

*The Fetishists of Nuclear Power Have Had Their Day*

*By Rebecca Johnson*

*Those who build, target, deploy and fire nuclear weapons are not supposed to think about the humanitarian consequences. They are not supposed to behave "like women". But a growing number of nuclear free countries are doing just this, and taking the lead in declaring it's time to outlaw these weapons of mass suffering.*

Nuclear weapons may seem like an odd thing to write about for International Women's Day, but they have a gendered dimension that is important to understand. Just as guns and other "small arms" are used in violence against women, so nuclear weapons are part of an international structure in which states that are armed with nuclear weapons have been allowed to control the security and choices of the majority of non-nuclear countries for far too long. That is now set to change.

I have just returned from a groundbreaking meeting in Oslo, the first ever [intergovernmental conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons](#). Representatives of 127 governments the Red Cross and various UN agencies attended the talks, hosted by the Norwegian Foreign Minister, Espen Barth Eide. After hearing facts and evidence about the consequences of nuclear detonations from scientists, doctors, the [Red Cross](#), emergency responders, aid organisations, and civil society representatives from over 70 countries, it was clear that ["the effects of a nuclear weapon detonation, irrespective of cause, will not be constrained by national borders"](#).

In fact, as the [final statement](#) on behalf of the [International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons \(ICAN\)](#) noted: "The consequences would be global, long term and truly catastrophic for human health, our environment, our development, security, human rights and food resources, with the most vulnerable people and regions suffering the greatest harm." We concluded that the global catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any intentional or accidental use of nuclear weapons make this a threat that has to be

prevented by everyone, and that banning and eliminating these weapons of mass suffering would be the most effective way forward.

Seven of the nine states that wield nuclear weapons – China, France, Israel, North Korea, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States – refused to join the multilateral discussions in Oslo. Justifying Britain's part in this boycott, Foreign Office Minister [Alistair Burt](#) claimed that discussing the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons would “divert” from the existing “step-by-step” process epitomised by the Conference on Disarmament (CD) and the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), claiming that these have “proven to be the most effective means to increase stability and reduce nuclear dangers”. This is an odd claim, since the NPT's consensus agreements have for years been dismissed or ignored by the five nuclear-armed states inside the treaty, while four other states have armed themselves with nuclear weapons outside the treaty, adding to over 18,000 nuclear weapons still held by the US and Russia 20 years after the end of the cold war. Similarly the CD hardly reflects effective means since only 66 states are members and the Conference (which meets in Geneva) has been so deadlocked since 1996 that in most years it hasn't even managed to adopt an agenda or programme of work.

India and Pakistan, by contrast, participated in the Oslo Conference, together with 125 other nations. The non appearance of a handful of self-important nuclear-armed governments underscored the view put forward by ICAN and others, that non-nuclear countries need to take the lead to get the weapons internationally prohibited as a first step towards their elimination. So there was loud applause when the leader of the Mexican delegation announced in the final plenary that his government would host a further meeting to deepen understanding of the humanitarian requirements and address what needs to be done.

The significance of Mexico's announcement should not be underestimated. In 1967, at the height of the Cold War, Mexico was the driving force behind the [Treaty of Tlatelolco](#), which prohibited nuclear weapons across the whole of

Latin America and the Caribbean. This “nuclear-weapon-free zone” led to further prohibition zones being established in Africa, the South Pacific, South-East Asia and Central Asia. These zones have proved more of a success than the painfully slow pigeon steps undertaken by some nuclear-armed states, which in recent years are constantly undermined by massive governmental investments to modernise, refine and renew the sizeable arsenals that they retain.

Frustrated by the continuing production, deployment and proliferation of nuclear weapons twenty years after the end of the Cold War, the nuclear-free states are taking the lead once more, with the objective of augmenting the zones that cover the Southern Hemisphere with a global ban on nuclear weapons. Through their shameful boycott, the nuclear-armed states no doubt hoped to stop this train from leaving the Oslo station. Far from diverting from nuclear weapons reductions, history has clearly shown that legal prohibitions generally precede and facilitate the processes of stockpile elimination, not the other way around, which would pave the way for existing agreements like the NPT to be fully implemented. As my final statement to the Conference on behalf of ICAN noted, “weapons that have been outlawed become delegitimised. They lose their political status, and so do not keep having money and resources invested in their production, modernisation, proliferation and perpetuation.”

So what has this got to do with International Women’s Day?

This true story was told to [Dr Carol Cohn](#) some years ago by what she described as a white male physicist who was part of a group of American nuclear strategists: “Several colleagues and I were working on modelling counterforce nuclear attacks, trying to get realistic estimates of the number of immediate fatalities that would result from different deployments. At one point, we re-modelled a particular attack, using slightly different assumptions, and found that instead of there being 36 million immediate fatalities, there would only be 30 million. And everybody was sitting around nodding, saying, ‘Oh yeh, that’s great, only 30 million,’ when all of a sudden, I *heard* what we were

saying. And I blurted out, 'Wait, I've just heard how we're talking – *Only* 30 million! *Only* 30 million human beings killed instantly?' Silence fell upon the room. Nobody said a word. They didn't even look at me. It was awful. I felt like a woman.' The physicist added that henceforth he was careful never to blurt out anything like that again."

The point here is that those who build, target, deploy and fire the weapons are not supposed to think about the consequences. They are not supposed to behave "like women". It is that separation of technological capabilities from honest debate about the human impacts that has allowed the nuclear age to continue so long. Doctrines of "deterrence" are lauded as "rational" while concerns about the victims are dismissed as "emotional". Traditional structures of masculinity in many cultures are associated with "punching above one's weight". Nuclear weapons are the logical extension of the way in which patriarchy values and rewards power projection through militarist means. Through the non-proliferation regime, with its differential obligations on nuclear "haves" and "have-nots", the major nuclear-armed states sought to extend their patriarchal power at the expense of the majority that chose not to acquire these weapons of mass suffering.

Some of the evidence brought out during the Oslo Conference provides further reasons why women need to recognise nuclear weapons as a feminist issue. Though death might come equally quickly to those hit by the blast and fireball that would destroy almost everything within 5 km of a nuclear "ground zero", compelling evidence from the [International Committee of the Red Cross \(ICRC\)](#), the UN [Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\)](#), the [World Food Programme](#) and others, underscored that there would be longer term global consequences if nuclear weapons were used, with women and children suffering the greatest harm.

Ever since the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, health experts have noted that exposure to radioactivity does not treat all human beings equally. Foetuses, babies and infants are most vulnerable to suffering genetic damage and cancers that will blight their lives. Women suffer worse

effects in the long term than men, with particular dangers for our reproductive systems. Girl babies contaminated by radioactivity are more likely to find that they are sterile in later life; or else they suffer high rates of stillbirths, miscarriage, and congenital birth defects. [Indigenous women from the Marshall Islands, Tahiti Polynesia](#) and many other destroyed islands have described tragedies such as giving birth to “jellyfish” babies following US, British and French nuclear weapons testing in the Pacific before such explosions were finally banned by the 1996 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

Interspersed with expert presentations to the governments attending the Oslo Conference were testimonies from some of the victims of nuclear explosions, including [“Hibakusha”](#) from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Kazakh artist, [Karipbek Kuyukov](#), who suffered birth defects and deformities as a consequence of his mother's exposure to radioactivity from Soviet nuclear testing in the 1950s and '60s. He has no arms, so he paints with his feet (and, as he said, his heart). He called for all nuclear weapons to be banned and abolished.

Following that very moving testimony, the Conference heard from [Dr Ira Helfand](#), of ICAN and Physicians for Social Responsibility, who is author of a recent study on nuclear-induced famine. Building on research by renowned [climate scientist Alan Robock](#) and others on the climate disruption and “nuclear winter” effects likely to follow a “small” or “limited” nuclear war, Dr Helfand told the conference that a billion people could die of starvation following a limited regional use of nuclear weapons. The most vulnerable - mainly women and children – would suffer first.

Like most weapons, nuclear bombs are primarily produced, deployed and wielded by men. If there is time for a warning to be given, and if underground shelters are near at hand (two very doubtful “ifs”), far more men than women will be regarded as “essential personnel” worthy of the scarce places in the bunkers.

We are familiar with the ways in which young men tend to fetishise guns as a kind of masculine accoutrement. The few governments that wield nuclear weapons seem to do the same, with talk of exercising “freedom of action”. The Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs were nicknamed ‘Little Boy’ and ‘Fat Man’ respectively, and British and American bombs have often been given heroic personae with masculine overtones, such as Minuteman, Blue Streak, Pershing, Polaris, Trident. Similarly, the French strategic arsenal is carried by “Triomphant” submarines. After one test in 1974 code-named “Smiling Buddha”, India suddenly conducted five more in May 1998, declaring itself a “nuclear weapon state”. Though stated more bluntly than the Indian government might have liked, nationalists celebrated because “we had to prove that we are not eunuchs”.

Nuclear weapons threaten the ultimate nihilistic violence against future generations. They are designed and have the capacity to destroy cities full of people, leading to the poisoning and destruction of our environment, health and food resources for generations. But the fetishists of nuclear power projection have had their day. Despite their years of posturing in the United Nations and multilateral fora such as the NPT and CD, the nuclear-armed states are beginning to realise that they can’t maintain nuclear business as usual if the non-nuclear states bypass their boycotts and pursue a multilateral ban under international law.

Withstanding the pressure of the nuclear bullies, Norway has led the way in taking the consequences of nuclear weapons seriously. With Mexico and others now committing to organising further such conferences, let’s look to the future and celebrate!