Current Controversies

Feminist Foreign Policy or Eco-Humanism?

By Robin Collins

International Women's Day march for women's rights and equality | © *Mia Wicks, Wikipedia*

Since the middle of the last decade, Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) has been promoted by several governments in (mostly) Western countries. There is a direct connection between FFP and UN Security Council Resolution 1325, the Women, Peace and Security statement. The principles advanced then are reaffirmation of "the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement…"

It is not likely that countries like Canada have embraced all the fundamental elements of a FFP as described by the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy, such as eschewal of military force, embrace of "intersectional rethinking of security" or scrutiny of "the destructive forces of patriarchy, colonisation, heteronormativity, capitalism, racism, imperialism, and militarism." Many do mouth words in support of a more just world order, yet do not in practice "draw on lessons from critical feminist and race scholarship." The Centre's framing, unlike governments' milder tone, is also chock-full of post-modernist jargon.

Does feminist foreign policy delineate the most inclusive route forward, and something better than human security or sustainable, common security? The broader humanist framework has a similar pedigree, and also challenges the "patriarchy" in defence of equality. One definition of humanism affirms "the dignity of each human being, [and] supports the maximization of individual liberty and opportunity consonant with social and planetary responsibility. It advocates the extension of participatory democracy and the expansion of the open society, standing for human rights and social justice."

Women's "pacific nature"? Biological determinism

Douglas Roche in a *Hill Time*s op-ed in August lamented the lack of progress at the recent NPT Review Conference despite the prevalence of women in high positions. They are visible in the Canadian power ministries of Defence and Global Affairs, as Ambassador to the UN (Geneva), and as the UN's own Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs. A recent paper (Laura Rose Brown and Laura Considine, Examining 'Gender-sensitive' Approaches to Nuclear Weapons Policy: a Study of the Non-Proliferation Treaty) makes clear that female representation (the head count), while important, is insufficient to drive change. The NPT is already "gendered" but focused on policies other than disarmament. Worse, women have "assimilated hegemonically masculine discourses to maintain their positions." As well, the supposition that women have a pacific nature and inherent capacity for consensus and problem-solving is to dabble in biological determinism. The Women, Peace and Security agenda, they further argue, is about female participation and ineffective at challenging existing "masculine" perspectives.

The importance of female participation seems self-evident, including (most agree) for decisions about gender-based violence, "particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, in situations of armed conflict."

IS NUCLEAR DETERRENCE "MALE"?

My own experience in peace and disarmament campaigns suggests that women are often dominant in terms of representation and policymaking, at least in civil society. But just as we shouldn't expect women in positions of power to categorically act any differently, neither should we presume disreputable policies to be male-gendered. A significant proportion of disarmament campaigners are male; women dominate the social sciences. Essentializing men isn't a promising strategy either.

There is also the core problem of what is sometimes called 'inertial sticki-

ness' or 'lock-in' which may account for much of the lag in policy change. While the origins of some bad policy can be found in long-time power relations when a certain breed of males dominated and where their default policy is war, not *jaw-jaw*, eventually bad ideas need to be ejected by senior policymakers.

Paul Pierson and Theda Skocpol argued that it can be difficult to alter course because power inequalities may come to dominate. New ideas may not be sufficient to dislodge institutional norms because of significant political risk. If a transition is to occur, as Janice Stein also argued, it requires an "engaged senior leadership with the willingness and the capacity to bear the political costs of change in the face of the strong coalition of vested institutional and private interests."

Given institutional and careerist influences, is the gender lens the most useful method for truth-seeking? Does gendering skew the analysis?

TWO EXAMPLES

The Canadian Voice of Women for Peace statement on Ukraine this year included this: "***Women and girls suffer disproportionately from the horrors of war*** and must be meaningfully included in all aspects of peacebuilding and conflict prevention, in accordance with UN SC Resolution 1325."

Resolution 1352 did reflect on women as active agents rather than as weak and fragile. It recognized "that ***civilians, particularly women and children, account for the vast majority of those adversely affected*** by armed conflict, including as refugees and internally displaced persons..."

But UNSCR 1325 does not exactly claim women "disproportionately" suffer from war. I assume this is because males are the vast majority of those killed in conflict.

ARE THEY?

One of the most accessible studies of this subject, Armed Conflict Deaths Disaggregated by Gender is by Christin Ormhaug et al. and published by Peace Research Institute Oslo. They found "men are more likely to die during conflicts, whereas women die more often of indirect causes after the conflict is over." They looked at a range of assessments, including a few that follow here.

- The Iraqi Body Count study, which relied primarily on published news reports, found that 82 per cent of civilians killed were adult males.
- A "widely-respected" study of the Kosovo conflict (Spiegel and Salama 2000): Men were "8.9 times more likely to die from war-related trauma than women, which coincides with men being systematically targeted."
- On the other hand, some found that the impact of indirect deaths and disability "works its way through specific diseases and conditions, and disproportionately affects women and children" (Ghobarah et al. 2003).
- Reza et al. (2001) found "An estimated 211,000 females were killed as a result of war in 1990, compared with 291,000 males."

Women's dominant role as caregiver in many societies makes them more vulnerable to the indirect consequences of war. If this has been less reported, then it is also less visible. Yet many of us involved in disarmament campaigns know that in conflict countries when men are away at war (killing and dying), women (and children) and the elderly may take on agriculture functions and can be vulnerable to cluster munition and landmine detonations in the fields and in contaminated communities. When civilians are targeted, their casualty numbers climb accordingly. The core value of civilian impact analysis is at the heart of the people-centred, 'humanitarian disarmament' movement.

THE IMPACT OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS ON WOMEN AND...GIRLS?

Related to the different impacts of war is a claim that the consequences of using nuclear weapons "have a disproportionate impact on ***women and girls***, including as a result of ionizing radiation." The source for this claim appears to be from data about the victims of atomic bombings over Japan in 1945.

What strikes me is that the catastrophe of nuclear weapons use is universally destructive (certainly in terms of blast and fire and highest radiation levels at ground zero.) Variance in radiation impacts may differ geographically and over time, and is interesting and important, but secondary. Why is it being highlighted?

Gendering our analysis may prove to be less fruitful

Gender distinction language is prominently found in the preamble of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). The Red Cross (ICRC), however, in its report of 2020 to the delayed NPT Review Conference, Humanitarian Impacts and Risks of Use of Nuclear Weapons, considered the subject area a work in progress. It requires more research on the long-term humanitarian and environmental effects of nuclear weapons use and testing and including "the sex- and age-differentiated and, potentially, intergenerational consequences of ionizing radiation." The ICRC carefully refers to the use of, or testing of, nuclear weapons as having disproportionately affected "women ***and children***." It is likely the Red Cross chose its words with considerable circumspection, even though differently than the authors of the TPNW.

As humanitarians, if we are to eliminate the problem at the source, we should be concerned most with the overall human impacts of war and weapons. My guess is that gendering our analysis may prove to be less fruitful, and more divisive than a non-gendered humanist perspective. Better yet, a further lens upgrade that provides both an ecological and humanist framework might get us to the best of all possible worlds faster. ■

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