., which would lead to greater national security for the countries investing in nuclear arsenals, because the gender-coding of this alternative, “soft” path enables its instant dismissal. Thus, the investment of funds, time and brain power in projecting, modeling and comparing the different outcomes of these alternative paths is never made. This problem needs correcting in our policy development process.

In national security discourse, “realism” functions a lot like the word “wimp” – as a gendered silencer, an interrupter of cognitive and political processes. “Realism,” with its connotations of manly tough-mindedness, is deployed whenever the human dimensions

of security threaten to become a topic of conversation. One can simultaneously tip one’s hat to feminized concerns with familial love, bodily harm, human suffering, human feelings of grief, loss and despair – perhaps even the death of animals and plants – and summarily dismiss the possibility that they should ever be the basis upon which security policy is made: “After all, we must be realistic!”

The deployment of masculinized “realism” forecloses the possibility of even deliberating about the proper role of those “feminized” concerns in national security policy. This is exactly the rhetorical strategy used by (then) U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley, to justify not attending or participating in the U.N. General Assembly debate on a prospective global ban on nuclear weapons. The debate and the treaty itself dared make the *human consequences* of nuclear weapons, rather than the weapons’ supposed *national security* benefit, the appropriate grounds for decisionmaking. This approach, which falls on the “feminine” side of our gender system, is deftly undercut by Haley’s comments: the tip of the

hat to the “feminine” (her womanly familial roles, the sentimental pull they create toward idealistic fantasy) immediately delegitimized as the grounds for decisionmaking through the invocation of “realism.”

Recommendations

If ideas about gender act as a preemptive deterrent to thinking rationally, fully, complexly, creatively and, indeed, realistically about security, what are the implications for policymakers and the citizens they represent? What can we each do?

- Be curious! Gender as a symbolic system is so deeply embedded in how we perceive, categorize and evaluate ideas and policy options that it is often hard to notice. Practice being curious about where gender is shaping – or preventing – mainstream thinking about national security issues.
- Pay attention to that which *feels* true and ask *why* it feels this way. Do you have an empirical basis for believing it, or is it just “self-evident”? If the latter, how are gendered assumptions working to make it feel true – and what questions might you ask or what actions might you recommend if gender did not underpin your gut-level sense of its truth?
- Be alert to – and wary of – the use of terms like “rogue actors,” “bad guys” and “bad actors.” They short-circuit and dumb down our political analysis by reducing a complex country with

many competing interests and motivations into a unitary male actor. And they trigger all the conventional tropes of manly contest (e.g., “I’m not gonna let him push me around,” etc.), instead of more complex and accurate assessments of the varied options for dealing with the problem at hand.

- Monitor your own silences. When you hesitate to propose an idea or to oppose someone else’s, ask yourself: why? Are you unconsciously self-censoring out of fear of appearing “soft,” “wimpy,” “naïve,” “idealistic” – i.e., not being taken seriously because you veered into “the feminine”? If that’s the case, or if you do speak and someone tries to discredit you in this way, try naming it and shaming it as the absurd barrier to truly rational thought that it is.
- At every step, question the claim of “realism” as the basis for nuclear and national security policy. Is it *actually* realistic or does its claim to realism rely on

the ideas about gender encoded within it? Ask what other models have been seriously considered, thought-through, modeled, tested. And ask to be shown the evidence for any particular policy.

- Finally, try an experiment. Since the human, material and financial resources invested in militarized state security so vastly outweigh those invested in any other manner of trying to ensure security for the world’s people or states, try committing to just one year of equal allocation. One year matching every dollar the government spends on the nuclear arsenal, military, or private security contractors with a dollar spent on improving health care, education, access to water and sustainable household energy, improving access to resources for subsistence agriculture, and reversing climate change around the world. Then, at the end of that year, we can start measuring the impacts of these different expenditures on our national security.

Are you about to dismiss this last idea as “unrealistic”? Try giving a second thought to your gendered assumptions... ■

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Notes

1 Nikki Haley. “On Nuclear Weapons,” United Nations, New York, NY, March 27, 2017 (C-SPAN), <https://www.c-span.org/video/?426068-1/un-ambassador-nikki-haley-shell-protest-debate-nuclear-weapons-ban>.

2 Carol Cohn. “The Perils of Mixing Masculinity and Missiles,” *New York Times*, January 5, 2017; Carol Cohn and Sara Ruddick. “A Feminist Ethical Perspective on Weapons of Mass Destruction,” In *Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Religious and Secular Perspectives*, eds. Sohail H. Hashmi and Steven P. Lee (Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 2004), http://genderandsecurity.org/sites/default/files/Cohn_Ruddick_-_Femst_Ethical_Perspective_on_WMDs.pdf.

3 Neta C. Crawford. “United States Budgetary Costs of the Post-9/11 Wars Through FY2019: \$5.9 Trillion Spent and Obligated,” Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University, November 14, 2018, https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2018/Crawford_Costs%20of%20War%20Estimates%20Through%20FY2019.pdf.

4 Colin Archer et al. “Move the Nuclear Weapons Money: A Handbook for Civil Society and Legislators,” (International Peace Bureau, Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament, and the World Future Council, 2016) https://www.worldfuturecouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/IBP_PNND_WFC_2016_Move-the-nuclear-weapons-money.pdf.