I have been asked to speak today about the connections between gender and nuclear weapons. This might seem like an unlikely topic, but there are actually a lot of interesting things to say about this.

I’ll start by laying out some of the background material. First, a note on what I mean by gender. I am not talking about men and women. I am not going to be saying men do this or are prone to this, or women do this better or worse than men. When I’m talking about gender, I am talking about cultural associations of behaviours and characteristics with what it means to be a man or masculine and what it is to be a woman or feminine. These conceptions change over time and vary from culture to culture.

The point is, certain characteristics, personalities, ideas, expressions, concerns, interests, information, and feelings are marked as feminine or masculine, even if they have nothing to do with being biologically female or male. In most cultures, masculinity is viewed as strong, rational, and active, while femininity is considered weak, irrational, and passive. The preparedness to use military action and to wield weapons is also usually associated with masculinity. Consider in pop politics, how female politicians like Margaret Thatcher or Hillary Clinton are considered “masculine”.

But gender is not only about individual identity or what a society teaches us men or women should be like. Gender is also a way of structuring relations of power—whether that is within families, where the man is often considered the head of the household, or in societies writ large, where men tend to be the ones in whose hands political, economic, religious, and other forms of cultural power are concentrated.

So how does this relate to nuclear weapons?

Three scholars of both feminist theory and nuclear weapons, named Carol Cohn, Felicity Hill, and Sara Ruddick, have eloquently described the deeply gendered political context in which nuclear weapons are developed, deployed, and discussed as well as the gendered dimensions of the weapons themselves. They have outlined how armament and disarmament policies and practices are influenced by ideas about masculinity and how the practical and symbolic dimensions of nuclear weapons are gendered.

In the 1980s, Carol Cohn explored what she called the “technostrategic” language of nuclear security intellectuals during the Cold War, who employed abstraction, euphemisms, and unabashed sexual metaphors to discuss nuclear weapons and strategies for nuclear war. To give you a sample, some of the terms the men—all of them were men—used included: “vertical erector launchers, thrust-to-weight ratios, soft lay downs, deep penetration, and the comparative examples of protracted versus spasm attacks”. In a great article she wrote at the time, “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals,” she said she was shocked that the feminist critique around this language hadn’t reached these guys—they were completely unashamed to be talking like this.

Later studies by Dr. Cohn along with Felicity Hill and Sara Ruddick explored the sense of masculine strength afforded by nuclear weapons. A perfect example is a comment made by a Hindu nationalist leader after India’s 1998 nuclear weapon tests, who explained, “we had to prove that we are not eunuchs”. They also look at mass media reactions to the 11 September attacks, which included appeals to the US government to “bomb ‘em back to the Stone Age, and then make the rubble bounce”. They argue these statements are meant to “elicit admiration for the wrathful manliness of the speaker” and to
imply that being willing to employ nuclear weapons is to “have the balls” or to be “man enough” to “defend” your country.

Okay, so we have some connections between gender conceptions of masculinity and nuclear weapons. How is this relevant?

It’s relevant because:

1) the relationship between nuclear weapons as a symbol of masculine strength make it harder to open up discussions about disarmament. Proponents of abolishing nuclear weapons are put down as unrealistic and/or weak. I can assure you, as someone who sits in UN meetings about nuclear weapons and who constantly engages with the full political spectrum on this issue, these weapons are still seen as an instrument of power and it’s very hard to get past this to start talking about how we can get rid of them.

2) related to this, as a symbol of strength, nuclear weapons are attractive to others. They are seen as the platinum credit card of state security and as giving admission to a very elite club of powerful states. The fact that the five permanent members of the UN Security Council have nuclear weapons is no coincidence. The association of masculinity to power, the association of nuclear weapons to power, the association of masculinity and nuclear weapons, all this gets jumbled up and facilitates proliferation.

Let’s apply this to the current situation of nuclear disarmament. Here is a very brief picture of the current situation:

In nuclear weapons diplomatic and policy circles these days, people often say that nuclear weapons have lost their utility. Even the likes of George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn (known as the “four horsemen” in policy circles!), have recently argued that nuclear deterrence is no longer a legitimate justification for the existence of nuclear weapons. In the absence of a bipolar world order, they say, nuclear deterrence “is becoming increasingly hazardous and decreasingly effective”.

Yet, nuclear weapons are still useful in some form to some, or else there would not be such resistance to their elimination. And the resistance remains great, even from those who have argued against the utility of nuclear deterrence and in favour of a nuclear weapon free world.

Many of the political and defence intellectual elite in nuclear-armed countries and their allies still continue to valorize nuclear deterrence as a fundamental element of their security. Those in the United States point to “extended deterrence” as a primary rationale for retaining their nuclear weapons. They argue that US nuclear weapons in Europe and the US nuclear umbrella (which covers Australia, South Korea, Japan, and others) prevents these other states from “going nuclear”. Some military strategists and politicians continue to emphasize the importance of maintaining an “effective nuclear deterrent” until nuclear weapons are eliminated.

And in fact, the same four horsemen who described the decreasing effectiveness of nuclear deterrence remain politically, administratively, and financially invested in the long-term maintenance of the US nuclear weapons complex. The economic and political stronghold of the nuclear weapon labs is a major impediment to nuclear disarmament in the US and other countries. All nuclear-armed states have these weapons because specific constituents benefit from investment in the weapons’ production and maintenance.
And nuclear weapons are part of a bigger picture of power projections. The work of the four horsemen, while ostensibly aiming for the elimination of nuclear weapons, in reality reflects a pragmatic strategy to maintain US military and economic dominance well into the 21st century, resulting in the formation of a new intellectual paradigm perhaps best described as “anti-nuclear imperialism”. Its proponents issue varying degrees of verbal support for nuclear disarmament, but in terms that prescribe restrictive measures on the rest of the world, such as strengthening non-proliferation measures, achieving new arms control treaties and new stringent fissile material controls, and securing stronger commitments from those states that do not possess nuclear weapons to refrain from doing so, all for the stated purpose of making the world universally more secure.

When I first started seeing this picture develop, I immediately thought of Cynthia Enloe’s concept of “adaptive patriarchy”. She’s a great writer, I’m sure many of you here are familiar with her work but if not check it out. Enloe has explained that one way the patriarchal system deals with changing landscapes that might upset its interests is by co-opting the movement. I would apply this here as “adaptive disarmament,” whereby the nuclear-armed states affirm their support for nuclear disarmament but seek to attain this “ultimate” goal through immediate, strong-arm measures that do not actually involve getting rid of their own nuclear weapons but restricting other’s access to such weapons. And as in methods of adaptive patriarchy, this approach to disarmament is not in fact interested in the value of nuclear disarmament for other aspects of the world order but instead seeks to fold the process into its own agenda to preserve the current order that nuclear weapons help to uphold.

**How does “adaptive disarmament” or “anti-nuclear imperliams” affect nuclear weapon proliferation?**

In the same way that empire-building and “anti-nuclear imperialism” are gendered, so too are efforts of non-proliferation. The dominant arms control and non-proliferation discourse characterizes the possession of nuclear weapons by the established nuclear weapon states as legitimate while problematizing the nuclear weapons that “spread” to “other” states.

This distinction between the Self, that has a right to possess nuclear weapons, and the Other, which is too unpredictable to possess them, is patronizing. This type of distinction between legitimate and illegitimate nuclear weapons possessors does nothing to prevent proliferation and only makes it more difficult to reduce the perceived value of nuclear weapons as a source of power.

When governments act as though their power and security can only be guaranteed by a nuclear arsenal, they create a context in which nuclear weapons become the ultimate necessity for, and symbol of, state security. And when nuclear-armed states then work hard to ensure that other countries don’t obtain nuclear weapons, they create a context in which they are perceived as keeping other countries down, subordinating and emasculating them.

The case of Iran provides an excellent study for gender analysis. The Iranian example displays the problem of treating nuclear weapons as the ultimate tool of national security—it makes acquiring nuclear weapons more attractive to those who feel threatened, which is ostensibly why Israel and Pakistan developed nuclear weapons. The case of Iran also concretely demonstrates the problem of “rational authorities” in one country asserting their right or capacity to “handle” the possession of nuclear weapons while discouraging others from doing so on the basis of their alleged irrationality and nefarious designs.
So how could we use gender analysis to promote nuclear disarmament?

Gender analysis deconstruct nuclear weapons as symbols of power and tools of empire and the anti-nuclear imperialism paradigm. One useful method is gender analysis, which can show that the enshrinement of nuclear weapons as an emblem of power is not a natural fact, but a social construction.

Gender analysis also helps highlight the ways in which the possession and proliferation of nuclear weapons are silently underwritten and supported by an image of hegemonic masculinity, which enables us to see just how dangerous and illusory an image of security that produces.

Being aware of the gendered meanings and characterizations embedded throughout the discourse and politics of nuclear weapons helps to confront the traditionally constructed meanings and redefine terms such as ‘strength’ and ‘security’ so that they more appropriately reflect the needs of all people. This kind of awareness can help us to understand and improve how we think, talk, and act about weapons, war, and militarism in a broader sense.

Gender analysis can very effectively multiply, amplify, and deepen arguments for disarmament and question the role of men and a certain kind of masculinity that dominate the political structures that organize wars and oversee security matters. You’ll hear a lot about UN Security Council Resolution 1325 from our other speakers, which is really relevant to challenging assumptions about masculinity and power structures.