



ZeFKo Special Issue editorial: gender approaches to disarmament, arms control, peace and conflict

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1 Introduction

“This B-52 bomber is neutered, because under the terms of the START agreement with Russia it cannot be equipped with nuclear weapons”, explained the pilot, a woman of colour.¹ As part of the Academic Alliance of US Strategic Command, one of our editorial team (Plesch) was visiting Offutt Air Force Base (the Command’s Headquarters) in 2018, and was being briefed while standing under the open bomb doors of this particular aircraft. The implications of this throw-away remark—that nuclear weapons are regarded as fertile, sexual, and gendered—were not examined critically by StratCom. But they are front and centre of this Special Issue.

The Special Issue embraces a gender approach to understanding disarmament policy and practice, as well as peace and violence, with a particular emphasis on the role of women and feminism in relevant political processes and lived experiences.

¹ We are aware that such terms are not accepted by everyone. We use the personal preferences of the individuals concerned as far as possible.

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It comprises a rich set of articles that examine a variety of security discourses and practices, for instance those embedded in the global ordering of international peace and security, as well as those inherent to the negotiation and implementation of multilateral disarmament and arms control treaties, and activist strategies and actions at both local and global levels. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to and extend expert scholarly and practitioner accounts on how conflict, violence, peace and security relate to gender and patriarchal structures.

The arguments that Carol Cohn made in *Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defence Intellectuals* show that intellectuals were manifest in transforming the term “neutering” from being used to describe processes that prevent the reproduction of life to instead referring to activities that render nuclear weapons incapable of inflicting mass death (Cohn 1987). Cohn’s insights open a door to discussions of social understandings of war and its preparations, and continue to find resonances in discourses on all sides of the political spectrum. It is unclear, for example, whether the March 2022 demonstration in Oslo by advocates of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) that featured a bright red tip on a black missile was deliberately or unconsciously ironic. In any case, such symbolism is revealing and matters, and it continues to appear regularly.

The Special Issue contributes to addressing gaps in standard scholarly and policy literatures, in particular, the paucity of understanding about how gender contributes to the constitution and (re-)production of armed conflict and violence. Historically, foreign policy and international security have been dominated by the male elite, and were upheld and defined by patriarchal and masculine structures, power and language (e.g. Cohn 1987; Shepherd 2007). In policy and diplomatic efforts, patriarchal structures remain largely ignored and intersectional feminist perspectives have rarely been adopted or integrated, and consequently the voices of women in diplomatic efforts for disarmament and peacebuilding have been frequently marginalized and disregarded. Indeed, between 1992 and 2019, only 13% of negotiators and 6% of signatories in major peace processes worldwide were women (Council on Foreign Relations 2019).

But although overlooked in many official processes and scholarly analyses, there is nevertheless a growing recognition of the importance of women in advancing disarmament and peace, as well as a heightened understanding of the role/s they play, and an elevated presence of women in implementing and negotiating international treaties and arms control measures. The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution on “Women, disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control” (A/RES/65/69), initiated by Trinidad and Tobago, represents a milestone in this respect. Regularly updated and reaffirmed, this demonstrates that UNGA formally acknowledges that there is a link between involving women in local, regional, national and international decision-making, and achieving effective disarmament, recognizing that “the participation of both men and women is essential for the attainment of sustainable peace and security”. Further, the Treaty on the Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), adopted by the UNGA in 2017 and entered into force in January 2021, has been understood as an “act of challenging patriarchy” (Acheson 2018, p. 78). The African Union’s campaign “Silencing the Guns by 2020” has also aimed to integrate gender-sensitive approaches. In Latin America and the Caribbean, women

have been key leaders in advancing and implementing the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) to control the illicit trade of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in the region, which disproportionately impact and threaten the security of women and girls. In the Middle East, evidence suggests that women are playing a crucial role in disarmament, for instance in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) processes.

This Special Issue seeks to remedy the relative neglect of such developments, by recognising, evaluating and amplifying them. The articles consider the role of women in international processes, and crucially, they also go beyond conventional binaries involving sex and gender, and recognise the ways in which patriarchal and masculine structures, power and language order policy spaces. Sine Choi and Catherine Eschle “wonder” whether the “developments in feminist approaches to foreign policy, diplomacy and WPS [Women, Peace and Security] have encouraged a focus on gender abstracted from other power relations, and/or the elevation of Eurocentric dialogues on international norms and politics” (Choi and Eschle 2022, p. 1131). In line with this approach, we aim for this Special Issue to showcase critical feminist research on gender, power relations and colonial structures, particularly focused on the underappreciated issues surrounding arms, arms control, disarmament, peace and conflict. Through multiple approaches, and by addressing varied themes, our authors recognise the agency of different feminisms and perspectives, from missile firing crews to the role of the US Vice President Kamala Harris as a black woman of Indian-American and Jamaican-American heritage in briefly taking control of the US nuclear arsenal, and from activists practising transoceanic solidarity to the incorporation of gender into decision-making processes at the United Nations.

The papers in this Special Issue recognise and build on the knowledge production of academia as well as that of expert activists and practitioners. It is rooted in two interrelated traditions: feminist activism on disarmament and academic engagement with feminist and gender perspectives on weaponry, particularly nuclear weapons. As Louise Arimatsu identified, disarmament and feminist activism have been intertwined from the start. First wave feminists pushed for disarmament during the Hague Peace Conferences of 1899 and 1907 alongside their struggle for women’s suffrage, and are described as “Chief amongst the ‘utopians’” (Arimatsu 2021, p. 839). Following this, the year 1915 saw both the Women at the Hague conference and the establishment of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). By the time nuclear weapons were invented and deployed, feminist activists were already an important voice on disarmament—although all too frequently silenced or overlooked. Examples are the anti-nuclear activists of the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific that originated in Fiji in 1975, and those who organised the UK-based Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp which started in 1981. The richness and diversity of feminist activism against weapons and war has been matched by strong academic engagement focused on intersectional examination of war and weapons, as well as analyses that point to means to disrupt and challenge prevalent assumptions such as the ways in which language can (re)produce or revolutionise social orders (e.g. Cohn 1987; Enloe 1990 or Teiwa 1994; Duncanson and Eschle 2008; Das 2010).

This varied history has inspired our Special Issue to combine academic rigour with expert-practitioner experiences and insights. Motivated by best practice in co-produced research, several papers are co-authored by policy practitioners and scholars who we connected and supported. We found such partnerships were valued by the contributors themselves and generated scholarly accounts that feature sophisticated insights into real-world policy challenges and processes. The papers thereby complement, challenge and extend expert knowledge related to national and international peace and security, and provide strong contributions to a diverse, and growing, body of literature on feminist approaches to disarmament (see for example Choi and Eschle 2022).

In bringing this collection together, we have built on a seven-part webinar series in 2021 that showcased leaders in feminist disarmament from around the world, in particular the Global South, that was led by two of our editorial team (Nancy Ehrenberg-Peters and Jannis Kappelmann) working within and supported by the Strategic Concept for the Removal of Arms and Proliferation (SCRAP) weapons programme,² SOAS University of London.³ SCRAP is a global campaign that researches practical and intellectual tools for achieving the international community's objective of general and complete disarmament as specified in numerous treaties.⁴ Empowered by student volunteers from global backgrounds, SCRAP's work includes developing a holistic approach that integrates weapons of mass destruction disarmament, conventional weapons disarmament and non-proliferation practices. SCRAP recognises the UNGA's definition of general and complete disarmament as the elimination of weapons of mass destruction alongside balanced reductions in conventional weapons, and proposes that this can be achieved through a synergy and extension of international legally binding treaties which have already delivered successful arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation results. SCRAP's research into feminism and disarmament sits within broader policy-orientated research into gender and sex in international affairs at SOAS's Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy that includes: diplomacy and girls education; sex and gender in the UN Charter; and Women and the UN: A New History of Women's International Human Rights; all of which engage diverse groups of postgraduate students and alumni.

² For more information, see SCRAP weapons [online]. Available at: <https://scrapweapons.com/> [Accessed 10 August 2023].

³ We would like to thank our fellow SCRAP team members who took part in the coordination, organisation and implementation of the webinar series: Ana Guimarães, Anant Saria, Eva-Nour Repussard, India Achilles, Juan Garcia-Nieto, Marla Zgheib, Mehdi Arshed, Moe Sasaki, Olamide Samuel, Reem, Rut Einarsdottir and Vanessa Hanson.

⁴ See for example the consensus Final Document of the General Assembly's First Special Session on Disarmament in 1978. General and complete disarmament is also embedded in many other treaties including the Treaty of Tlatelolco (Latin America and the Caribbean, 1967); the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (1968); the Sea-Bed Treaty (1971); the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC, 1975); the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT, 1996); the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC, 1997); the Bangkok Treaty (Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone, 1997); the Pelindaba Treaty (African Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty, 2009); the Semipalatinsk Treaty (Treaty on a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in Central Asia, 2009); and in the Preamble of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (2017).

As Siddharth Tripathi argues, “[k]nowledge emerging from the Global South has often been marginalised and viewed as primitive, unscientific and inferior” (Tripathi 2022, p. 2041). Throughout our work on the webinars and this Special Issue, we aimed to overcome epistemic hierarchies that exist in policy and academic spaces, as far as was practically possible. We were committed to finding and promoting voices and viewpoints that are under-represented, mis-represented and sidelined within mainstream publications and discourses. Social justice demands that all genders, ages, sexes, ethnicities and classes should be given equal access to political spaces and the decisions that affect them. More than this, harnessing diverse perspectives is important to building full understanding of policy challenges and needs, and to finding solutions that can work across multiple communities, cultures and places. Consequently, diversity is increasingly recognised as important to achieving political outcomes. Following this logic, SCRAP works to embed diversity throughout its work. Beyond being a tick-box exercise, SCRAP seeks active engagement with, and empowerment of, as broad a range of communities as possible. For example, it encourages and supports student volunteers to participate in real-world (rather than model) intellectual and advocacy projects, is building a global interfaith community advocating for disarmament, and identifies, works with and supports strategic partners in the Global South and across minority communities everywhere. One instance of this is that its Advisory Committee⁵ is broadly representative across diverse countries of origin, gender, youth, as well as including eminent policy practitioners and prestigious scholars.

Our commitment to diversity underpinned our first proposing, and now compiling, this Special Issue. We worked to achieve representative input from a range of authors and peer reviewers, by actively seeking diverse voices, in terms of the geographies of where contributors are based (we engaged with scholars based in Global North and Global South, inviting them to contribute as authors and peer reviewers, and did our best to actively support all contributors to fulfil their commitments), and in terms of experiences (we engaged with people that have run successful community disarmament initiatives and worked in high level diplomacy, as well as academic experts). Inevitably, we faced hurdles in achieving these objectives. Throughout, it was clear that different communities face disproportionate barriers to contributing to this sort of endeavour. For example, while earlier stages of the project saw commitments for papers with even greater diversity than those published here, unfortunately individual and systemic barriers prevented some authors from ultimately submitting their planned texts, including financial and time constraints. We are enormously grateful to all our partners for their generous effort and support in shaping this Special Issue throughout its development.

We are proud of what the authors have achieved in the Special Issue. Together, they provide state-of-the-art thinking about feminist and gender approaches to disarmament, and also represent the rich benefits of, and challenges to, work representing diversity. The Special Issue comprises two types of papers. Both have followed double-blind peer review processes; while both are academically rigorous,

⁵ For more information see The SCRAP Advisory Committee [online]. Available at: <https://scrapweapons.com/committee/> [Accessed 23 October 2023].

forum articles are shorter and may be more policy-focused. The collection starts with Laura Considine's (2023) forum piece "Rethinking the beginning of the 'nuclear age' through telling feminist nuclear stories", which examines why a feminist reflection (and "rethinking") of nuclear issues is necessary and how this can be achieved through illustrating the historical, contemporary and continuing socio-political functionings of the masculinised nuclear origin myth. This is followed by 'Why haven't you known?', in which Catherine Eschle (2023) presents an analysis of the textual ephemera of the Women Working for a Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific—a transoceanic network that worked from 1984 to 1999 to build links between women in the Pacific and the UK, and coordinate UK women's support for indigenous women. This reveals a neglected history of solidarity building in which white women in the UK elevated indigenous women as experts and teachers. In doing so they acknowledged their discomfort in recognising their own complicity with global nuclear injustices, but did not let this stop them pushing for actions on change.

Contrasting with these historical analyses, in their forum article 'Untold stories: exploring the link between the illicit proliferation and possession of weapons and gender-based violence in Lebanon', Shirine Jurdi and Nancy Ehrenberg-Peters (2023) present original research investigating the contemporary gendered impact of the illicit proliferation and possession of small arms and light weapons in Lebanon. Their findings are based on both primary research conducted with Lebanon-based women survivors of armed violence and analysis of the disconnect between internationally binding instruments and domestic legislation, such as the Arms Trade Treaty and the Domestic Violence Law respectively, and the reality on the ground. The next two papers consider the tensions between feminist practices that reinforce existing power hierarchies and those that seek to transform them. Through drawing parallels with police and prison "reforms", and adopting a feminist lens, Ray Acheson (2023) analyses the role of arms control in pushing us further away from achieving disarmament in their forum article 'Abolition, not arms control: against reinforcing nuclear weapons through "reform"'. They argue that arms control, as well as policies which aim to achieve greater diversity (such as by increasing the number of women involved in certain activities), can reinforce the status quo rather than achieve actual disarmament, and can ultimately serve to assure violence and destruction. Adding to this, Kjølv Egeland and Hebatalla Taha's (2023) article 'Experts, activists, and girl bosses of the nuclear apocalypse: feminisms in security discourse' surveys the ways in which the nuclear weapons industry has joined the corporate trend of adopting liberal feminist language, such as on women's empowerment in the workplace, and assesses the impact this has. They conclude that practices such as corporate feminist rhetoric, feminist sponsorship programmes, women's mentoring and liberal feminist events are frequently employed. These trends contradict the historical struggle of feminist practices contesting the nuclear status quo, and offer another case of the familiar tension between liberal/corporate approaches and critical feminism. The adoption of liberal feminism, according to Egeland and Taha, can be interpreted as nuclear industries' "attempt to efface the association of feminism with being anti-war".

Following on, the article by Maritza Chan and Eloisa Romani (2023) ‘Represented but not always heard: an analysis of the progress of gender equality at the United Nations through the lens of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons’ focuses on gender equality at the United Nations as a structural problem. Framing the 2017 TPNW as the first ‘gender-sensitive’ international nuclear weapons agreement, the authors investigate gender equality during the development of the TPNW, and consider the treaty’s negotiation and adoption processes within developments at the United Nations at large. They conclude that “women’s representation in multilateral negotiation processes does not constitute positive progress towards their interests if gender-sensitive disarmament policies are not implemented”. Meanwhile, Miriam Mukalazi (2023) assesses ‘The African Union’s *Silencing the Guns*: between stereotyping and owning gender roles’, problematizing the concept of gender by asking who gets to choose different definitions and, by extension, embedded assumptions, through analysing the *Silencing the Guns* campaign in Africa (developed by the African Union in 2016 as a roadmap to making Africa a conflict-free continent). She examines policy documents to demonstrate how their choice of language reflects and reproduces particular constructions of gender, and shows that *Silencing the Guns* incorporates gender constructions that draw on universal norms, as well as those specific to the region. Finally, in the forum piece ‘Lost in space: feminist considerations of space security’, Jessica L. West (2023) overviews scholarly research on ways in which gender impacts on outer space governance, and demonstrates that there are broad absences, including women’s under-representation in space itself, and in female, feminine and feminist viewpoints in the efforts to build appropriate structures for regulating global engagement with and use of outer space, especially in peace, security and arms control governance.

Between them, then, the papers cover detailed subject-specific explorations, as well as numerous interlinking themes. For example, several papers (Acheson 2023, Egeland and Taha 2023, Chan and Romani 2023) assess how feminist arguments and constructions can be (mis)applied to reinforce systemic barriers to arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation, and also how they can be used to overcome these barriers and transform political spaces. Meanwhile, two papers (Jurdi and Ehrenberg-Peters 2023, Mukalazi 2023) present original empirical evidence on the connection of gender and small arms and light weapons and consider gendered aspects of violence, and ways in which different communities construct gender. Another theme, represented in the final set of papers (Considine 2023, Eschle 2023, West 2023), is the importance of identifying and engaging with under-represented voices and narratives, for example: the contributions of indigenous communities and women to the original development of nuclear weapons in the Manhattan Project; Pacific Islanders’ testimony about, and campaigns against, nuclear testing; and the actual and preferred contributions of women in space.

As we invite you to engage with our authors’ work, may we offer you two final opening thoughts. The Special Issue reflects and contributes to a wider movement which suggests that the Zeitgeist is increasingly appreciating the importance of gender in understanding matters of war, violence and peace. This is illustrated by the characterisation of the problem of global security as the “monstrous phallus” of militarism—the words of the President of World Methodism, Rev. Dr. Jong Chun

“J.C.” Park, at an international conference on disarmament (SCRAP weapons 2022). While the present harms and potential global catastrophe posed by global weapons are issues for humanity regardless of gender, in recent decades political rhetoric and practice have introduced the notion of the value of a stronger feminist presence and energy throughout international security policy.

And lastly, we invite readers to consider whether we can usefully reconcile feminist critiques of militarism with seemingly very different theoretical works of international relations including classical realism, liberalism, critical constructivism and post-/de-colonialism. Perhaps most surprisingly, in his eponymous work on US Foreign Policy, and in a marked change to his earlier work, the ‘realist’ scholar Hans Morgenthau argued that nuclear weapons have fundamentally changed and undermined the use of force in foreign policy and that to avoid disaster, societal change and disarmament are required. More specifically, he suggested that the US should adapt culturally to the existential threat posed by the bomb, rather than try and integrate nuclear weapons with conventional forces (Morgenthau 1968, p. 252). From this perspective, feminist approaches can be seen as compatible with classical realist strategy. Taking these different traditions together, we then have a realist frame for a feminist foreign policy that enhances arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation.

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