Gender Roles and Nuclear Disarmament Activism

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From 1955 to 1963 and 1979 to 1985 (two periods of intense nuclear disarmament agitation), gender and assumptions about gender interacted with attitudes toward nuclear weapons and nuclear war.

At first glance, the remarkable upsurge of protest against nuclear weapons from the mid-1950s through the early 1960s seems to have embraced rather conventional gender norms. Although numerous mixed-gender organizations sprang up during these years to call for banning the Bomb, nearly all their top leaders were men. Moreover, the movement's rhetoric employed the same gender-exclusive language that prevailed in the broader society.

Nevertheless, below the surface, the movement departed dramatically from the prevailing gender norm that excluded women from the realm of national security policy. In the United States, Eleanor Roosevelt was a signer of the ad that launched the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE), a featured speaker at SANE's 1960 Madison Square Garden rally, and—after her death—the namesake of SANE's yearly peace award. Women also took the lead in organizing America's civil defense protests. In Britain, the top staff person of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) was female. In Japan, the activities of housewives launched the widespread campaign that led to the formation of Gensuikyo—an organization whose advisory board included leaders of the YWCA, the Housewives Federation, and the Federation of Japanese Women's Organizations.

Furthermore, a great deal of nuclear disarmament agitation emerged from all-women's organizations. Confronted with a proposal by the Swedish military to arm Sweden with nuclear weapons, the Social Democratic Women's Organization came out strongly against it, playing a central role in Sweden's mass antinuclear campaign. The Women's International League for Peace & Freedom, with branches in nations around the world, conducted vigorous campaigns against nuclear testing and nuclear weapons.

Meanwhile, new women's groups sprang up to take on the challenge of the Bomb. In July 1960, Canadian activists launched the Voice of Women, which attracted thousands of members and engaged in a whirlwind of antinuclear protest. In November 1961, a handful of female peace activists mobilized an estimated 50,000 women in dozens of U.S. cities to assail the nuclear arms race. Delighted with their success, they organized Women Strike for Peace, which became, like SANE, a mass, quite visible, organization. Other all-women antinuclear groups, sometimes linking themselves to the Voice of Women or Women Strike for Peace (WSP), emerged in Norway, South Africa, New Zealand, and Britain.

Given this outpouring of women's nuclear disarmament activism, it's not surprising to find that more women than men expressed misgivings about nuclear weapons. Although the polling data is minimal and limited to the United States, there is a remarkable consistency to the findings of public opinion surveys that examined gender and the Bomb. In the aftermath of Soviet resumption of nuclear testing, a 1962 Gallup poll found that 38 percent of women (compared to 53 percent of men) were willing to resume U.S. atmospheric nuclear testing. Polls also found that women were more opposed than men to the use of the Bomb in war. Overall, opinion surveys showed a gender gap on nuclear issues that ranged from 7 to 15 percent.

The disproportionate female concern about the Bomb flowed largely from conventional assumptions about women's maternal nature. One of Canadian Voice of Women's early brochures proclaimed that "women, as the givers of life, are particularly concerned about survival of children and have special responsibilities for preserving life." When CND's Women's Group organized a 1961 demonstration to condemn renewed nuclear testing, it was exclusively a *mothers'* protest. WSP constantly used the "motherhood" theme to mobilize support and lacked a feminist consciousness. Questioned about the gender rebellion implied by WSP's first "strike," Dagmar Wilson, the group's beloved leader, sought to squelch the idea. "Our organization," she told the press, "has no resemblance to the Lysistrata theme or even to the suffragettes."

If women disarmament campaigners of the era were traditional when it came to motives and avant garde when it came to political activism, male campaigners were just the reverse. To "be a man," after all, was to show an unfailing readiness to fight for one's country. Thus, the masculinity of male antinuclear activists was often called into question. At demonstrations, they were not only baited as "commies," but as "fags."

Although childcare was not a high priority for most men of the time, the male-led nuclear disarmament groups frequently employed it as their focus. In Britain, CND churned out literature proclaiming "the right of our children to live, uncrippled by nuclear poisons." In the United States, SANE's dramatic newspaper ads again and again emphasized that children's lives were being endangered by nuclear testing. Indeed, SANE's most famous ad showed Dr. Benjamin Spock, the world-renowned pediatrician, looking gravely down at a female toddler and saying: “I am worried. . . . As the tests multiply, so will the damage to our children – here and around the world.” The ad, appearing in the *New York Times* in 1962, created a sensation, and was reprinted in 700 newspapers around the world. Dr. Spock was the world’s best-known specialist on baby and childcare—famed for his advocacy of loving, concerned parenting. The following year, he was elected co-chair of SANE.

This similarity of concerns facilitated a remarkable level of cooperation among activists across gender lines. The all-women’s groups repeatedly joined the male-led mixed gender groups in sponsoring demonstrations and issuing protest statements. In turn, the male-led mixed gender groups were delighted by the burst of energy mobilized by all-women’s groups. In a message to WILPF’s international conference in 1962, Norman Cousins—the founder and co-chair of SANE—told the assemblage: “Women—who are despised by the war-makers as sentimental weaklings—may finally bring the war dogs to heel.”

The transformation of gender roles in the nuclear disarmament movement was more evident in the late 1970s and early 1980s—partly because many women were veterans of the earlier antinuclear campaign, and especially because female and male activists had experienced a decade or more of feminist agitation, which deeply affected their assumptions and behavior.

In this later period, women played leading roles in the mixed-gender movement. They included Randy Forsberg (founder and inspiration of the Nuclear Freeze campaign), Helen Caldicott (reviver of Physicians for Social Responsibility), Petra Kelly (founder and leading light of West Germany’s Green Party), and Mary Kaldor (a key figure in the European Nuclear Disarmament campaign). Other, less prominent leaders included Joan Ruddock (chair of British CND), Pam Solo (a leader of nuclear disarmament efforts for the American Friends Service Committee), and Joanne Landy (founder of the Campaign for Peace & Democracy/East & West).

Women comprised about half of CND’s leadership and played very important roles in its operations.

Moreover, during the late 1970s to early 1980s uprising, exclusively women’s peace organizations were either founded (such as Women for Peace and Women’s Action for Nuclear Disarmament) or resumed their antinuclear agitation (such as WILPF, WSP, and the Voice of Women). By this point, feminism held sway within their ranks, and as a result, their pronouncements and demonstrations took on a feminist flavor unlike those of the earlier era.

The best-known of these feminist antinuclear ventures were the women’s peace encampments, with the largest and longest-lasting of them in England. Protesting the deployment of cruise missiles, an August 1981 women’s march turned into a women-only peace camp (designed to “take the toys away from the boys”) outside the U.S. air force base at Greenham Common. In late 1982, responding to a call for action, 30,000 women from across the nation appeared at the nine-mile military fence surrounding the base, adorning it with symbols of the life and linking arms to “embrace the base.” In the ensuing months and years, thousands of women activists settled in at Greenham Common to continue resistance efforts—blocking the gates with their bodies, cutting or pulling down the fence, painting peace symbols on U.S. warplanes, and even dancing and singing defiantly atop the missile silos. Other women’s peace camps were established in the United States, West Germany, Italy, Canada, and the Netherlands.

The sharp criticism of patriarchy (and sometimes of men) emanating from the peace camps and, at times, from leaders like Caldicott and Kelly, placed male activists in an uncomfortable position. On a personal level, it excluded them. On a political level, it seemed a dead end. Nevertheless, because they welcomed the contributions made by women’s protests against nuclear weapons and because they, too, had come to accept the major tenets of women’s liberation, most male activists adapted—supporting the women's peace camps, other women's peace action, and leadership by women.

Within the broader society, women continued to be more critical of the Bomb than were men. In 1983, when Britons were asked about the deployment of cruise missiles in their country, 58 percent of women opposed it, compared to 49 percent of men. In 1984, a poll of residents in the Netherlands on cruise missile deployment found that 66 percent of women opposed it, compared to 60 percent of men. With a few exceptions, the polls on nuclear weapons-related issues show a gender gap of about 6 to 15 percent.

In conclusion, during these two surges of antinuclear activism, women—whether driven by maternalism *or* feminism—displayed a stronger opposition to nuclear weapons than did men. But opposition by men was also substantial, and male activists, particularly, often shared the attitudes and assumptions of their female counterparts.